

I CORINTHIANS

**The First Letter of Paul
to the Church in
Corinth**

Paul in Ephesus

In the spring of 52, accompanied by Aquila and Priscilla, Paul left Corinth, made the four hundred kilometre sea voyage across the Aegean and arrived in Ephesus, the main city in the Roman province of Asia. He stayed a few days only (Acts 18:19-20), then went to Jerusalem and Antioch before making the overland journey back to Ephesus. On his overland return to Ephesus, he passed through ‘the region of Galatia and Phrygia’ (Acts 18:23). Scholars are divided on whether Luke is including in this reference the northern region of Galatia or is speaking only of the region of eastern Phrygia which was in the southern part of the Roman province of Galatia. Though Luke hurries over this journey, wishing only to highlight the presence of the Holy Spirit who is calling Paul to Ephesus, we should not overlook the fact that from Ephesus to Antioch and back to Ephesus is a journey of three thousand kilometres, half by sea and half by land. Without any long delays, it would have taken Paul most of the year 52.

Ephesus (52-55AD)

Josephus tells us that there were five hundred cities in the Roman province of Asia. Allowing for his tendency towards exaggeration, we should still picture a thickly populated and agriculturally and commercially prosperous area. Ephesus itself, reconstructed and embellished by Augustus and Tiberius, is estimated to have had a population of between two and three hundred thousand in the middle of the first century. Located at the mouth of the Cayster river, it commanded the richest hinterland in the province. The main trade routes, whether by land, sea or river, went through it. Among the major cities linked to Ephesus by a Roman road were Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea – the cities addressed in the Book of Revelation (chapters 2-3) towards the end of the century. Paul was in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). For two of those years he lectured in the hall of Tyrannus (Acts 19:9), laying the foundations for a thriving Christian community in the province. Luke is content to sum up this most successful period of Paul’s missionary life in one brief verse: ‘all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord’ (Acts 19:10). In the letter we are about to study, a letter written during Paul’s stay in Ephesus, Paul says that he hopes to visit the Corinthians soon, but adds: ‘I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me’ (1Corinthians 16:9). That the community in Ephesus flourished is evident from Paul’s farewell speech given in Miletus to the elders of the Ephesian churches (Acts 20:17ff).

In Paul’s letter to the community at Colossae (1:7; 4:12-13), a city in the same province as Ephesus, we hear of a certain Epaphras who took the gospel there. It is likely that he was sent from Ephesus. Luke tells us that Timothy and Erastus were working with Paul during his time in Ephesus (Acts 19:22), as well as Gaius and Aristarchus (Acts 19:29). Titus was there, too (2Corinthians 12:18) and Archippus (Colossians 4:17; Philemon verse two), as, it seems, was Apollos (1Corinthians 16:12). Luke writes: ‘The word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed’ (Acts 19:20).

Writing from Ephesus to Corinth 53AD



Paul's sufferings

Luke describes a memorable scene (Acts 19:23-41) in which we see the resistance of those whose economic prosperity was being threatened by the gospel. The silver smiths attached to the famous temple of Artemis – one of the seven wonders of the world – were not happy to see their clientele diminishing as people converted to Christianity.

In his brief account of Paul's three-year stay in Ephesus, Luke says little of the problems faced by Paul or of his sufferings there. From Paul's own writings, however, we know that he went through times of extreme difficulty during these years in Asia. In the letter which we are examining in this chapter Paul writes: 'To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day' (1Corinthians 4:11-13). Later in the same letter, he is arguing against those who deny the resurrection. If there is no resurrection, says Paul 'why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? ... If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? (1Corinthians 15:30,32). Whatever form these 'wild animals' took, it doesn't sound pleasant. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, written from Macedonia soon after his departure from Ephesus, he writes; 'We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself' (2Corinthians 1:8). In the same letter he speaks of his many imprisonments, his countless floggings and of his being often near death. Undoubtedly, some of these experiences belong to his stay in Ephesus. He goes on to speak of 'danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters' (2Corinthians 11:23-26).

We have spent some time exploring Paul's situation in Ephesus because it provides some background to the letters which he wrote during this time. We should now take a closer look at the city to which this present letter is addressed.

Corinth

Ancient Greek Corinth was totally destroyed by a Roman army in 146BC. It was only in 44BC that Julius Caesar had a Roman colony erected on the ruins. The Roman city rapidly expanded and was made the seat of the proconsul of Achaia in 27BC. Its rapid expansion is explained by its geographical position, for it dominates the narrow isthmus which connects the Peloponnese to the rest of Greece. Corinth commands two ports. Between two and three kilometres to the north the port of Lecheion on the Gulf of Corinth opens westward to the Adriatic, and so to Spain, Italy and Sicily. Nine kilometres to the east the port of Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf opens into the Aegean and so to Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt.

Efforts to build a canal were never completed in ancient times, but a system had been organised to haul small and medium sized boats across from one waterway to the other. Many traders chose the overland haulage between the two ports in preference to the treacherous sea voyage round the Peloponnese. The tax from the haulage plus the trade which came through Corinth accounted in large part for the city's prosperity.

Ancient Corinth had a reputation for lax morals, partly because of the large number of prostitutes attached to the sanctuary of Aphrodite which dominated the city acropolis. The temple in Roman Corinth was much smaller, but the Roman city seems to have inherited some of this reputation. At the time of Paul's arrival, the population is estimated to have been somewhere in excess of three hundred thousand. The theatre could seat fourteen thousand. Two-thirds of the population were slaves and most of the others had one focus, which was to get rich through commerce. Apart from the constant turnover due to trade, Corinth also attracted visitors because of the healing sanctuary of Asclepius, and the Isthmian games which took place every two years. Its position and the constant movements of people made it an excellent choice for Paul's mission.

Referring to Paul's arrival in Corinth, Luke writes:

There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together — by trade they were tentmakers.

– Acts 18:2-3

Luke records that Paul stayed in Corinth for eighteen months (Acts 18:11). He also mentions that at one stage Paul was brought before the proconsul Gallio (Acts 18:12). As already noted in the Introduction to Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (page 103), his length of stay, his meeting with Aquila and Priscilla who had recently been expelled from Rome and his being brought before Gallio, enable us to get a fixed point for the dating of Paul's stay in Corinth from about the autumn of 50AD to the spring of 52AD. A year or so later, here we have Paul writing back from Ephesus to the Christian community there. It is not his first letter to them (see 1Corinthians 5:9), but it is the first to have survived. The regular traffic between Corinth and Ephesus meant that he was constantly in touch with the Corinthians and some of the news which reached Paul in Ephesus was not good (see 1:11; 5:9). Then a delegation came to Ephesus from Corinth bearing a letter seeking clarification of some of Paul's teaching and instructions, and informing him of groups that were challenging his authority and the gospel he had preached. This letter is Paul's response.

Living in communion of love

In Galatians Paul focuses attention on the cross and reveals his passionate concern lest people seek security in ways that distract them from the love that is revealed there. We find the same focus here. Most of the converts in Corinth were from the lower economic stratas of the town, but some were well off. This was one reason for the problems which they were experiencing in living Christian community. A central theme of this letter is that the various gifts we have come from the risen Christ. They are given not to divide the community or so that some would have an advantage over others but so that each person can enrich the others, and the whole community grow in love. Part of the special interest which First Corinthians has for us is the insight it gives into the life, organisation, problems and questions of the community which Paul had chosen as the centre of his missionary endeavour from late 50AD to the spring of 52AD.

First Corinthians is quoted by Clement c.95-96AD in his Letter from Rome to the Corinthians (7:1-3); also by Ignatius of Antioch c.110AD (see his Letter to the Ephesians 16:1; 18:1; and his letter to the Romans 5:1) and by Polycarp c.135AD (see his letter to the Philippians 11:1). It is listed by Marcion c.150 and quoted by Tertullian c.200 (The prescription of heretics 36:1-12). Almost the whole text of First Corinthians is preserved in a papyrus manuscript (P⁴⁶) from c.200AD, and the complete text is found in two fourth century parchment codexes, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and in a fifth century parchment codex, Alexandrinus.

The Structure

Introduction	1:1-9
Part One: Those who are dividing the community lack true wisdom	
a: the factions	1:10-17
b: true 'wisdom' seen in the cross	1:18 - 2:5
c: The wisdom of God	2:6-16
Part Two: The role and authority of an apostle	3:1 - 4:21
Part Three: Their behaviour proves their lack of true wisdom	
a: Incest and their treatment of it	5:1-13
b: Their appealing to pagan courts to sort out their differences	6:1-11
c: Irresponsible sexual behaviour	6:12-20
Part Four: Paul answers the questions they have put to him	
a: Questions on marriage and virginity	7:1-40
b: Questions on the eating of meat offered to idols	
• they should forgo their right when love demands it	8:1-13
• Paul offers himself as an example	9:1-27
• Their communion with Christ demands that they avoid idols	10:1-11:1
Part Five: Conduct in the Christian Assembly	
a: The conduct of women in the assembly	11:2-16
b: The celebration of the Lord's Supper	11:17-34
c: The gifts of the Spirit	
• There are varieties of gifts	12:1-11
• the community is a 'body' with many gifts	12:12-31
• The greatest gift is love	13:1-13
• speaking in tongues and prophesying	14:1-40

Structure

Part Six: The resurrection of the dead

- a: The resurrection of Christ 15:1-11
- b: The resurrection of those in communion with Christ 15:12-34
- c: We will be transformed 12:35-58

Part Seven: Additional matters

- a: Concerning the collection for Jerusalem 16:1-4
- b: Paul promises to visit them 16:5-9
- c: Concerning Timothy, Apollos, Stephanas and others 16:10-18

Conclusion 16:19-24

1:1-3	2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
1:3-9	1st Sunday of Advent Year B
1:1-9	21st Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:10-13,17	3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
1:14-16	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
1:17-25	21st Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:22-25	3rd Sunday of Lent Year B
1:26-31	4th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 21st Saturday Year II
2:1-5	5th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 22nd Monday Year II
2:6-10	6th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
2:10-16	22nd Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:1-9	22nd Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:10-15	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:16-23	7th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
3:18-23	22nd Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
4:1-5	8th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A and 22nd Friday Year II
4:6-15	22nd Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
4:16-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
5:1-8	23rd Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
5:6-8	Easter Sunday
5:9-13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
6:1-11	23rd Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
6:12,16	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
6:13-15,17-20	2nd Sunday of ordinary Time Year B
7:1-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
7:25-31	23rd Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
7:29-31	3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
7:32-35	4th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
7:36-40	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
8:1-7,11-13	23rd Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
8:8-10	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

Lectionary Readings

9:1-15	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
9:16-19,22-23	5th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
9:16-19,22-27	23rd Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
9:20-21	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
10:1-6,10-12	3rd Sunday of Lent Year C
10:7-9,13	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
10:14-22	23rd Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
10:16-17	Corpus Christi Year A
10:23-30	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
10:31 - 11:1	6th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B
11:2-16	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
11:17-26,33	24th Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
11:23-26	Holy Thursday and Corpus Christi Year C
11:27-32,34	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
12:1-2	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
12:3-7,12-13	Pentecost Sunday Year A
12:4-11	2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
12:12-30	3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
12:12-14,27-31	24th Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
12:31 - 13:13	4th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C and 24th Wed. Year II
14:1-40	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
15:1-11	5th Sunday of ordinary Time Year C and 24th Thur. Year II
15:12,16-20	6th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
15:12-20	24th Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
15:20-26,28	Christ the King Year A
15:27,29-34	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
15:35-37,42-49	24th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
15:38-41,50-53	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
15:45-49	7th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
15:54-58	8th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
16:1-24	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

As in all his letters, Paul uses his Roman family name (see page 11). This is an apostolic letter, sent by their spiritual father (4:15), and Paul will have reason to insist on his authority. He therefore adds ‘called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus’. He is an apostle, but not from his own initiative. Christ Jesus is the one whom he proclaims, and Christ Jesus is the one who called Paul and commissioned him to be his apostle. We recall Paul’s words to the Galatians:

God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.

– Galatians 1:15-16

In the opening address of that letter, too, Paul calls himself: ‘an apostle sent ... through Jesus Christ and God the Father’ (Galatians 1:1). It is Jesus himself who called Paul and he is carrying out his commission in obedience to the will of God. As he will say later in this letter:

Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

– 1Corinthians 9:1-2

Paul speaks of ‘Christ Jesus’ because it is the risen, glorified Jesus who called Paul and commissioned him. As we saw when commenting on Galatians 1:1, for a Jew the word ‘Christ’ (the ‘Anointed One’, the ‘Messiah’) calls to mind the anointing with God’s Spirit of a person chosen for a special task in the community, prophetic, priestly, but especially regal. Before all others the king is God’s anointed. With the end of kingship as an institution in Judah, all their hopes and dreams focused on the promised Messiah (the ‘Christ’). Paul is saying that Jesus is this Messiah, reigning with God in heaven and now powerfully bringing about the kingdom of God on earth.

Paul associates himself as author with ‘our brother Sosthenes’. Luke mentions a Sosthenes who was a leader in the synagogue in Corinth and was beaten in front of the tribunal when Gallio dismissed the case against Paul (Acts 18:17). If, as seems likely, it is to this Sosthenes that Paul is referring, he has become a Christian and has joined Paul in Ephesus.

The letters sent from Corinth to Thessalonica included the names of Silvanus and Timothy. Though Timothy is mentioned in this letter, Silvanus is not. He was from Jerusalem (Acts 15:22). Perhaps he returned there with Paul (Acts 18:22) and stayed on. Timothy is not mentioned in the address because he is already on his way to Corinth (see 4:17; 16:10).

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes

The church is catholic

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints,

together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not a private letter. Like his previous ones it is sent to the ‘church’, the Christian community assembled for worship. It is the ‘church of God’(see Galatians 1:13; 1Thessalonians 2:14), for it is assembled in response to God’s call and given life by God’s Spirit. Its members have been ‘sanctified in Christ Jesus’. God ‘sanctified’ them (set them apart) when they were baptised into the community (‘washed and sanctified’, 6:11). Christ, whom Paul will call their ‘sanctification’(1:30), has shared with them his life of communion with God.

Paul has spoken of his own call, now he speaks of theirs. They are ‘called to be saints’. The language is traditional:

All the congregation are holy (‘saints’), everyone of them:
the Lord is among them.

– Numbers 16:3

In his letters to the Thessalonians Paul spoke of ‘saints’ in relation to the coming of the Lord (1Thessalonians 3:13; 2Thessalonians 1:10). He reminds the Corinthians that they are called to this. He also reminds them that they belong to a wider (‘catholic’) Christian community of ‘all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’. It will soon become obvious that Paul is stressing communion because of those in Corinth who are forgetting their links with other Christians and are causing divisions in the community.

In calling the risen Jesus ‘Lord’, Paul is associating Jesus with God as God revealed himself to Moses: God the Redeemer and Saviour (see the commentary on Galatians 1:3). We recall the words of the prophet Joel: ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’(Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21).

Paul speaks of God as ‘our Father’, a familiarity learned from Jesus who addressed God as ‘Abba’(see the commentary on Galatians 1:1). Following his normal custom, Paul prays that the Corinthians will remain open to the gifts of ‘grace’ and ‘peace’ offered to them by God and the risen Jesus (see the commentary on Galatians 1:3 in which we reflected on the wealth of meaning in both these terms).

Paul expresses his thanks for the many ways in which God has poured out his gifts over the community, especially the gifts of speaking in tongues and of knowledge. He will have more to say concerning these gifts later in the letter, when he will have to make some criticisms of the way in which charisms ('grace-gifts') are exercised in the community. However, he wants them to know from the start that he recognises the wealth of the gifts they have and is grateful to God for them. At the same time, it is interesting to compare this with the parallel passage in 1Thessalonians 1:3. There Paul thanks God for the community's faith, love and hope. The absence of a similar statement here is not without significance, for the Corinthians, as we shall see, are showing by their behaviour that they are deficient in precisely these fundamental virtues.

Another reason for gratitude is the strengthening among them of 'the testimony of Christ'. This genitive construction relates the two words but without specifying the relationship. Paul is speaking about the testimony to Christ, that is to say the gospel, which he gave to them while among them. They listened and learned to believe and their faith continues to grow. They in turn are giving testimony to others through their believing. However, both Paul's testimony and theirs are gifts received through grace. They are sharing in the testimony which Jesus himself gave to God especially through his love.

Paul speaks of their 'waiting for the revealing (Greek: apokalupsis) of our Lord Jesus Christ' and of the importance of their being 'blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ'. In his letter to the Galatians he spoke of the revelation of Jesus which he had already received (see Galatians 1:12,16; 2:2). It was this revelation which gave rise in him to a longing for a complete revelation that was yet to come: 'through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness' (Galatians 5:5). It was this hope that was the dominant theme of his letters to the Thessalonians, composed while he was living in Corinth. 'When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels' (2Thessalonians 1:7), then they will be with the Lord forever (see 1Thessalonians 4:17; 5:10; 2Thessalonians 2:14). Paul prays that 'on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' (see 1Thessalonians 5:2; 2Thessalonians 2:2), the day of final judgment, the Corinthian Christians will be blameless, with nothing inhibiting their enjoying a full sharing in Jesus' glory.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus,

⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind –

⁶just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you –

⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift of grace [NRSV 'spiritual gift'] as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁸He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Communion

Any confidence which he or they may have is not based on anything which they have done, but solely on the faithfulness of God. As he wrote to the Thessalonians: ‘The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this’ (1Thessalonians 5:24); ‘the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from the evil one’ (2Thessalonians 3:3). Paul prays that they will be ‘blameless’. Later he will write to the community at Colossae:

You who were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his fleshly body through death, so as to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him.

– Colossians 1:21-22

And to the Romans:

Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.

– Romans 8:33-34

In all these texts the focus is on the future. Paul is assuring his readers that they can leave the future trustingly in God’s hands. However, they can do this only because of what God has already done for them. It is this past action of God that Paul particularly has in mind in our present text: ‘by him you were called into fellowship with his Son’. This happened when they were baptised into the Christian community:

We have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

– Romans 6:4

Paul wishes to keep the focus on ‘fellowship’ (Greek: *koinōnia*, ‘communion’). The communion they should be experiencing now is a foretaste of the eternal communion with God in Christ towards which they are journeying. This implies a warning: if they are careless about communion now, they may fail to enjoy it later.

In our creed we declare that we believe in ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic church’. We declare also that we believe in ‘the communion of saints’. This communion reaches back across the centuries, and also beyond death. Yet we witness the painful fact of people claiming to belong to Christ, while not being in communion with each other. This makes us worse off than the Corinthian Christians, for in spite of their divisions they were still coming together to pray and to celebrate the Eucharist. To read this letter with insight we need to feel something of the pain of a broken and divided Church; we need to experience a longing to be enriched by each other’s faith and commitment to Christ; we need to enter into Jesus’ own prayer that his disciples will continue to live in intimate communion with God and with him (John 17:21-26). Communion in love among his disciples is a fruit of this divine communion .

A delegation has come from Corinth with a letter asking Paul to respond to certain questions (see 7:1). Before responding to their questions, Paul decides to speak to them about certain divisions that have emerged within the community. One issue that is dividing them is their relationship to Paul himself. He decides to deal with this first, for it affects their acceptance of his authority – an authority which he will have to call upon later in this letter. Scholars differ in their judgment about how many factions there were and about the significance of the group, if there was indeed a separate group, that claimed allegiance to Cephas (Dionysius, bishop of Corinth c.170, claimed that Peter was in Corinth). In any case, it appears that the main problem was that there was a group who were disappointed in Paul's lack of polish as an orator, and who looked to the more eloquent Apollos as a better 'leader'. Others defended Paul and his style of proclamation. Paul directs his words to the whole community, but, as the following chapters will show, he focuses especially on those who criticise him and those who support him: what we might call the Apollos and Paul factions.

The Corinthian Christians had a passionate interest in public speaking. The city crowds throughout Greece looked forward to the entertainment provided by the travelling 'philosophers', and they fancied themselves as connoisseurs of good rhetoric. Obviously Paul did not come up to the expectations of some of the Christians, and we can easily imagine their own private hesitations being reinforced by their non-Christian neighbours who wondered what they were doing following such a second-rate orator. This criticism is especially significant in a culture where it was not possible to be thought wise without being an eloquent orator. Apollos only highlighted the problem. If the matter sounds trivial to us at first, it will become clear that, on the contrary, it goes to the very heart of the gospel.

Rhetoric was about content and form. Quintillian, one of the leading Roman writers on the subject, spoke for most when he wrote: 'eloquence has its fountain-head in the most secret springs of wisdom'(Inst.Or. 12.2.6). A good orator was expected to have something to say. He was also expected to capture the attention of his audience and to make his points clearly so that the audience understood what he was saying. A lot of attention was given to the art of winning the audience over to the speaker's position. He was judged also on whether or not his listeners retained what he had said and acted on it. It is evident that on most of these points Paul was eminently successful. However, the key interest of the populace was in the manner in which the orator used his skill to win people over, and Paul rated poorly in this area (see also 2Corinthians 10:10).

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ'.

Paul does not disagree with their assessment of him as far as eloquence goes, but he defends his style as demanded by the content of his message. It is obvious that it matters to Paul how they consider his proclamation. It matters, because his manner of proclaiming the gospel is one with the message itself, and their manner of receiving is linked closely with their understanding of and appreciation of the essence of the gospel. He will argue that they are judging him from the wrong perspective. Furthermore, the perspective which they have indicates a serious failure to appreciate the central message of the gospel. It is also at the root of their divisive behaviour. Their concentration on ‘intelligence’ (as they understood it), ‘wisdom’ (as they understood it), and the persuasive power of eloquence, is feeding their pride and self-sufficiency. It is distracting them from what really matters: the revelation of God in Jesus’ love-giving on the cross. This section has a special interest in that it is the only place where Paul directly speaks about his manner of proclaiming the gospel. It makes especially rewarding reading, for it takes us to the very core of Paul’s convictions about Jesus.

Some people working for Chloe, presumably a woman of means in Ephesus, have been across to Corinth on business and have returned with news of a fractured church. One faction was using Apollos, and in particular his skill as an orator, to pass negative judgments on Paul. The first we hear of Apollos is when he arrived in Ephesus in the time between Paul’s first short visit there after leaving Corinth (Acts 18:19-21), and his arriving back after his long journey to Jerusalem and Antioch (Acts 19:1). Luke informs us that he was a ‘Jew, a native of Alexandria, an eloquent man well versed in the Scriptures’ (Acts 18:24). Luke continues:

He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Messiah is Jesus.

– Acts 18:25-28

Some in Corinth, embarrassed by Paul’s lack of standing as an orator, and impressed by Apollos’s eloquence, were critical of Paul. For the reasons noted above, Paul judges that he must defend himself against their criticism. The word translated here ‘appeal’ (*parakaleō*) contains within it the word ‘call’ (*kaleō*). Paul is appealing to them ‘by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (see 1:2). They call on Jesus in their prayer. Paul is reminding them that they joined the community in response to Jesus’ call, and Jesus is still calling them through Paul who speaks with the authority of Jesus and confident in Jesus’ grace (see commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:12). As he will say in a later letter: ‘we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ’ (2Corinthians 5:20). Paul appeals to the community in Corinth to work to heal their divisions (Greek: *schisma*) and ‘quarrels’ (*eris*, see Galatians 5:20), and to be ‘united in the same mind and the same purpose.’ He wants them to have ‘the mind of Christ’ (2:16).

His rhetorical questions attempt to highlight the foolishness of the situation they have brought on themselves through their self-exalting claim to 'wisdom'. Christ is one, so dividing the community cannot come from him. Paul is especially determined to put an end to any faction that claims his authority for its sectarian behaviour. He goes straight to the heart of the matter by reminding them of who it was who was crucified for them. He will remind them shortly that while he was among them his only interest was 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (2:2; see 1:18,23). We are reminded of his opening words to the Galatians where he speaks of the 'Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father' (Galatians 1:4), and his beautiful words later in the same letter: 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). We recall also his words to the Thessalonians: 'God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us' (1Thessalonians 5:9-10). Paul is not interested in a personal following. He wants them all to attach themselves to Jesus.

Entering the Christian community through baptism is not like entering a school as a disciple of a teaching philosopher. Nor is baptism like initiation into a mystery cult where one placed oneself under a 'mystagogue' for guidance in the spiritual life. When Jesus was baptised the Spirit of God descended upon him. When Christians are baptised, the risen Christ pours out this same Spirit upon them, thus creating a bond of consecration between the disciple and himself, and between the disciple and all those already baptised. All are 'baptised into Christ' (Galatians 3:27). Later, Paul will write to the Romans:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

– Romans 6:3-4

To introduce or to encourage divisions in this communion is to divide Christ. To act in this way shows a complete lack of wisdom, whatever claims people might make.

¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?

¹⁴I thank God that I baptised none of you except Crispus and Gaius;

¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptised in my name.

¹⁶(I did baptise also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptised anyone else.)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptise but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

Baptism

As an extra argument to dissuade them from treating him like the leader of a faction, he reminds them how few of them were actually baptised by him. Crispus was one of the officials in the synagogue (see Acts 18:8). Gaius will be Paul's host on a later visit to Corinth (see Romans 16:23). Stephanas is one of the delegation who has brought the letter from the Corinthians to Ephesus (16:17). The fact that these are the only three people actually baptised by Paul may give us an indication of one of his pastoral strategies. A little later in the letter he will say of the community in Corinth: 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1:26). It is clear that some of the community are slaves (7:21). Yet the three persons mentioned above are clearly people of means. Paul speaks of 'the household of Stephanas' (16:15), and in his Letter to the Romans he says that Gaius 'is host to me and to the whole church' (Romans 16:23). The Roman system worked on patronage. Were these men wealthy patrons who, when converted, attracted their dependent clients to the faith? Are 'Chloe's people' (1:11) people who looked to her for patronage?

Some of us were baptised as infants. Just as we received our human life as a gift without our knowledge or choice, so we were welcomed by our parents and by the Christian community into the Church. The community of disciples committed itself to surround us with love and to introduce us to the gospel of Christ. We were gifted with a consecration to the risen Christ, and his Spirit filled our being, binding us in a special way to God our Father. The risen Jesus gave us a share of his own life to guide, strengthen and heal us in our struggle against sin. The prayer was that one day, having experienced the life of Christ, we would freely commit ourselves to him in love. Some of us were baptised as adults, in which case you will remember your expectant faith and the journey into which you were drawn. In either case, baptism is a love-gift from God, a gift that God will never withdraw. We can be unfaithful; we can turn aside and choose an aimless life of sin, but God will never withdraw the commitment he made to us at our baptism.

Paul is appealing to the Corinthians to recall the gift which they have received. He is asking them to open themselves to the Spirit of love which is the gift of the risen Jesus. If they do so they will realise the close bond it creates with every other baptised person. No difference can outweigh this union. Furthermore, this communion in the one Lord carries with it the 'power' to overcome any difference that may threaten to divide the community. Paul has not been gifted with eloquence to the same degree as Apollos – though his letters witness to a man well trained in the art of rhetoric and not without eloquence. He reminds them that eloquence is not the heart of the matter. He is an 'apostle of Christ Jesus' (1:1), sent (Greek: *apostellō*) to proclaim the gospel (Greek: *euangelizō* Galatians 1:8-11,16; 4:13; 1Thessalonians 3:6). The gospel is not about how eloquent we might be. It is the good news about God's love as revealed by Jesus, especially on the cross. Nothing can be allowed to distract from this, and the only glory they must seek is a share in Jesus' glory, the communion in love which he has with the Father.

We are at the heart of the gospel proclaimed by Paul. He is proclaiming as good news that God is revealed as love in a man called Jesus who was crucified. That such a message might appear ridiculous hardly needs explaining. Whatever way people conceived of God they always, one might say necessarily, included the idea of power. If one thinks of power as control – and such a connection of ideas is hardly uncommon – then how could the degrading death of a man on a cross have anything to do with God, apart, perhaps, from thinking that God must be punishing this man for some terrible deed. Yet Paul is preaching as good news that Jesus, precisely in his dying on the cross, was a revelation, as he says here, of the power of God to save. This does need some explaining, and in attempting to do so, we must take great care to allow the true God to be revealed as we contemplate Jesus on the cross, and not somehow fit what we see into our preconceived notions of the divinity, and thereby fail to experience the saving power of ‘the message about the cross’. We refer the reader to the commentary on Galatians 1:4 where we reflected on Paul’s understanding of the central place of Jesus’ self-giving in our salvation.

To proclaim as Paul does that the power of God to save is revealed in a man dying as a criminal on a cross is, indeed, ‘foolishness’ to those who judge everything by their own clever logic. If we are going to put our accent on human eloquence when it comes to proclaiming the gospel, we can only fail, or proclaim a false gospel. Only the language of love can enable a person to see a God of love in contemplating Jesus on the cross, and only the power of God’s love can move the human heart to believe. Paul wants nothing to distract from that and he is afraid that some of the Corinthian community, impressed by the eloquence of Apollos, are fancying themselves and promoting themselves by attempting to copy his eloquence. There is nothing wrong with eloquence. There is everything wrong with basing one’s trust on it rather than on the power of crucified love. Their behaviour is causing divisions in the community, and in relying in a self-confident way on human eloquence they are distancing themselves from the power of God which alone can save: the power of self-giving love in the heart of Jesus.

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

¹⁹For it is written ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart’ (Isaiah 29:14).

²⁰Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolishness the wisdom of the world?

²¹For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.

²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom,

²³but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

²⁵For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom,

and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

Paul is not claiming to interpret the intention of Isaiah, nor is he attempting to understand the gospel in the light of the prophetic text. On the contrary, it is the new revelation of the gospel that sheds light back on the sacred text. We reflected on Paul’s use of scripture when commenting on Galatians 3:6ff. Isaiah is pointing out the mess into which Judah has descended because its leaders relied on their political and diplomatic ‘wisdom’ rather than on obedience to God. If the wisdom of writers (the ‘scribe’) or public speakers (the ‘debater’) is ‘of the world’, it is folly because it does not ‘know God’.

Paul’s proclamation is ‘foolish’ in the sense that it is simply proclaimed and not presented oratorically. It is however, a proclamation of the saving power of the love of God revealed on Calvary. This does not need the help of oratorical art. It need only be announced, for it has its own power to persuade. God has wisely arranged it that human wisdom cannot know God. We need the revelation given on the cross. Paul is contrasting self-reliant ‘wisdom’ with humble openness to God’s revelation of love and willingness to live in response to this love; in other words, with ‘faith’. Those who are ‘being saved’ are those who ‘believe’. For a reflection on the meaning of faith see the commentary on Galatians 2:16.

It is important to recognise that the ‘wisdom’ which Paul is rejecting as foolishness is the ‘wisdom’ that does not recognise God in Jesus crucified. The Greeks had made extraordinary advances, particularly in the physical and mathematical sciences. They also recognised that not all reality can be measured by the methods appropriate to the empirical sciences, and they recognised, too, the folly and pride of assuming that everything that exists falls within the range of our comprehension. They knew the importance of the searching and probing of the logical mind, but they knew also that there is a wisdom that goes beyond logic. Furthermore, though the Epicureans denied an effective role for God in human life, Plato and others came to some quite sublime insights into the divine. Paul is not denying any of this.

Paul knows that all human knowledge can be at the service of the gospel, and that all that is truly wise will open a person's mind and heart to the ways in which God has chosen to reveal himself. It is instructive to read Luke's account of Paul's proclamation before the philosophers at Athens (Acts 17:16-31). It is a brilliant and eloquent presentation of the gospel. We should not interpret his words here to the Corinthians as the result of disillusionment following his experience in Athens, nor should we conclude that Paul discontinued the kind of proclamation which he gave in the Areopagus. Paul knows that human wisdom cannot reach the conclusions proclaimed in the gospel, but he in no way despises this wisdom. What he does challenge is the sin of self-sufficiency that undermines any genuine human searching for the truth. A philosopher must recognise the limits of human logic and human wisdom. To attain to truth we must open ourselves to the gift of God's love revealed in Jesus, and to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which can change our minds as well as our hearts, and open us to 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, excellent or worthy of praise' (Philippians 4:8).

At the same time, there was something in Greek wisdom that was a barrier to the acceptance of the gospel: the central role played by the self in their philosophies. They recognised the defect in a self-love that is uncontrolled and does not lead to virtue. They recognised also the vice of being so caught up in self as to see no merit in other people, or to have no concern for their welfare. But the self was still central, and being self-sufficient was a person's highest moral achievement. This is very different from the example given by Jesus. By the standards of Greek philosophy, was it not foolish of Jesus to spend his time attempting to educate the fickle crowd? In the end it turned against him (see Matthew 27:20). Was it not foolish of Jesus to rely on the leaders he chose to carry on his work? They fled when trouble came (see Matthew 26:56). Was it not foolish of Jesus to think he could challenge the religious and political leaders? They had him crucified. And the cross? Can we ever make sense of it? It is true that when we contemplate Jesus, abandoned, and yet still loving, still forgiving, still gentle, still reaching out to others, we are not led to understand. We are, however, drawn to believe.

Jesus said that if we strive to build up our lives for ourselves, we will end up wasting our lives; whereas, paradoxically, if we waste our lives, in the sense of pouring ourselves out for others, we will find that life is constantly given to us (see Luke 17:33). Such wisdom transcends the limits of the wisdom of the Greek philosophers. They could admire the free choice of a heroic death by someone who had achieved a high degree of self-perfection through the discipline of philosophy (one thinks of Socrates), but they could not grasp the advice of Jesus nor the way he lived it himself.

It is the gospel of the crucified Jesus which reveals the wisdom and the power of God. Paul does not want the Corinthian community to be distracted from it in any way. If we wish to contemplate God's power we must look at Jesus on the cross. If we wish to contemplate God's wisdom we must look at Jesus on the cross, for 'Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God'.

Their life is from God

²⁶For consider your call, brothers and sisters; not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

²⁷But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;

²⁸God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, ²⁹so that no one might boast in the presence of God.

³⁰He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption; ³¹in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

(Jeremiah 9:24)

Paul asks the Corinthians now to take an honest look at their own experience. By 'human standards' (Greek: *sarx*), that is to say, by standards that are unenlightened by the gospel or by the Spirit of God, most of the Corinthian converts would not have rated as wise. Not many of them came from the circles of the intelligentia. Not many of them were in positions of social power, whether by virtue of their birth, or education, or accumulation of wealth. Some obviously owned their own home (Stephanos, 16:15; Gaius, Romans 16:23); Erastus was the city treasurer (Romans 16:23), and Crispus came from a position of power within the Jewish community (Acts 18:8). Most, however, came from among the poor (see 11:22), and some were slaves (7:21-23). If they have special gifts, it is because of the sheer grace of God's call, and not something about which to boast (see Deuteronomy 7:7-8). All is gift (see 4:7). We are reminded of Paul's words:

Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

– Galatians 6:14

The life they enjoy as a community, their 'life in Christ Jesus', comes from God. As Paul has already said: 'You were called by God into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1:9). The crucified and risen Christ therefore is our wisdom, for it is he who reveals to us the mystery of who God really is and how God has chosen to relate to us and to draw us to live his life. Christ is also our 'righteousness' (see 6:11), because we are in a right relationship to God, not because of some special merit of ours, but because of him (see Galatians 2:15-21). It is his righteousness in which we share. Christ is our 'sanctification' (see 1:2; 6:11), because it is his Holy Spirit who is transforming us. Christ is our 'redemption', for it cost him his life to liberate us from slavery to passions, to false ideas, and to a meaningless existence (see Galatians 5:1,13).

Paul is underlining the fact that if the Corinthian Christians are experiencing a certain freedom in their life they should not boast of it, or forget the one who liberated them, or use that freedom in a way that puts them in opposition to the cross of Christ. He is challenging them to reflect: if they are dividing the community, they do not partake of Christ's wisdom, they are not in the right relationship to God, they are not experiencing the saving grace of his Spirit, and they are not truly free.

Paul does not employ the arts of rhetoric to win over his audience, as did the travelling philosophers of the day, nor does he have a commanding physical presence. The Corinthians are witnesses, however, of the power of his proclamation of the gospel. It was effective in awakening faith, not because of Paul's persuasive power, but because of the manifest presence of the Spirit of Jesus working among them. Furthermore – and this is the key to Paul's argument – on principle, Paul avoids any persuasion that does not come from the Spirit. A herald's task is simply to announce. The message carries its own attraction. The word 'mystery' (Greek: *mustērion*) denotes a revelation of God in a manner that is veiled, perceived only in faith. The 'mystery of God' which Paul proclaimed is the revelation in the crucified Jesus of God as love and of God's power to save. Paul chose not to make use of rhetorical display, for he did not want to use any other means to attract them to faith than 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified'. He did the same in Galatia: 'It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified' (Galatians 3:1). The knowledge of which Paul speaks is not information about Jesus. Rather, it is knowledge that comes only through an intimate sharing of life. Paul knows Jesus crucified, for he shares in the suffering of the servant of the Lord (compare Galatians 6:14,17).

It is this to which he refers when he speaks of coming to them in 'weakness'. He was not sure of himself. He was sure of Jesus, and so he remained vulnerable, refusing to use any power other than love, and sharing in the suffering, humiliation and rejection experienced by Jesus. The expression 'fear and trembling' is traditional (see Psalm 55:4). Paul is very conscious of the enormity of the mission that has been entrusted to him and of his own weakness. His reliance is totally on God. The Corinthians must have the same sense of awe, and not feel self-assured because of their supposed 'wisdom'. Paul will write to the Philippians: 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling' (Philippians 2:12).

The 'demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (compare 1Thessalonians 1:5) may include 'miracles' (see Galatians 3:5), for in Paul's ministry, as in the ministry of Jesus himself, wonderful things happened when people opened themselves to love. The focus, however, is on the powerful presence of the Spirit awakening faith and revealing itself in love – a love which transcended suffering, persecution, and all the difficulties that are part of the human condition, especially when compounded by sin. Paul is still drawing his readers to the cross. God conquered death in raising Jesus to life. God's power, however, was already revealed before the resurrection in the way Jesus loved while on the cross.

¹When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom.

²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.

⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.

⁷But we speak God's wisdom, in a mystery [NRSV 'secret'] and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory.

To this point Paul has been admitting that he does not have the kind of 'wisdom' that is demonstrated in the eloquent rhetoric of Apollos, the kind of 'wisdom' that has so impressed a group of Christians in Corinth that they have been criticising Paul for his lack of it. He has also been demonstrating that faith is not based on this kind of 'wisdom', but rather on the revelation in the crucified Jesus of God's power to save. Now he declares that there is a wisdom which he and those who are mature in faith speak which those who are criticising him cannot appreciate. This true wisdom does not have its source or inspiration in this passing world. Those who command respect and obedience in this world but who are not open to the Spirit, do not speak this wisdom, and cannot grasp it.

Paul is speaking of the 'mature' (Greek: *teleios*). He is not claiming to be 'perfect', in the sense of being someone who has reached the goal. As he will say to the Philippians: 'Not that I have already reached the goal (*teleioō*); but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own' (Philippians 3:12). He is claiming to be among the 'mature' (see Philippians 3:15), that is, to have been given that special wisdom of which he has been speaking, a wisdom that comes only from God and that draws him towards the goal of complete communion with Jesus. This is 'God's wisdom':

Even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you.

– Wisdom 9:6

This wisdom is known only to those whose inspiration is not 'of this age'. It is a wisdom that is 'mysterious' (*en mustērion*) for it reveals God but in a way that is veiled except to faith. It remains hidden from the gaze of the 'wisdom of the world' (1:20). The wisdom spoken by Paul does not draw its inspiration from human eloquence, but from the Spirit of God, and it reveals what 'God decreed (Greek: *proorizō*) before the ages for our glory'. It takes us outside the realm of space and time and human wisdom, and reveals God's gracious design which, as Paul keeps saying, is to save us through the love of Christ crucified. He is the Lord of glory, a glory that is the perfection of love (see 13:10), revealed on the cross. That the powerful in this world crucified him demonstrates their lack of this wisdom and their inability to appreciate it.

Paul has just spoken of the special divine wisdom given to the mature that enables them to speak of what God's design is 'for our glory' (2:7), a glory that is a sharing in that of the 'Lord of glory' (2:8). Without quoting a particular text, Paul draws on phrases taken from the sacred scriptures to express the incomprehensibility, but also the wonder, of 'what God has prepared for those who love him':

From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him.

– Isaiah 64:4

God lavished wisdom upon those who love him.

– Sirach 1:10

The wisdom that is given to Paul to speak concerns the wonderful and mysterious design of God for our glory. The 'to us' in verse ten is emphasised in the Greek text, thereby posing the question: 'And what about you? You are flaunting your claimed wisdom but your behaviour shows that you are not mature. You are causing divisions in the community: a sure sign of failure in love. Be careful or you may not inherit these things that God has prepared for those who love him'.

Paul is not boasting of his wisdom. Its source is not in anything he has done or is capable of doing (and, as he has already said, it is independent of eloquence). Its source is 'the Spirit'. The finest commentary on this passage is found in the words of Jesus:

Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.' Then turning to the disciples, Jesus said to them privately, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

– Luke 10:21-24

⁹But, as it is written, 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' – ¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit;

for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

The Spirit that is from God

The Spirit of which Paul is speaking is the mysterious inner being of God which God chooses to express in creation, in which the radiance of God's glory is manifest. It is the Spirit who invites us into dialogue and who speaks through the words of the prophets. It is the Spirit of love, for God is revealed as love. It is the Spirit that finds perfect expression in the life, in the words, and especially in the love-giving of Jesus on the cross. It is the Spirit that is the bond of the eternal love in which the glory of the risen Jesus consists. It is the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of his Son. It is this Spirit that is poured out over the world from the wounds of the crucified Christ and from his pierced heart. It is the Spirit of love that draws Paul into the divine embrace and that inspires his mission as an apostle and his proclamation of the gospel.

Our human spirit is our sharing in the being of God. Heart speaks to heart, and Spirit speaks to spirit. Through this communion in love, Paul is drawn into the inner being, 'the depths', of God. 'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!' (Romans 11:33). 'Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?' (Wisdom 9:17). Here, in the heart of God, God's gracious design is revealed to Paul. It is the source of the inspired wisdom that energises him in his proclaiming of the gospel of the crucified Jesus.

The Spirit is offered to all who welcome the saving love of Jesus, who 'receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Galatians 3:14). 'He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (Romans 8:32). 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5). 'Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"' (Galatians 4:6). As Paul will write later in the present letter: 'Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?' (3:16). 'In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (12:13).

The Spirit is offered to all, but not all welcome the Spirit with the same openness. It is the Spirit who sanctifies us (see 2Thessalonians 2:13), but not all welcome the purifying fire of love with the same faith and the same courage. 'If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit' (Galatians 5:25). Not all follow the guidance with the same fidelity. Paul is speaking here of that special receptivity to the Spirit that is experienced by the 'mature', whereby they are able to 'understand those things that are bestowed-as-gifts (Greek: *charizomai*) on us by God'. This special receptivity and this special understanding is the fruit of the gift of wisdom. Being especially sensitive to God's inspiration the mature are able to proclaim the mystery of God revealed in the cross – something that is beyond the comprehension of the 'wisdom' of this world, and something that no amount of eloquence can convey. Something that some immature Corinthians clearly fail to appreciate.

The words by which Paul conveys the mysteries of God are not born of the craft of rhetoric. They are inspired by God's Spirit. If some of the Corinthians have failed to appreciate the wisdom conveyed through them, this is because they are not sufficiently in tune with the Spirit. They are not 'spiritual' (Greek: pneumatikos).

On the contrary, they are 'natural' (Greek: psuchikos), that is to say, their energy and insight comes from their own soul (Greek: psuchē) and not from the Spirit. These are those who boast of 'human wisdom', the 'wisdom of the world', but fail to recognise the 'wisdom of God'. For this reason they are in no position to criticise Paul and those who, like him, may not be expert in rhetoric, but who are inspired by the Spirit to reveal the hidden mysteries of God. Those who are spiritual are able to 'discern all things', because they are open to the Spirit of God to whom nothing is hidden.

We might have expected Paul to conclude by claiming: 'we have the Spirit of Christ'. This has been the gist of this whole passage. He chooses, however, to speak of the 'mind of Christ' because his focus is especially on the capacity which the mature have to recognise the content of divine wisdom: the gospel, understood as revealing God's power to save through the mystery of the love of the crucified Christ.

If they failed to appreciate the wisdom in Paul's proclamation of the gospel while he was among them, this was because they were immature 'infants' (Greek: nēpios). Note how differently Paul uses the word 'infant' here to the way Jesus used it in the passage we quoted earlier (Luke 10:21). Jesus is using it as an image for the little ones who look up to God as their Father and so are receptive to wisdom. Paul is using it as an image for those Corinthians who have failed to grow up in the spiritual life. Wisdom is what they do not have, because they are not capable of digesting solid food. Even worse, it is evident from their jealousy, their quarrelling and their divisive behaviour that they are 'of the flesh' (Greek: sarkikos; Galatians 5:20).

¹³And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

¹⁴Those who are natural [NRSV 'unspiritual'] do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

¹⁵Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

¹⁶For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' (Isaiah 40:13). But we have the mind of Christ.

¹And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready,

³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another, 'I belong to Apollos,' are you not merely human?

**⁵What then is Apollos?
What is Paul? Servants
through whom you came
to believe, as the Lord as-
signed to each.**

**⁶I planted, Apollos watered,
but God gave the growth.
⁷So neither the one who
plants nor the one who
waters is anything, but only
God who gives the growth.**

**⁸The one who plants and
the one who waters have a
common purpose, and each
will receive wages accord-
ing to the labour of each.**

**⁹For we are God's servants,
working together; you are
God's field, God's building.**

**¹⁰According to the grace
of God given to me, like a
skilled master builder I laid
a foundation, and someone
else is building on it. Each
builder must choose with
care how to build on it.**

**¹¹For no one can lay any
foundation other than the
one that has been laid; that
foundation is Jesus Christ.**

Paul and Apollos are 'servants' (Greek: *diakonos*). As a religious term the primary reference of the word *diakonos* is God. They are servants of the Lord; that is to say, they owe obedience to God and they carry out their ministry with God's authority and at God's command. The ministry is to proclaim the gospel and it was through this proclamation that the Corinthians 'came to believe' (see 2:1-5). As Paul will write to the Romans:

How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?

– Romans 10:1

Paul speaks of his and Apollos's work in traditional images: 'I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the Lord' (Jeremiah 31:28). Everything comes from and depends upon God. As servants of God, Paul and Apollos – and the same goes for every other missionary or preacher of the gospel – will be judged by the way they have carried out their commission.

After repeating that he and Apollos are 'God's servants', Paul adds 'working together'. He may mean working with God (compare a possible reading of 1Thessalonians 3:2), or he may mean working with each other in God's service. Paul is the master builder (Greek: *architekton*), not because of any skill of his own, but 'according to the grace of God given to me' (see 15:10). It was Paul who first proclaimed the gospel in Corinth. He laid the foundation. Any one building later must be careful to build on this foundation, for it is 'Jesus Christ' – and as Paul has insisted throughout this letter, it is 'the message of the cross' (1:18). 'We proclaim Christ crucified ... the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1:23-24). 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (2:2).

Using a metaphor that was common in his day, Paul speaks of the day of judgment in terms of fire (compare 2Thessalonians 1:7), a fire which destroys everything that is combustible. God's servants must make sure they build solidly, lest their work come to nothing under the test of God's judgment.

Isaiah came to the profound realisation that the whole of creation is a temple filled with the glory of God:

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

– Isaiah 6:1-3

Waking from a dream, Jacob exclaimed:

Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it ... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.

– Genesis 28:16-17

Paul came to Corinth with the same feeling of awe (2:3), for he was sent by the risen Christ on a divine mission, to build a sacred community, a sanctuary for God's Spirit. He wants the Corinthians to share this feeling of awe towards their community, and to recognise the sacred nature of any ministry exercised within it. Paul laid the foundations of a community which was to be the dwelling place of God, a sacred place filled with God's Spirit. To destroy this community by party jealousies is to be guilty of sacrilege.

Since God is the ultimate cause of all that is, Paul speaks about God as the one who will destroy a person who destroys the community. As we saw when examining the concept of the 'anger of God' in relation to 1Thessalonians 1:10, the sinner brings about his or her own self-destruction. To do this we must break through the arms of Jesus stretched out on the cross, for he gave his life to save us. The gospel is that in doing so he revealed the design of God: God's power to save.

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw —

¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done.

¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward.

¹⁵If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

¹⁷If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

¹⁸Do not deceive yourselves. If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise.

¹⁹For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.

For it is written, ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’(Job 5:13),

and again, ²⁰The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile’(Psalm 94:11).

²¹So let no one boast about human leaders. For all things are yours, ²²whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future — all belong to you, ²³and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God.

This short passage brings together much of what Paul has been saying so far in this letter: about wisdom and foolishness (1:17-25); about God’s wisdom and the wisdom of the world (2:6-16); about those who proclaim the gospel being servants of God (3:5-17); as well as about the cult of personalities (1:12), and about boasting (1:29,31).

The wisdom of ‘this age’(see 2:6) has shown how foolish it is in crucifying ‘the Lord of glory’(2:8). Those in the Corinthian community who are impressed with this ‘wisdom’ are in danger of destroying the temple of the Christian community (3:17). Paul invites them to embrace the ‘folly’ of the cross (1:18, 21, 23).

He repeats what he has already said about the foolishness of the wisdom of this world (see 1:18-25), and, as on that occasion, he turns to sacred scripture to support his claim.

If they are going to boast, let them boast only in the Lord (see 1:29,31). Certainly they should not be boasting in those they are calling their leaders. As Paul has already said, their ‘leaders’ are servants of the Lord. They belong to the community, the community does not belong to them. Their ministry is for the community. In fact, not only Paul and Apollos and Cephas, but everything in the created universe belongs to them. Paul will express this idea again in writing to the Romans: ‘He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?’ (Romans 8:32). Paul goes on to speak of death, life, things present, and things to come (Romans 8:38).

And here is the point. All belongs to them because they belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God (compare 11:3). If they leave Christ, they will lose everything that he has given them, and if they attempt to build on any other foundation it will come to nothing.

When Paul spoke of himself and Apollos earlier as ‘servants’ (3:5), he used the highly charged religious word *diakonos*. Not so here. He speaks, rather, of their being employed servants (Greek: *hupēretēs*), responsible to Christ (compare Acts 26:16), and stewards (Greek: *oikonomos*) of God’s mysteries (compare Titus 1:7). As ‘stewards’ they have responsibility for order (*nomos*) in God’s house (*oikos*). Paul has already referred to the Corinthian community as God’s temple. By ‘mysteries’ Paul has in mind particularly the many aspects of the mystery of the cross of which he has been writing in this letter (see 2:1).

Paul’s commission is to preach the gospel and to see that people know of and carry out God’s design. As a steward, he has a duty to carry out faithfully the responsibilities placed on him by his master (see Matthew 24:45; 25:21; Luke 12:42). Whether the Corinthians judge him a faithful steward or not does not ultimately concern Paul. They are in no position to carry out a judicial inquiry (‘judge’, *anakrinō*, 4:3-4) into the way in which he has fulfilled his duties. They are certainly in no position to pass judgment (*krinō*, 4:5) upon him. Paul himself cannot do this either, for it is not human judgment that matters. Paul is confident that he has carried out his ministry according to the will of his Lord, but even his confidence is not what ultimately matters. The accountability that matters is his accountability to the one whom he is sent to represent. The only tribunal that ultimately counts is the tribunal of God who alone can declare a person just (*dikaioō*, see the commentary on Galatians 2:16).

Not only are the Corinthians acting outside their competence in criticising Paul, they are also judging before the appropriate time. This will happen when ‘the Lord comes’ (see also 11:26). In his correspondence with the Thessalonians, Paul spoke of this as the *parousia* (see commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:19). Paul is so confident in the judgment which he will receive that his mind goes naturally (and only) to commendation from the one who ‘searches the heart’ (Romans 8:27).

¹Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.

²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy.

³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself.

⁴I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God.

⁶I have applied all this to Apollos and myself for your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you may learn through us the meaning of the saying, 'Nothing beyond what is written,' so that none of you will be puffed up in favour of one against another.

⁷For what makes you [singular] so special? [NRSV 'who sees anything different in you?'] What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?

⁸Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings! Indeed, I wish that you had become kings, so that we might be kings with you!

Throughout the whole of this first section of his letter, Paul has been focusing on himself and Apollos. Now he sets out to clarify the lesson which he wants the Corinthians to learn from all that he has said. There is no need for them to go beyond what he has written, and especially they do not need to go beyond what God has caused to be written in the scriptural texts to which he has referred, to realise the folly of their thinking themselves important and putting others down by vaunting their allegiance to either Paul himself or to Apollos.

In verse seven, for the first time in this letter, Paul switches to the second person singular: what makes you so special? (He reverts to the plural from verse eight onwards). We saw him do this once in his letter to the Galatians (6:1), but not in either of his letters to the Thessalonians. Because his letters are addressed to the community, when he writes 'you' it is almost universally plural. The effect of moving suddenly to the singular is to engage each member of the community in a personal dialogue the way a teacher engages pupils. The intention is not to confront, for it is assumed that there is a willingness on the part of the pupil to learn from the master. Paul loves the Corinthians very much. They have been sidetracked seriously, and Paul is concerned to bring them back to their senses and to the central focus of the gospel which he preached among them. His questions invite them to a higher viewpoint from which they can look back at their present behaviour and see where they are in error.

They do have wonderful gifts. Paul has already thanked God for some of them in the opening paragraph of his letter (1:4-9). They are, however, making a serious error in focusing on eloquence rather than on the cross of Jesus. In any case, says Paul, whatever gifts they have are precisely that: gifts received from the gracious God. They are not something to boast about (see 1:29-31), or to cause them to fancy themselves as being superior to others.

Verse eight is heavy with irony. It is true that 'in every way you have been enriched in him ... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift'(1:5,7). But surely you don't think you have 'all you want'? And can't you see who the source of all these gifts is? Surely you do not think that you are already participating in the fullness of the Messianic reign of Christ?

It is essential that we avoid introducing any sense of the ‘heroic’ into this passage. Isaiah will help us:

There were many who were astonished at him — so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals ... he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity; and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised, and we held him of no account.

– Isaiah 52:14 and 53:2-3

They remember what Paul’s life was like when he was with them in Corinth, and it is no different in Ephesus (‘to the present hour’). His life as an apostle of Christ – and it is the same for any genuine apostle – is a sharing with Jesus in the ‘folly’ of the cross. They were used to seeing the victory parades in which the conquered were ignominiously presented to the mockery of the populace before being sentenced. As we read this we can hear the scoffing of the scribes and elders as they mocked the naked Jesus in the agony of the crucifixion:

He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son.’

– Matthew 27:42-43

Once again, verse ten is heavy with irony – only to shame the Corinthians into recognising the stupidity of their petty claims. As he has already noted: ‘not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth’ (1:26). Contemplation of the crucified Jesus points up the special ugliness in their boasting to be ‘wise in Christ’. By contrast Paul returns to the theme (see 1:26-28) of his own foolishness (the folly of Jesus’ love-giving on the cross), weakness (the power of God to save, 1:18,24; 2:5) and dishonour (the glory of God is revealed on the cross).

As we read verses eleven to thirteen, we think of the words of Jesus to Ananias about Paul: ‘I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name’ (Acts 9:16), and of Paul’s own words: ‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14). There are echoes here also of Jesus’ sermon on the mount (Matthew 5:11,44; Luke 6:28).

⁹For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to human beings. [NRSV ‘mortals’]

¹⁰We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute.

¹¹To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless,

¹²and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure;

¹³when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.

¹⁴I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children.

¹⁵For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

¹⁶I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.

¹⁷For this reason I sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church.

¹⁸ But some of you, thinking that I am not coming to you, have become arrogant.

¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power.

²⁰For the kingdom of God depends not on talk but on power.

²¹What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

While shame would be an appropriate response to a lot of what Paul has said (see especially 1:10-17; 3:1-4; 4:8-13), and while Paul will say things later which he thinks should cause them shame (see 6:5; 15:34), this is not his purpose in writing. They are his children, and his love will not allow him to stand by and watch them causing so much hurt to each other. We are reminded of his words to the Galatians: 'My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you' (Galatians 4:19).

The others, including Apollos, who have ministered to the Corinthians as preachers or teachers are referred to as 'guardians'. The Greek *paidagōgos* denotes the person, often a slave, to whose care the child was entrusted during his or her childhood years (compare Galatians 3:24-25). Their task was to take the Corinthians to Christ that they might learn from him. Paul's role was unique. Their new life as Christians came to them through him. He is therefore their father (compare 1Thessalonians 2:11), and he appeals to them, not to recognise his authority and power, but to follow his example (compare 1Thessalonians 1:6; 2Thessalonians 3:7-9).

God willing, Paul will come to them soon, though he explains later (16:8) that it cannot be before Pentecost. In the meantime he has sent Timothy to them (obviously overland via Macedonia, since he expects the letter which will go to them by ship to reach them first). Paul hopes that Timothy's presence among them will renew their spirit. When Paul does manage to come, anyone who persists in the kind of arrogance that has been causing problems in the community will be shown up as being all talk and the Corinthians will witness again the power of God which is found only in the gospel of the crucified Jesus (see 1:18; 2:4).

See the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:12 for a reflection on 'the kingdom of God'. It is the reign of God's love and, as Paul has been at pains to remind them, its power comes only through the foolishness of the cross. Paul loves the Corinthians ('my beloved children'). He does not want to come to them like a stern schoolmaster. Rather he wants to come with the gentleness (see Galatians 6:1) that is a fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:23).

Having defended his authority, Paul now uses it to instruct the Corinthians in regard to a number of abuses that have developed in the community. A member of the community is living with his stepmother. Such behaviour was abhorrent to Jews (Leviticus 18:8), and even to Romans and Greeks, who, apart from the Stoics and some other groups, were renowned for their permissive attitude in most matters of male sexual behaviour. Furthermore, it would appear that some of the community were priding themselves on how open-minded they were, seeing this as a demonstration of their maturity and freedom (6:12-13). We wonder if perhaps the guilty man was in a position of power in the community through being a patron. This would have made it difficult to speak out against his behaviour. It is possible that 'in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' in verse four relates to the man's behaviour. If so, he is claiming Christian freedom as justification for his actions. If, however, we follow the translation given in our text, Paul is claiming to pronounce judgment with the authority given him by Christ.

Though absent in 'body' (Greek: *sōma*), Paul is present in spirit. The word *sōma* plays an important role in this letter. It refers to the person as physically present and relating to others. Though not present in this way with them in the assembly, Paul is present through their sharing with him in communion with God's Spirit and he speaks to them as a prophet. His judgment is firm. By his behaviour the man has rejected the life of communion with God given him at baptism and has thereby handed himself over to Satan. The community must reflect God's judgment in its own: 'you shall purge the evil from your midst' (Deuteronomy 17:7). Not to do so is to be party to a lie, and to endanger the whole community through contagion. No doubt Paul is also concerned at the scandal such behaviour is causing to those outside the community, and so at the harm done to the gospel (compare 1Thessalonians 4:12).

He calls for a communal and public excommunication, carried out 'with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ'. Since he says nothing about the woman, we can assume that she is not a Christian. The aim of the excommunication is to destroy in him what is coming from sources that are not open to grace (his 'flesh'), and to open him to the grace of repentance that comes from the Spirit. He will have to face judgment at the parousia (see 1Thessalonians 2:19). The foolish arrogance of those who are justifying the man's behaviour is encouraging him to continue to endanger his eternal salvation.

¹It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. ²And you remain quite smug about it! [NRSV 'you are arrogant'] Should you not rather have mourned, so that he who has done this would have been removed from among you?

³For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment ⁴in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?

⁷Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.

⁸Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

**⁹I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons –
¹⁰ not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since you would then need to go out of the world.**

¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber. Do not even eat with such a one.

¹²For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge?

¹³God will judge those outside. 'Drive out the wicked person from among you' (Deuteronomy 17:7).

To explain the reasons for his judgment, and using a homely metaphor (see also Galatians 5:9; Luke 13:20-21), Paul goes to the heart of the gospel. At the feast of Passover, according to Jewish ritual, all leavened bread was removed from the house, and new, unleavened bread was baked and eaten (Exodus 12:14-20). The Passover marked a new beginning. They were to put behind them all that belonged to the period of slavery prior to God's great redemptive act. The sacrifice of his life by Jesus was understood by the Christian community to be a new Passover, a new redemption (see 6:11). The outpouring of his love made possible a new life 'of sincerity and truth', free from the enslavement and corruption of sin.

Paul refers to an earlier (no longer extant) letter in which he had instructed them not to associate with people who live immoral lives. It seems that some chose to interpret his words in such a way as to make them appear absurd, as though Paul was expecting them to cut off all relations with the world. Paul says that this was never his intention. He was speaking only of the behaviour of Christians. Christian morality is the fruit of the Spirit (see 1Thessalonians 4:1-12; Galatians 5:13-24). Paul does not expect it to be lived by non-Christians, and he leaves their judgment to God.

The clarity of the church's witness to the gospel demands that the community be seen as a forgiving community capable, like Jesus, of living with sinners and embracing them. But sin must be named, and if a person is blatantly and obstinately determined to publicly flaunt his or her sin, the community must break its ties with such a person, in this way making it clear to the sinner and to everyone else that such a person is not living or witnessing to the life of Christ (compare Matthew 18:17; 1Timothy 1:20). The aim, of course, is repentance and reconciliation. The sins of sexual immorality, idolatry and drunkenness were named also in the list given in Galatians 5:19-21. Paul spoke of greed (Greek: *pleonexia*) in 1Thessalonians 2:5. It is the vice of wanting more and more of anything, just to have it, with no regard for one's own or anyone else's real needs. Paul names these sins as corroding a community that is called to be holy.

The key to this passage is found in the word ‘saints’ (see 1:2). As Paul wrote to the Galatians: ‘the Lord Jesus Christ, gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of God our Father’(Galatians 1:3-4). The Christian community in Corinth is a community of ‘saints’, that is to say, of those who have been removed from a world dominated by sin and taken into the embrace of God’s love where they share in the divine communion enjoyed by the risen and glorious Lord.

Grievances will arise within the community. Surely, says Paul, there is someone within the community who is wise enough to arbitrate and reconcile and bring about true justice according to the grace of God and the inspiration of Jesus’ Spirit. What are they doing, seeking justice from civil courts which know nothing of the new life which they share? It helps to understand Paul’s point of view when we remember that the Jewish community also forbade having recourse to civil courts in disputes between members of the synagogue, and for parallel reasons.

The Christians in Corinth believed that Christ would come with his saints to judge the world (see 1Thesalonians 3:13). Jesus promised that one day ‘you will eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel’(Luke 22:30). Indeed, says Paul, the whole world, including the angels, will be judged by the life of Jesus in which the Corinthians share. In this world now, they are called to be ‘blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world’(Philippians 2:15). What are they doing, abandoning grace and going back to find justice in the world from which Jesus has freed them?

They fancy themselves as being especially ‘wise’. Paul underlines the irony of such a claim when they cannot even find someone in the community able to arbitrate in ‘trivial cases’.

¹When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints?

²Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?

³Do you not know that we are to judge angels — to say nothing of ordinary matters?

⁴If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church?

⁵I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another,

⁶but a believer goes to court against a believer — and before unbelievers at that?

7In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you.

Why not rather be wronged?

Why not rather be defrauded?

8But you yourselves wrong and defraud — and believers at that.

It is important to read these verses properly. Paul is not saying that justice is not to be sought. He is not saying that it is better to be wronged and defrauded than to seek justice. He is saying that it is better to be the victim of wrong and injustice than to be the one causing it, and he is obviously concerned that in seeking justice through the civil courts which do not know the kind of justice revealed by Jesus, the aggrieved person is likely to end up inflicting injustice. Paul is not suggesting that they do nothing and just put up with injustice. He is calling on them to seek out an arbitrator within the Christian community who will help them find true justice, enlightened by grace and achieved through love. Behind Paul's words in 6:1-8 stand the words of Jesus:

I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.

– Matthew 5:39-41

We are still within the context of the 'foolishness' of the cross. In his own trial and crucifixion, Jesus himself remained above the travesty of justice that brought about his condemnation. In Peter's words: 'When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly'(1Peter 2:23). Relevant also are the words which Paul will write to the Romans: 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God'(Romans 12:9,17,19).

There will be problems in the community that need to be faced and resolved. The community in which Matthew's Gospel emerged (Antioch?) found it necessary sometimes, and as a last resort, to have recourse to excommunication, when a public sinner remained obstinate:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

– Matthew 18:15-17

The gospel is about human lives being transformed through the power of God's Spirit. Paul names some of the more obvious vices that resist grace, corrupt the person and the community, and which, without repentance, will mean the loss of salvation. The list duplicates that just given (5:10-11) with the addition of the following three: adulterers, male prostitutes (Greek: malakoi) and sodomites (Greek: arsenokoitai). As noted in our commentary on Galatians 5:19, we should not be surprised that sexual sins feature so strongly in Paul's lists. The way we express our sexual drive affects the way we love, and it is love which is at the heart of Christian morality. Since this is the first time that Paul has named sins that relate to homosexual behaviour, and since the issue is widely discussed today, we should delay to see what the behaviour was against which Paul directs his words.

The culture in the Greek and Roman worlds was, speaking generally, indulgent towards male sexual behaviour. The male was considered (by male writers and teachers) to be superior, not only intellectually, but also from the point of view of physical beauty. An adult male was encouraged to have a young male to give him pleasure, including the pleasure of sexual gratification. It was expected that the intimacy be intellectually stimulating, and that the older male would look to the education of the younger male, and behave towards him in a sensitive way. Plato wrote against this practice: 'man with man, or woman with woman, this is against nature' (Laws, 636b). Most moralists, however, extolled the virtues of love directed to boys (pederasty). It was not expected that wives would be chosen for either intellectual or romantic motives. It was considered that the appropriate partner for a male was another male. In opposition to Plato's view, pederasty is sometimes described as being more 'according to nature' for a male. Sexual union with a woman is needed for obvious reasons, but it is of a lesser dignity. Laws were enacted to protect young males against sexual harassment and rape, but pederasty of the kind we have described was widely encouraged. It is dangerous to speak in such generalities of the many diverse cultures that made up the Greco-Roman world, but the evidence supports the above statements as being largely true.

We might say that the culture, unlike our own, encouraged in all males the prolonging of undifferentiated pubertal sexuality. It was an unashamedly bisexual world. However, while on the whole condoning and even encouraging pederasty, the moralists condemned those who ran brothels, and those males who made a living out of offering their sexual services to older males. In cities like Corinth, the presence of coiffured and perfumed young men in the streets and public squares was a common sight and moralists of divergent philosophical persuasions frequently spoke out against what they decried as decadent behaviour.

⁹Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived!

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, ¹⁰thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers - none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

¹¹And this is what some of you used to be.

Homosexual behaviour

A moralist of the day writes :

To be in love with those who are beautiful and chaste is the experience of a kind-hearted and generous soul; but to hire for money and to indulge in licentiousness is the act of a man who is wanton and ill-bred.

– Aeschines, Timarchus, 137

These young men were often described as *malakoi*, one of the words used by Paul in our text. Literally it means ‘soft’, hence ‘effeminate’. The main criticism of indulging in sexual behaviour with such males, without any relationship and without any of the refining elements of education and genuine appreciation of beauty, was that it was ‘against nature’ (*kata phusin*). Of course, one can readily see the dangers inherent in the acceptable forms of pederasty: dangers in the unequal nature of the relationship, in its impermanency, and in the occasion it provides for abuse and humiliation. However, the point being made here is that the culture saw its advantages as outweighing its disadvantages. There is a good deal of evidence in the ancient texts of a prevailing (though not universal) misogyny, but there is no evidence of the kind of homophobia that we witness today.

There is very little in the Hebrew Bible on the subject of homosexual behaviour. There is the terrible story of Sodom (Genesis 19), which accounts for our word ‘sodomy’. It is a condemnation of inhospitality and of rape. There is the even worse story of the Levite (Judges 19), which also involves a condemnation of rape. Both stories demonstrate an assumption of male superiority and a disgusting denigration of women. There is the proscription against cult prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:17-18), and the following law:

You shall not lie with a male (Greek: *arsēn + koitē*) as with a woman; it is an abomination.

– Leviticus 18:22

If a man lies with a male (Greek: *arsēn + koitē*) as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them.

– Leviticus 20:13

No context is given for these regulations, and there is no discussion of the issues involved. Were they concerned with the kind of public, flagrant, male prostitution that they observed in the Greek world? Were they concerned at the waste of male semen and so of what they understood to be the vehicle of life (they had no concept of the role of the female gamete)? We do not know what they were saying unless we know what the nature of the behaviour was which they were condemning. What emerges in the discussions of these texts among the Rabbis and in the writings of Jews living in the Greek world is a strong disgust for the male prostitution that is also condemned by Greek and Roman moralists, as well as a condemnation of pederasty. Such behaviour was unknown in the Jewish culture and Jewish writers condemn it as typically Gentile. What is also clear is that there is no discussion at all of homosexuality as a physiological-psychological sexual preference or tendency. The focus is on homosexual behaviour. Furthermore, it is not evident that any of the texts envisage a situation in which two male adults as equals express their affection sexually and with mutual sensitivity. The texts from Leviticus cannot be quoted against behaviour which they may well not have been addressing.

We come now to the two sins listed by Paul. Neither the malakoi nor the arsenokoitai will inherit the kingdom of heaven. According to the most obvious reading of the text Paul is repeating what is commonly said by Jewish writers and to a lesser extent also by Stoic and other Greek and Roman moralists of his day. He is speaking against the behaviour of those young men, quite obvious in cities like Corinth, who dressed themselves up and offered themselves for money for the sexual gratification of other males. He is also condemning those who take advantage of them. The word arsenokoitai is not found in the Greek moralists. It seems to have its origin in Jewish circles and to derive from the Leviticus texts. Since Paul simply lists these sins here we should assume that he is repeating common Jewish condemnation of male prostitution and pederasty. We would need more evidence to justify extending Paul's meaning to condemn outright all expressions of homosexual behaviour. The same must be said about his statement to Timothy. Among those who behave in ways that are 'against sound teaching' he includes 'fornicators, sodomites and slave traders' (1 Timothy 1:10). The first group are the pornoi, the primary meaning of which is 'male prostitutes'. This may well be its meaning here. If so it refers to those whom Paul calls malakoi in our present text. The second group are, once again, the arsenokoitai, which, as in our present text, could be referring to those who take advantage of the prostitutes. The third group are the andrapodistēs. In context Paul may well be referring to those who take slave boys into brothels for purposes of prostitution. In the only other text in which Paul refers to homosexual behaviour he goes, however briefly, beyond a simple listing of sins:

Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator ... God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

– Romans 1:25-27

This text is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it is one of only a handful of texts from the time that even mention female homosexual behaviour. Secondly, Paul uses the expression 'not natural' (not kata phusin), used by Plato against those who allowed their affection for young men to descend into sexual gratification, and used by a number of Greek moralists in their condemnation of male homosexual gratification that was separated from real affection and where the younger man was treated as a commodity for sale. It is possible that Paul is expressing the traditional Jewish opposition to male prostitution, extending his words to include women to demonstrate the universal degradation from which human beings need redemption. In the light of other Jewish writings, it is likely that he intends to include the Gentile practice of pederasty. Beyond that, we are in the area of conjecture. We should note that everything Paul says about love, sensitivity, mutuality, and the sacred nature of sex, is relevant to the discussion of heterosexual behaviour. What we cannot do is take these few texts from Paul and use them to close the discussion as some are wont to do. The Bible has a lot to offer us, but we must discover the most loving way forward, faced with questions which are, in the light of advances in psychology, quite new.

^{11b}But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

Paul reminds them of the significance of their conversion. They were washed clean from their sins: whatever was blocking their communion with God was washed away in the flood of God's redeeming love. They were sanctified: the Spirit of God, the Spirit of the risen Christ, was given them so that they could share his life and be set aside as belonging to him. They were justified: they were graced to be able to enter upon a new way of living in accordance with the will of God (see 1:30). This happened when they were baptised into the Christian community (see commentary on 1Corinthians 1:13-16). Let them live this life in true wisdom and so 'inherit the kingdom of God' (see commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:12). Note the Trinitarian perspective. Jesus, the Spirit, God. We are not far from Jesus' command:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

– Matthew 28:18-20

Though all agree that Paul is including statements from the Corinthian letter, it is not always easy to know exactly when he is quoting and when he is responding. My suggestion is indicated by the different format. The Corinthians are appealing to the freedom they have as disciples of Jesus, probably echoing sayings of Paul such as: 'For freedom Christ has set us free' (Galatians 5:1). Paul counters: first, they have been given freedom in order to be able to do what is beneficial (not harmful); secondly, how free are they when in the name of freedom they are being dominated by their own unruly passions?

Their second argument is that the stomach is made for food and food for the stomach, and, anyhow, both are passing and have no real, ultimate relevance. The implication is obvious: the stomach is made for food, sex organs are made for sex. There's nothing else to it. Paul reminds them that they have been drawn by grace into intimate communion with Christ. As he will write to the Romans; 'If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Romans 14:8). The body (Greek: *sōma*, see 5:3), that is to say, the physical dimension of our being and of our relating, is not irrelevant to Christian living (see 1Thessalonians 4:3-8). Our union with the Lord involves our whole person. Furthermore, the body is not destroyed for ever at death, for the resurrection encompasses all that makes up a human being (compare 1Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1Corinthians 15). God will raise 'us', not some disembodied spirit.

Paul reminds them that their 'bodies are members of Christ'. By 'body' he does not mean some material part of what we are. He is referring to our person insofar as we are a part of and relate to the physical world, especially other people. He uses the Genesis text to make the point that the union realised through sexual intercourse with a prostitute is a union of 'flesh'. We are called, however, to a union of 'spirit' with Christ – a union of our whole human person enjoying communion in love 'in the Spirit'. The distinction is not between physical and non-physical, but between the self with no reference to the divine spirit and the self in communion with God.

¹²*'All things are lawful for me',*

but not all things are beneficial.

'All things are lawful for me',

but I will not be dominated by anything.

¹³*'Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food' and God will destroy both one and the other.*

The body is meant not for fornication but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power.

¹⁵**Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never!**

¹⁶**Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, 'The two shall be one flesh.'** (Genesis 2:24)

¹⁷**But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.**

¹⁸Shun fornication!

Every sin which a person commits is outside the body; but the fornicator sins against the body itself.

¹⁹Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God,

and that you are not your own?

²⁰For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Paul gives us an insight here into why sexual immorality is so important for him. There is something quite special about sexual sins. Other sins, in comparison, are committed ‘outside the body’. Paul seems to be using the word body (*sōma*) here in a sense quite close to our own use, but without the duality of soul-body which we have inherited. He is speaking of our person, but with special regard to the dimension of our being that identifies us with the physical, created world and especially with regard to the ways in which, as physical beings, we relate to other persons. In relating sexually, the whole human person is involved in a way that is quite special. To sin sexually is to pervert love. Quite apart from the hurt that is given to the other person, we sin against ourselves as relating human beings. We must ‘shun sexual immorality’.

He supports his claim with two fundamental Christian truths. The first is that we are temples of the Holy Spirit, and this includes every aspect of our being, including the way we relate to the world and to other people; in other words, our ‘body’. God has given us God’s own Spirit to dwell in us. In behaving in sexually irresponsible ways we profane God’s temple.

The second truth concerns the price Christ paid on the cross to redeem us and to give us our freedom (see 1:30). As always, Paul bases the position which he takes in matters of morality directly in our relationship with Christ. We are not our own; we belong to him. It should be the praise of God that resounds in the temple. Also, others, seeing our love, should be moved to give glory to God. Paul expresses the same idea later in writing to the Romans:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

– Romans 12:1

God’s will is to transform every aspect of our human condition: our way of thinking, our way of responding, our way of loving; our feelings and our desires. The risen Christ wishes to speak through our lips, see through our eyes, listen with our ears, touch with our hands. Everything we do should witness to the gospel and be an instrument in carrying out his mission to bring about the kingdom of his Father. ‘You are not your own; you were bought with a price’. In our relationships with each other (our ‘body’) we are to behave in such a way that those seeing us will praise the wonder of God’s grace.

Having defended his own authority, and having used it to direct the Corinthians as to how they should act in matters that have come to his attention, Paul now turns to the matters contained in the letter brought to him by the delegation from Corinth. It is difficult to know whether Paul is quoting from the letter (the option taken by the translators of the NRSV) or whether he is giving a one-line response which he will go on to qualify in the remaining verses of chapter seven.

We should recall that Jewish Christians would have grown up with the idea that there is, in general, an expectation – one might almost say an obligation – to hand on the gift of life, and with it the gift of the promise. It was probably not at all obvious to many of them that it was a morally good thing (Greek: kalos) to forgo this obligation. However, as Paul's response develops it will become clear that he is living as a celibate. This would have influenced the thinking of the Corinthians. As regards Paul's celibacy we should recall that Paul was a Pharisee and that the Pharisees were especially strict in seeing marriage as an obligation. It is possible that Paul was still unmarried at the time of his experience on the road to Damascus. On the other hand, he may have been widowed young or felt obliged to separate from his wife in order better to carry out the mission given him by Jesus.

It is possible that some of the Gentile Christians in Corinth were influenced by Greek philosophers who recommended sexual abstaining for the wise man as providing the best environment for him to be free from distraction so as to pursue perfection. The benefits and disadvantages of marriage was a frequent subject for debate.

Were some of the Corinthian community genuinely striving to imitate Paul by living celibate lives, only to be told that they were failing to fulfil their obligations either to their wives or to the community? Were some of the women wanting to avoid sexual relations in their search for holiness, and was this confusing the men? Were some seeking asceticism as a higher way and using it, as they were using other claims, to assert their superiority over others in the community? Were some claiming that a person had to be celibate to be truly Christian? Were they looking upon celibacy as the easiest way to avoid sins of sexual immorality that had plagued them in the past and that continued to trouble them? Any or all of these currents of opinion may well have provided the background to the question. Paul's reply, as we shall see, is nicely nuanced.

¹Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: It is a good thing [NRSV 'It is well'] for a man not to touch a woman.

²But because of cases of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.

³The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.

⁴For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

⁵Do not deprive one another except perhaps by agreement for a set time, to devote yourselves to prayer, and then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

⁶This I say by way of concession, not of command.

⁷I wish that all were as I myself am. But each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind.

Paul turns his attention first of all to those who are already married. His aim here is not to speak of the beauty of marriage or to depth the special graces that are given to a married couple so that their married love will be a means of mutual sanctification. Hints of his understanding and appreciation of marriage can be found in the text, but his aim is to respond carefully to the precise question that is troubling the Corinthians. One thing is clear: Paul wants to rid them of the idea that sexual abstaining is a cure-all for sexual immorality. On the contrary, the sexual drive is so strong that those who are married will find that their safest place for living chaste lives is in living their marriage well. He wants them to exercise great care about committing themselves to sexual abstention and to make sure that any decision in this direction is mutual.

Of course, they are to restrict their sexual expressions to their married partner. This is Paul's first point. Secondly, the husband must remember that he has promised himself to his wife. He cannot unilaterally withdraw from their mutual sexual life. Nor can she. To do so would be to be unfaithful to the commitment given in marriage. It would also put the unwilling partner in a dangerous position in regards sexual temptations. Note here Paul's reference to 'self-control' (Greek: *egkrateia*, see Galatians 5:23) – a central virtue in Stoic moral writings. In light of the culture of the day, Paul's sensitivity to the mutuality of husband and wife is quite outstanding. Rarely do his contemporaries consider such matters from the woman's perspective.

Having said that, Paul reaffirms the value of celibacy. For reasons that he does not develop in this chapter, though he does touch on some of them, he finds the celibate life frees him for a special closeness to Jesus and a special availability for mission. It is, of course not possible for them all to share his experience, but he wishes everyone could experience the value of celibacy. However – and this is the key point – it all depends on God's gift. The only thing that ultimately matters is being dedicated to Christ and doing the will of God. Paul's advice is that if God graces you as a married person you would do best to live your married life faithfully, sensitively, and prayerfully and it will be 'well' for you.

Paul's words on celibacy cause him to turn his attention for a moment to those who are in a position to follow his example: those who have never married as well as the widowers and widows. He suggests that they think seriously about celibacy, but, only if they have the gift. It is no good attempting celibacy unless they can live a sexually moral life and can mature in love as a celibate. If they do not have the gift, let them marry. Since it gives them a way of expressing their sexual needs, it is a much safer way to live chastely.

If you are a married person reading this, you might like to go back in prayer and remember the promises you exchanged with your spouse. You offered to each other the security of love with all the simple expressions of love that reach deep into your spiritual, emotional and physical needs and give direction to your yearning for communion. If you wonder whether you can fulfil those promises, remember the special gift you have from God, the gift you can call on to help you take the next step in the long journey of growing in love. Pray to be open to this gift which God renews each day.

If you are a person who has made a commitment to remain single, whether it be to live and work as part of a religious community, or to care for a sick parent, or to work in a particular profession, or for whatever reason, remember that there is a special gift from God which makes it possible for a single person to grow in love. Paul himself is a good example. Pray that your single life will be a way of loving, and pray for the communion with God and with people that will support you in it.

If you are living a single life because you have not yet made a commitment, or because of the death of a spouse, or through separation or divorce, and you are considering which direction to take in your life, pray to come to see your gift. You will need to look at your natural gifts and inclinations, you will need the help of the discernment of people who know and love you and whose wisdom you trust. You may reach your deepest ability to love and to be loved through union with a spouse, perhaps with the addition of children, with all the joy and all the pain that goes with such a life. You may, on the other hand, find your deepest ability to love and to be loved by responding to the challenge offered in this passage by Paul, or by Jesus when he addressed himself to those who had enough space in their hearts to be celibate 'for the sake of the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 19:12). This life too has its joys and its pain. Both ways are meant to be ways of loving and of being loved. The best way is the way that each is gifted by God, for 'each has a particular gift from God, one having one kind and another a different kind'.

⁸To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well for them to remain unmarried as I am.

⁹But if they are not practising self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion.

¹⁰To the married I give this command — not I but the Lord —

that the wife should not separate from her husband

¹¹(but if she does separate, let her remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband),

and that the husband should not divorce his wife.

Paul addresses himself now to those who are married, and firstly to a married couple who are both believers, whose marriage therefore is lived and supported within a faith context. The fact that he mentions the wives first may indicate that it is the Corinthian women who are urging separation. Paul repeats Jesus' own teaching: there is no place for divorce. Married love is to be a vehicle and an expression of the faithful love of God in whom the believers put their trust. In taking this stand Paul is reinforcing the teaching in the previous verses: the desire to live a celibate life does not justify breaking up a Christian marriage. Jesus' teaching is given direct and simple expression in the Gospel according to Luke (16:8):

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and whoever marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

The statement is addressed to the male because only the male in Jewish society could procure a divorce. Jesus' statement is expressed without qualifications. It is important to observe, as is obvious from a reading of verses twelve to fifteen, that Paul understood it as directed to the situation in which both husband and wife are believers. In other situations it requires nuancing.

Mark and Matthew preserve this saying of Jesus in the context of a debate with the Pharisees over the interpretation and application of the regulations of Jewish law concerning divorce. We find these regulations in the Book of Deuteronomy (24:1-4). Jesus disagrees with Deuteronomy, and reminds them of the ancient law contained in the Book of Genesis: 'a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh' (Genesis 1:27, quoted Mark 10:7-8 and Matthew 19:5). In Mark's Gospel (10:8-9,11-12), Jesus concludes:

They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate ...Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.

Jesus refuses to see marriage as a matter of male rights. It is a union of man and woman that has its origin in the will of God. It is interesting to note that Mark's account extends Jesus' words, as does Paul in our present letter, to include the Greek and Roman situation in which it was possible for a woman to procure a divorce. Matthew's account alerts us to the need to use discretion when applying Jesus' words to a particular marriage situation. The New Jerusalem Bible translation captures well the interpretation favoured by many scholars today: 'Anyone who divorces his wife – I am not speaking of an illicit marriage – and marries another is guilty of adultery' (Matthew 19:9).

Paul turns his attention now to marriages in which one or other of the partners is not a Christian. According to Matthew, Jesus' words do not apply to marriages that have been contracted outside the laws governing the Jewish community, including non-Jews married to Jews. Paul is dealing with people affected by Corinthian law, which allowed either partner to divorce simply by making a declaration before witnesses and registering the fact. If the Christian spouse was divorced by his or her non-Christian spouse, what was to be done? Was remarriage possible for the Christian? Alternatively, how does a person committed to the gospel live in a marriage relationship with a spouse who is not committed to it? Is the Christian obliged to divorce? Is he or she permitted to do so? In his earlier letter Paul had told the community 'not to associate with sexually immoral persons' (5:9). Did this include a non-Christian spouse?

Paul states that he has no teaching from Jesus on the matter. His judgment is that the Christian is not obliged to divorce. On the contrary, if the non-Christian partner does not instigate the divorce and consents to live with the Christian in peace, the Christian should continue in the marriage. Just as the children of a Christian who are too young to believe are drawn into the ambit of the Spirit by the believing parent, so also is the unbelieving spouse. The Christian may well be God's instrument in bringing about the salvation of the unbelieving spouse. If, however, the Christian partner is divorced by the unbelieving spouse, he or she is free to re-marry.

Paul does not claim to be covering every eventuality or to have the last word on such a complex matter. What was to happen when a believing spouse gave up the faith, in fact if not in theory, and made it impossible for the believing spouse to live his or her faith, or to experience peace in the marriage? Into what category would such a marriage fall? There is no substitute for doing what Paul himself does in this passage: one must examine the actual relationship in the light of the nature of Christian marriage as a sacrament of God's unfailing love, and attempt a wise, compassionate and realistic discernment, remembering, as Paul says, that 'It is to peace that God has called you'. Fidelity to love can mean the cross – this has been a central theme of this letter. But not every cross is redemptive, nor can remaining in an unloving relationship which is destructive be described as being faithful to love.

¹²To the rest I say — I and not the Lord — that if any believer has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her.

¹³And if any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.

¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. It is to peace that God has called you.

¹⁶Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife.

Marriage fidelity and divorce

Each community and each married person has to enter into a careful and honest spiritual discernment in this matter. It is clear that Jesus is demanding a fidelity to marriage and a commitment to pledged love that goes beyond the expectations of his contemporaries, of whatever school of thought. Jesus does not compromise. Where there has been a genuine commitment of love between two people who have embraced the good news, breaking this commitment comes under the condemnation of adultery.

Of course people, with the best will in the world, make commitments which prove to be impossible to keep for any number of reasons. Where the commitment, however, is genuine, and where faith-values are shared and peace enjoyed, an arbitrary decision to renounce the commitment is a breaking of faith.

Keeping faith can, in some circumstances, demand heroic love – a love that is possible only through grace. It can mean dying to oneself (9:23), but we must not lose sight of Jesus' teaching that such dying does issue in life. It is not destructive, but life-giving, and its fruit is love. Jesus is not commending a waste of life, or a destructive disregard of self.

Being a disciple of Jesus does not protect a person against the ordinary situations of hurt or misunderstanding or being the victim of another person's infidelity that are part of the human condition. The fact that two disciples of Jesus pledge their love to each other in faith does not guarantee them against marriage breakdown. Love does not control, and one partner cannot prevent the sin or the infidelity or the breaking of the covenant by the other.

In Jesus' world, as in our own, it was all too easy to break the marriage covenant and to seek in another relationship the happiness one failed to find in marriage. If a marriage is destructive, this may be an appropriate response. Jesus' words, however, stand as a warning against a too easy neglect of one's obligations. Some suffering is destructive. To undergo it has no merit and no reward. Some suffering, however, is redemptive. The later is revealed by its fruit: a deepening of love.

The key principle in this whole matter is that the only thing that matters ultimately is God's will. If God calls us to married love, being married is the best way that we can experience communion with God and grow in intimacy with Christ. If God calls us to celibate love, then that is the way we can best live our Christian life. Each person must be attentive to and obey God's call.

Paul digresses in order to illustrate his point. He speaks first of circumcision. They would often have heard him declare that whether they were circumcised or uncircumcised, they were called to share in the life of Jesus' Spirit. Becoming a Christian did not require an uncircumcised Gentile to become circumcised, nor did it require a Jew to attempt to undo his circumcision. God loves us and calls us into communion with him as we are. Conversion does not require us to change our state; it requires us, in whatever state we are, to do God's will, for 'obeying the commandments of God is everything'. The implication is obvious: a married person does not have to leave the marriage and live a celibate life in order to enjoy communion with God.

Taken out of context a Jew would have found the statement 'circumcision is nothing' to be dismissive of the Jewish religion. Paul is a Jew, however, and there is ample evidence that he remained faithful to Judaism to the end. It was when he came to accept that Jesus was the Messiah promised to his people that all the energy which he expended as a young Pharisee was directed to carrying out the mission given to his people to take the knowledge of the Lord to the nations. In doing so he was being faithful to his Jewish heritage. He wanted Abraham to be the father of many nations. Paul is not speaking against circumcision any more than he is speaking against not being circumcised. His precise point is that what matters is obedience, or as he put it beautifully in his Letter to the Galatians, 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6); 'a new creation is everything' (Galatians 6:15). If you are called as a Jew, be faithful to all that is good in your heritage and be obedient as a Jew to his call (see Romans 2:25-29). If you were called as a Gentile, be faithful to all that is good in your heritage and be obedient as a Gentile to the call. Once again the implication is obvious. You don't have to change your ethnic state, neither do you have to alter your situation as a married person.

¹⁷However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches.

¹⁸Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision.

Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision.

¹⁹Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything.

²⁰Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called.

**²¹Were you
[singular] a slave
when called?
Do not be con-
cerned about it.**

**If you can gain
your freedom,
avail yourself
of the opportu-
nity.**

**[NRSV 'Even
if you can gain
your freedom,
make use of
your present
condition now
more than ever']**

**²²For whoever
was called in
the Lord as a
slave is a freed
person belong-
ing to the Lord,
just as whoever
was free when
called is a slave
of Christ.**

**²³You were
bought with a
price; do not
become slaves
of human mas-
ters.**

**²⁴In whatever
condition you
were called,
brothers and
sisters, there
remain with
God.**

Paul's second illustration concerns slaves. See the commentary on Galatians 3:28 for a reflection on Paul's attitude towards slavery. Using the second person singular, Paul addresses each of the slaves in the community in a personal way, inviting them into dialogue. Being a slave has not stopped them enjoying the special freedom that comes with communion with Christ. And anyhow a free person (one who is not a slave), is called to be a 'slave of Christ', giving him or herself, body and soul, into Christ's service. Paul often speaks of himself as a 'slave of Christ' (see Galatians 1:10).

Verse twenty-one ends with the words 'avail yourself'. Paul may be challenging the slaves to avail themselves of the kind of 'freedom' which Jesus has given them – a freedom which they can live as slaves. On the other hand, he may be telling them that they may take advantage of the opportunity to be freed from slavery should the opportunity become available to them. They do not have to remain slaves to live the kind of freedom offered them by Jesus. Paul's point is that whether they are freed or not, being a slave does not remove a person from grace and so from the freedom that ultimately counts: the freedom won for them by Christ. Once again the point is made: neither does being married or being celibate. What matters is God's call.

Paul is sometimes criticised for failing to work for alternative structures for society: for example, the abolition of slavery. Paul's mission was urgent and his focus intense. His attention did not stray from the central truth revealed in the cross. His concern was that his readers realise that they were 'bought with a price' (also 6:20), and that they live that freedom to the full, by living the life inspired in them by the Spirit of Jesus, and so giving themselves to others in love. Paul provides the central point from which every reform must issue. No social programme that ignores the justice of God revealed on the cross can succeed in supporting our true human dignity. No programme that takes the cross seriously will cease pursuing the path of justice till every dimension of human living is redeemed. God is renewing everything through the gospel. If we 'remain with God', whatever is to be changed will be changed by God through our obedient faith.

All along he has been addressing the question of marriage or celibacy. Paul is not arguing for the keeping of the status quo. He is encouraging us to 'remain with God'. If we truly want what God wants and if we listen for God's call, we will find the right way in which to live out our Christian lives in and for the world. No structure will remain unchallenged by love.

Let us recall the question to which Paul is responding. He was asked whether it was a good thing to abstain from sexual relations (7:1). To this point he has focused his comments on those already married. In verses eight to nine he referred briefly to the unmarried, expressing the value of remaining celibate while advising them that if they find that they are unable to control their sexual urges they would do better to marry. Again and again he has said that the key to their decision should be found in listening to God's call and discerning the gift that they have been given. It is communion with Jesus and obedience to God's will that are of paramount importance, and each person has to discover the way in which he or she has been graced by God to live a loving life.

Having completed his advice to those who are married, Paul now turns his attention to the unmarried. He suggests that they remain unmarried, while carefully assuring them that there is no sin involved if they decide to marry. At the same time, he reminds them that marriage is not a bed of roses: 'those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that'.

Paul is advising celibacy within a quite specific perspective, namely, 'in view of the impending crisis (Greek: krisis)'; 'the appointed time has grown short'; 'the present form of this world is passing away'. We have the same intense focus here as we found earlier (see the comments on previous page). Jesus, too, spoke of the 'great distress' (Greek: anagkē) that was coming (see Luke 21:23). The reference is to the final judgment, and the language is traditional:

That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress (anagkē) and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness.

– Zephaniah 1:15

When Paul speaks of 'distress' he uses *thlipsis*. There is more to this word, too, than the normal problems of married life. The word recurs in reference to the crises that are to be expected in the 'end times' (see Mark 13:19-20). Independent of all expectations of Christ's imminent coming, the fact is that the world is passing. Paul wants them to live their lives focused on intimacy with Jesus. Compared to this everything else is as if it were not.

²⁵Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy.

²⁶I think that, in view of the impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are.

²⁷Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be free. Are you free from a wife? Do not seek a wife.

²⁸But if you marry, you do not sin, and if a virgin marries, she does not sin. Yet those who marry will experience distress in this life, and I would spare you that.

²⁹I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none,

³⁰and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions,

³¹and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.

³²I want you to be free from anxieties.

The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord;

³³but the married man is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please his wife, ³⁴and his interests are divided.

And the unmarried woman and the virgin are anxious about the affairs of the Lord, so that they may be holy in body and spirit;

but the married woman is anxious about the affairs of the world, how to please her husband.

³⁵I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord.

Paul now addresses the whole community, married and unmarried. The key word in this passage is the word ‘anxiety’ (Greek: *merimna*). This can also be translated ‘caring about’ in a wholly positive and wholesome way. Paul will use this word later to encourage the members of the community to ‘care for one another’ (12:25). In the present text Paul plays with both meanings. His basic concern, as he says, is to relieve their anxieties. The divisions in the community are troubling them, and the whole question of sexual morality and their wanting to draw as close as possible to Jesus has made them anxious about the value of marriage.

In the context of advising the unmarried to consider living a celibate life, and while being very careful not to put any pressure upon them, Paul reminds them of a simple truth. If they marry, they will, of course, have to give their attention to caring for their spouse. Paul has already spoken of the graced mutuality that is at the heart of Christian marriage. This will necessarily and rightly involve them in many matters concerned with what he has just called ‘the present form of this world’, which is ‘passing away’. Paul’s appreciation of such a commitment is, as we have seen, wholly positive, and, as he has said earlier, if that is the grace which God gives them, then in following that call they are doing the will of God and it is the best way in which to give their ‘unhindered devotion to the Lord’.

On the other hand, from his own experience he assures them that an unmarried person, freed from the need to care for a spouse with all that that entails, can give his or her whole attention in a special way to being in communion with the Lord. This is provided, as he has already insisted, they have from God the grace of being able to mature and to grow in love as a celibate.

Paul is not speaking abstractly. He has already given his answer to the question ‘Is it better to be married or celibate?’ His response is ‘Listen for God’s call. Discern the grace given to you’. In light of the anxieties of the community about matters of sexuality, he is being very careful, while recommending celibacy, not to put any pressure on them. His advice is that if a person finds that he or she does have the gift of being able to love in a celibate way, that is the better choice. His only interest is that, whether one is married or celibate, one does everything to give ‘unhindered devotion to the Lord’.

In the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42) we see two ways of attending to the Lord. Martha's problem was not that her way of serving him was in itself inferior to that of Mary. It was that in her attending to Jesus she was 'distracted' (10:40), 'anxious' (*merimnaō*) and 'troubled' (10:41), whereas Mary was not. Every moment of our life can be a prayer. No activity, no involvement, need distract us from God who is at the heart of everything, and who loves us and calls us to himself. Every occupation, and in a most wonderful way marriage and family life, can be a sacrament of love. As, like Martha, we are busy carrying out the mission he has given us in and for the world, let us remember, like Mary, to sit at the Lord's feet and listen to him. In this way we may gradually learn, in our silence and in our activity, to give him our unhindered devotion.

Some in the community have already entered into a contract of betrothal. Paul's advice to them is simple. They are wondering whether or not they should go ahead and marry. Paul tells them not to be anxious. They are free to decide either way, and they should, once again, look to the grace given them by God. If they can resist the temptation to act out their sexual needs in an irresponsible way – in other words, if they find that they can love in a mature way without marriage – then they are not bound by their betrothal promise and may remain unmarried. From everything Paul has written, one can assume that he understood this as being by mutual agreement. If, on the other hand, they do not have the gift of being able to love purely as a celibate, then they would be advised to go ahead with their commitment and marry as planned. Paul has no ruling on the matter. Either decision is good. Let them seek God's will. However, given a choice, once again Paul indicates his preference for celibacy.

Finally, Paul has some advice for those who have been widowed. He directs his words to the widows. Perhaps this is because it is the women who have raised the issue. He tells them that on the death of their husband they are free to marry again should they wish. Paul has only one rider, and that is that they make the decision within their relationship to the Lord, in obedience to him. Once again, Paul is telling them to attend to God's call. However, once again, he recommends that they live a celibate life. They are getting plenty of advice from the 'prophets' in their community. Paul reminds them that he, too, has 'the Spirit of God'.

³⁶If anyone thinks that he is not behaving properly toward his fiancée, if his passions are strong, and so it has to be, let him marry as he wishes; it is no sin. Let them marry.

³⁷But if someone stands firm in his resolve, being under no necessity but having his own desire under control, and has determined in his own mind to keep her as his fiancée, he will do well.

³⁸So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.

³⁹A wife is bound as long as her husband lives. But if the husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, only in the Lord.

⁴⁰But in my judgment she is more blessed if she remains as she is. And I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

¹Now concerning food offered to idols:

Paul turns now to the second area of concern expressed in the letter delivered to him from the Corinthian church. While, at first sight, the issue which takes up this and the following two chapters appears not to relate to our experience, a Christian community living in a largely non-Christian society faces similar problems, and Paul's magnificent reply has much to teach us about how to love others in a culturally mixed community in which there can be wide differences in the way people see things.

To grasp the issue at stake in Corinth we need to remember that sanctuaries devoted to various deities were an important part of the civic landscape. From writings of the time (including the travel guide of Pausanias, c.170AD) and from archeological discoveries, we know of the existence in Corinth of temples to Zeus, Hera, Poseidon, Asclepius, Aphrodite, Apollo, Demeter, and Persephone. Also, among others, to Octavia, the sister of Augustus, and to the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis. Civic occasions abounded which centred on one or other of these sanctuaries. Various guilds and various tribal groups in this multi-cultural city, as well as sporting and other confraternities, gathered regularly at the sanctuary of their protective god or goddess to seek favours and the express thanks. Then there were all the major family festivities such as marriages, funerals and births that included offerings made at a shrine. Friends were invited. Some of the offerings was later consumed by the priests; some was consumed by the guests in a room adjacent to the shrine, and the rest was sold by merchants in the public market and found its way to the tables of private homes.

One reason for the question may be what Paul wrote in an earlier letter (see 5:9-10). Surely, some of them are saying, when you told us to avoid idolaters, you were not expecting us to 'go out of the world'(5:10)? As can be seen from the above survey, to avoid eating all meat offered to idols, they would be unable to participate in any public festivities and would have to refuse all invitations to other people's homes. Paul's response indicates that most of the community had no problem in eating such food. However, some were troubled, others were in danger of reverting to idolatry, and one can imagine how difficult the whole area was to Jewish Christians. Joining the Christian community brought them to quite a different relationship to society than that to which they were accustomed. Because of their strict Jewish teaching on matters such as the present one they could well have been especially vulnerable to scandal.

Scholars agree that at times Paul quotes from the letter which he has received. However, without that letter, it is not always easy to be sure when Paul is quoting and when he is responding. As in chapter six (see page 213) I have indicated my opinion in the format. It seems that the Corinthians are defending their practice of eating food that has been offered to idols by claiming that all those who are doing so possess the gift of knowledge, the gift of the Spirit that enables them to know how to behave. Paul's response goes straight to the heart of the matter. Knowledge is, of course, important, but they must be careful because knowledge can be a basis for self-exaltation and pride. As he wrote to the Galatians: 'the only thing that counts is faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). If their love is true it will be constructive for everyone involved. Paul will repeat this idea later in this section (see 10:23-24). Behind Paul's words is the revelation given by Jesus that God is love. Knowledge, therefore, that is not suffused with love may be accurate within its limits, but it is not true, for it neglects the only ultimate truth and so everything that is known is misconstrued. It lacks true perspective. God is the source of all truth. To be 'known' by God is to be drawn into divine love-communion. This is to love God and knowledge that lacks this love is not true knowledge.

Their second justification is that those who are eating the food know that the idols are only idols and that the food that has been offered to them has no real religious significance. Here, too, their knowledge is defective. It is true, says Paul, that for us there is only one God, but 'there are many gods and lords (Paul himself prefers to call them 'demons') and so idolatry is possible. The Jews among them have always been strict monotheists (see Deuteronomy 6:4), and learning this was central to the conversion experience of the Gentiles (compare 1Thessalonians 1:9). However, though these evil powers are not really gods (see Galatians 4:8), people do worship them.

Paul will go on in the conclusion to verse six to remind them that the one God in whom they believe is the 'Father', the implication being that they are brothers and sisters and so should be more sensitive to each other. God has chosen to reveal himself to us through Christ, and it is through communion with Christ that we are able to be in communion with God and so enjoy the most profound knowledge possible: that which comes by being 'known by God'. The focus is still on love.

*we know that
'all of us
possess
knowledge'.*

**Knowledge
puffs up,
but love builds up.**

**²Anyone who
claims to know
something
does not yet have
the necessary
knowledge;
³but anyone who
loves God is
known by him.**

**⁴Hence, as to the
eating of food of-
fered to idols,**

*we know that
'no idol in the
world really
exists', and that
'there is no God
but one'.*

**⁵Indeed, even
though there may
be so-called gods in
heaven or on earth
— as in fact there
are many gods and
many lords —**

**⁶yet for us there is
one God**

‘yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.’

Though it has been suggested that these verses continue to express the position of the Corinthians, we are following the judgment of those who see them as part of Paul’s reply in which he is reminding them of their common faith. This one God in whom they believe is ‘the Father’; the one revealed as love by Jesus. It is this truth that underlies Paul’s whole response. For one who is truly a monotheist, the one God is the source of everything that is: ‘all things come from God’(11:2). We might compare John’s words: ‘All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being’(John 1:3). This means that everything is related to everything else, everything belongs to everything else, creation is one. A monotheist cannot speak of ‘my God’ and ‘your God’. There is only one God. A monotheist cannot be a racist or be sectarian. A monotheist will be sensitive to other people’s religious awareness and will recognise every thing and every person as fundamentally sacred, having a divine origin: ‘there is one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’(Ephesians 4:6).

This one God is not only the origin but also the goal of everything: ‘For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen’(Romans 11:36). In the words of the well known prayer of Saint Augustine: ‘You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you’ (Confessions, I.1). This God chose to endow human beings with the gift of freedom. In doing so God gave us the power to say Yes to love and to what is real and true. God gave us also the power to say No. Hence the reality of sin. Even in our idolatry, however, we are twisting something that is naturally good. We are taking a healthy longing to worship and we are focusing it in the wrong place. God is at the heart of everything. Sadly, we do not always go to the heart. We do not always see clearly or choose wisely.

Basic to the Christian understanding of life is the truth that Jesus is the perfect human expression of God. John speaks of Jesus as the incarnation of God’s Word (John 1:14). He is the revelation of God to human beings in our terms. It is Jesus who reveals the mystery, drawing us to ever deeper understanding of the wisdom of God. He takes us to the heart of the real, and in the mystery of his own heart he shows us the mind and will, the design and intention, of God, and the activity of God’s Spirit. In coming to know Jesus we come to know ourselves and the whole of creation, for ‘through him are all things and through him we exist’.

Drawing on the reflections of Jewish Wisdom literature, Paul sees Jesus as God's perfect creation. He is, as it were, God's blueprint. God has Jesus in mind in his whole creative work. Paul is also thinking of God's saving activity. God has chosen to save us through Jesus. Both of these ideas are found in an early Christian hymn which Paul will quote in a letter which he wrote probably about this time:

Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

– Colossians 1:15-20

It is basic to the Christian understanding of life that everything can take us to God. We can express our faith in God and our response to God through everything. There are no limits to the creative urge that rises in the human heart to give expression to our longing and our striving for fullness of life. We long to see God face to face. However, it is easy for us to be distracted and to substitute the creature for the Creator. It is therefore also basic to the Christian understanding of life that the way to God is most clearly and most fully revealed in him who is 'the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). We exist as finite expressions of God's Word, and we go to God through responding in love to this same Word, the Word made flesh in Jesus.

In his person, Jesus expresses how it is that God approaches us and how it is that we respond to God. Jesus is the mediator, the peacemaker, the bridge builder. Paul wants the community at Corinth to fix their eyes on Jesus, for it is Jesus who will show them how to behave towards each other. If they think of themselves as 'strong' because they are not scrupulous over eating meat offered to idols, they must see that the only strength worthy of the name is strength in love, for the one God, the Father, is love, and the one Lord Jesus Christ, who has called them into communion with him, is calling them to love.

Paul has gently questioned the accuracy of their claimed 'knowledge' and he has lifted the whole discussion into the context of a God who is a loving Father and of Jesus who is their way to God. He is now ready to respond to their question.

7It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

8'Food will not bring us close to God.' We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do.

9But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

10For if others see you [singular], who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? 11So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed.

He reminds them, first of all, that not everyone in the community shares the 'knowledge' which they claim. These others have what Paul calls a 'weak conscience'. He is probably taking the expression from the Corinthians who see themselves as helping their weaker brothers and sisters to become stronger in conscience by acting against what they see as their ill-founded scruples and eating this food. The word 'conscience' (Greek: *suneidēsis*) in this context seems to refer to people's judgment of the way things are and of the appropriate way to behave. As we have seen, Paul is in basic agreement with the Corinthians that eating food that has been offered to idols has of itself no religious significance. Here, however, he asks them to be especially sensitive to those in the community who may not be as secure in their faith or in their understanding of the issues involved. Not wanting to appear immature, they may be tempted to go along with the others, but in bad conscience. Having in the past shared in these meals as part of their pagan religion, they may even be tempted to revert to idolatry.

Some suggest that part or the whole of verse eight is a quotation expressing the view of the Corinthians. We are following the view of those who see these words as expressing Paul's view. The Corinthians do not have to eat the food that has been offered to idols. They claim that it doesn't make them any worse off. Paul is reminding them that it doesn't make them any better off either. So – and here is Paul's point – their key consideration should not be exercising their 'liberty' (their 'rights', Greek: *exousia*), but care for their 'weak' brothers and sisters in Christ who may well be worse off for eating. In verse ten, Paul shifts to the singular, engaging each person in the community in dialogue and seeking from each an honest conscientious response. They are taking part in a civic festival or have been invited to a community or family celebration, and they are enjoying a meal in a hall adjacent to a temple. Paul asks them to reflect on how their behaviour is affecting other Christians who do not share their 'knowledge'. They must be careful not to lead these others into the sin of idolatry. These 'weak believers' are people 'for (dia) whom Christ died'. Elsewhere Paul uses *huper* indicating those who benefit from Jesus' self-giving (see Romans 14:15). Here he uses *dia*, highlighting Jesus' motivation in giving his life; namely, his love for us. They are focusing on their knowledge of the rights and wrongs of the issue. Paul guides them to focus on love – and not on any love, but on the love demonstrated by Christ on the cross.

Paul is warning them of the danger of causing scandal. Jesus spoke very strongly on this matter:

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble.

– Luke 17:1-2

Paul, too, is concerned for the ‘little ones’. He stresses the fact that to sin against their weaker brethren is to sin against Christ himself. We are at the heart of Paul’s conversion experience; ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’ (Acts 9:5). Relying on their memories of the eighteen months that they spent together, and relying also on their love, he speaks of his own behaviour. Theory is one thing, example is another. Through contemplation of Jesus crucified and through his own sharing in the sufferings of Christ, Paul has learned the importance of love.

As noted at the beginning of this section, eating food offered to idols is unlikely to be a problem for us in living our Christian life. It does, however, raise the whole matter of inculturation and acculturation. We must inculturate our faith, making it real and relevant in the world of which we are part. However, there is the constant danger of our domesticating our faith and diluting, if not blatantly corrupting, it in the name of being relevant.

Paul’s response also requires us to ask how we treat people who sincerely are offended by ways in which we are behaving. It is not sufficient to debate the rights and wrongs of a situation on the so-called objective level. We must be sensitive to people’s feelings, and people’s weaknesses must be taken into consideration. While the scrupulous and those whose understanding is weak cannot be allowed to dominate, and must be challenged and helped to grow, they (we) cannot be simply dismissed. Concern for the truth must prevail, so long as we remember that the ultimate truth is that God is love and that he draws each of us to himself where we are. All parties must be challenged to be sensitive to this. Only love can build up a community – the love which Christ had for us when he gave his life for us.

It is interesting to observe that Paul makes no reference to the decision of the Jerusalem assembly which required Gentile Christians to follow their Jewish brothers and sisters by ‘abstaining from what has been sacrificed to idols’ (Acts 15:29; 21:25). Perhaps he judged that while this may have been appropriate in communities in which the majority of Christians were Jews, a different pastoral solution had to be found for Corinth.

¹²But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ.

¹³Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

²If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³This is my defence to those who would examine me.

⁴Do we not have the right to our food and drink?

⁵Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas?

⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?

Paul has just been suggesting to the Corinthians that in the cause of love they renounce their right to eat food that has been offered to idols. He concluded by saying that if eating such food were to cause another to sin, he himself would certainly refrain from doing so (8:13), so precious is the salvation of those for whom Christ died (8:11). He devotes the whole of this chapter to reminding them of the rights which he has willingly decided not to exercise, the better to carry out the commission given him by God. His key point seems to be that just because we have rights it does not mean that we have to insist on exercising them. Underlying this whole section is the challenge: if I have given up so much for the gospel and for love of you, cannot you forgo your rights for the sake of your brothers and sisters in the faith?

They have been insisting on their freedom. Well, is Paul not free (Greek: *eleutheros*)? As an apostle (see 1:1) does he not have the right (Greek: *exousia*) to be maintained by the community? Does not an apostle have the right to expect the community to support his wife as well? Surely, he has the right not to have to spend so much of his time working hard with his hands to support himself (see 4:11-12)? These are three rights which, as the Corinthians well know, Paul has chosen not to exercise. Incidentally, it appears from what Paul says here that Cephas's wife (see Mark 1:30) remained with him on his missionary journeys and that James was not the only one of Jesus' family to be actively involved in the early church.

Paul feels the need to offer a 'defence' (Greek: *apologia*) of his apostolic commission by reminding them that he has 'seen Jesus our Lord'. He is referring to his experience on the road to Damascus (see 15:8) and the commission given him by the risen Lord (see Galatians 1:15-16). Furthermore, they themselves are the proof. Others may question his credentials, but God has set his seal on Paul's commission by the evident grace experienced within the Corinthian community (see 4:15). Paul speaks beautifully of this again in his Second Letter (2Corinthians 3:2-3). Paul insists on his rights lest they think that he himself is unsure of his commission. He has the same rights as other apostles, but he has chosen not to exercise them.

To demonstrate that as one commissioned to proclaim the gospel he really has the rights that he has just named, Paul begins by giving examples from other professions. No one would argue that a soldier or a person who works in a vineyard or a shepherd should take on an extra job to earn his living.

If that is not sufficient proof, Paul turns to Scripture. We discussed Paul's use of Scripture when commenting on Galatians 3:6. Once again Paul reveals a deeper meaning in the sacred text: God inspired these words with Christian missionaries in mind, those who plough God's field and tread out the grain of God's word.

Paul's third argument is that if other missionaries have these rights, surely he has a greater claim to them, for reasons already given in 9:1-2 and earlier in 4:15. As soon as he mentions others, the question comes up again: 'Well, since they use these rights, why don't you?' He anticipates the following section by pointing to the basic reason: he does not want to do anything that will 'put an obstacle (Greek: *egkopē*) in the way of the gospel of Christ'. Though Paul did not use the word 'obstacle' earlier, the idea was central to his plea that the Corinthians not use their rights if their doing so meant placing an obstacle in the way of the salvation of their weaker brothers and sisters (see 8:9).

He appeals to the experience of both the Gentiles and the Jews. It is universal practice that those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed at the altar' (see Numbers 18:31). Finally, he refers to Jesus' own teaching on the matter:

Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid.

– Luke 10:7 (see 1Timothy 5:18)

⁷Who at any time pays the expenses for doing military service? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not get any of its milk?

⁸Do I say this on human authority? Does not the law also say the same? ⁹For it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain' (Deuteronomy 25:4).

Is it for oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰Or does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was indeed written for our sake, for whoever plows should plow in hope and whoever threshes should thresh in hope of a share in the crop. ¹¹If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits?

¹²If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.

¹³Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar?

¹⁴In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

¹⁵But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that —

no one will deprive me of my ground for boasting!

¹⁶If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe to me if I do not proclaim the gospel!

¹⁷For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward; but if not of my own will, I am entrusted with a commission.

¹⁸What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.

Having defended his rights as an apostle, Paul now asserts that his not exercising these rights is an essential part of the apostolic commission that he has been given. If some suggest that he is writing this only so that in the future he can claim support, he assures them in no uncertain terms: ‘I would rather die than that!’ Part of verse fifteen sounds like an accusation that is being brought against Paul. I have indicated this by the format (see page 213). If some suggest that he is declining the hospitality of the community and determined to remain independent only so that he can have something to boast of, he assures them that this is no matter for boasting. Has he not already said: ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’ (1:31), and ‘What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift’ (4:7)?

It was not his choice to proclaim the gospel. It is something for which he has been chosen. Of course he does it willingly, seeing it as a privilege. But he knows that to reject his calling is to reject the one who calls him, with all the consequences that follow upon such a rejection. He is a slave in God’s household, carrying out the commission (oikonomia, see 4:1) given him by the Lord. It is not a salaried position. Jesus’ words are relevant here:

Do you thank the slave for doing what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!’

– Luke 17:9-10

His salary, if one wants to use such language, is precisely to have no salary. That is why, unlike the other apostles, he supports himself by his own manual work. This is a deliberate choice, but it is a choice he makes in obedience to the commission given to him. For him it is an essential part of proclaiming the gospel. Why this is so he will now explain.

Summing up all that he has just said, Paul reasserts the fact that he is free (see 9:1), adding ‘with respect to all’. He is not locked into the Pharisaic system in which he was trained by Gamaliel. He is not even bound by the interpretations of Scripture in which he was so thoroughly schooled. Nor is he blindly carrying out instructions given him by those who were apostles before him. As we have already seen, he is not blindly following the decisions of the Jerusalem Assembly concerning the eating of meat or even the words of Jesus on divorce. He is a free man. Does this mean he insists of going his own way? Does it mean that he is self-reliant, self-possessed, self-focused, self-assertive? No, he has made himself a slave (doulōō) to all (see Galatians 5:13).

We have reached the climax of this chapter. Paul is challenging the Corinthians to follow his example in not insisting on their rights. They are to do what they have seen Paul doing. And why has Paul chosen to be a ‘slave to all’? Because he is modelling himself on his Lord. This is the way Jesus chose to live – Jesus, the servant (doulos) of the Lord (see the reflections on this theme in the commentary on Galatians 1:10). Jesus cared nothing for the rigmarole of prohibitions that surrounded Sabbath observance, when it came to embracing a leper or reaching out to a poor sick woman. Invited to share a meal with the untouchables of his day, Jesus did so with delight, whatever the religiously observant thought of his behaviour. He was killed for what was considered his cavalier attitude to what the authorities judged to be the will of God, but Jesus was a free man and followed the path of love, no matter what. Paul freely chose to be ‘a slave to all’ in order to win them to Jesus and to salvation. He has already insisted that it is not he who won them. It is not he who saved them. It is Jesus who was crucified for them, not Paul (1:13). Paul wants to hold nothing back in being the ‘slave of Christ’(7:22) and the instrument of Christ’s Spirit in winning them to Jesus and so to God.

It is instructive that Paul’s first thoughts in this context go to his Jewish brothers and sisters. This fits perfectly with his missionary strategy as consistently portrayed by Luke in Acts (see also Romans 1:16). Paul remained faithful to Judaism, though he learned from his Lord that obedience to God required that he be free not to follow the law when to do so would mean resisting the Spirit of Jesus guiding him to love. This is ‘the law of Christ’(also Galatians 6:2). Like his Lord, it was the needs of the weak that especially drew him. It must be the same for the Corinthians!

19For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them.

20To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.

21To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law.

22To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.

²³I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.

²⁴Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it.

²⁵Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.

²⁶So I do not run aimlessly,

nor do I box as though beating the air;

²⁷but I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified.

Paul is not pretending to be the one who is doing all the giving. He is not claiming to be self-sacrificing, in the negative sense of neglecting his own needs to be available to others in their need. Part of his reason for imitating Jesus by being 'a slave to all' is so that he may share in the blessings of the gospel. He wants to share now in the love-communion which the glorified Jesus has with the Father, and in the eternal salvation which he proclaims and longs to enjoy.

This brings him to a further consideration. Having challenged the Corinthians to look past their own rights and to consider the needs especially of the weak, he now speaks of the need to 'exercise self-control' (Greek: *egkrateuomai*, see 7:9). In a city as enthusiastic over sport as Corinth, a perfect illustration comes readily to mind. The isthmian games, second only to the Olympics, were held in Corinth every two years. If Paul did not attend the games in 51AD, we should assume that most of his congregation did. He tells them that they have to be just as determined and disciplined as the athletes if they want to win the prize.

Paul listed 'self-control' (*egkrateia*) as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:23). This is crucial if we are not to misunderstand him. He is not suggesting that the Corinthians work out their own discipline. There would be a danger, especially in the Greek world which highly valued this virtue, of their striving to be self-sufficient. This is exactly what Paul does not want for them. He is calling them to obedience, to God and to Christ (see 9:21). He is asking them to listen to the guidance of Jesus' Spirit, who will draw them to love as Jesus loves and with the love of the Holy Spirit. If they put this love above everything else, they will find sufficient discipline. He is calling them not to exert their own control, but to give over control of themselves to Jesus' Spirit; in other words, to learn to be a 'slave of all'. We might conclude this commentary by repeating Paul's words to the Galatians:

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

– Galatians 5:13

Having encouraged the Corinthians to think in terms of love rather than in terms of maintaining their rights, Paul focuses more closely again on the issue of eating food offered to idols. They are playing with fire, running the risk of getting caught up in worshipping false gods, and putting their salvation at risk. They are over confident and so Paul reminds them of what happened to the Israelites in the desert, whom he refers to as 'our ancestors'. They too had 'spiritual' experiences, that is to say, experiences which came to them from the Spirit of God and which required discerning by spiritual people, such as the Corinthians are claiming to be. These experiences, however, did not prevent them from falling into idolatry and so failing to reach the Promised Land.

In referring to the wonderful experiences of God's chosen people, Paul uses language that highlights the parallel with the spiritual experiences of the Corinthians. His point is obvious. If the ancient Israelites can miss out on salvation after receiving such signs of God's special love, the Corinthians had better beware. They all experienced life, yet most of them 'were struck down in the wilderness'. Wonderful spiritual experiences of communion with God are not in themselves a guarantee of salvation.

He begins by reminding them of God's presence which surrounded all the people and covered them like a tent in the desert: 'He spread a cloud for a covering' (Psalm 105:39). Protected in this way by God, they escaped from their pursuers and passed through the Red Sea: 'The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left' (Exodus 14:22). When Paul refers to this experience as their being 'baptised into Moses' the reference to the Corinthians' experience of being 'baptised into Christ' (Galatians 3:27) is obvious. Just as clear is the reference to the Christian Eucharist when he speaks of the 'manna from heaven' (Psalm 78:24) and the water that flowed from the rock (Numbers 20:11).

Paul gives the key to his allegorical interpretation by identifying the rock as being Christ. As he says in verse six, he is using his examples as types (Greek: tupos). What the rock (God) was for the Israelites, Christ is for us. The experience of the ancestors is being realised in a more complete way in the Christian community. The warning is clear: if after all that the Israelites received from God they still failed (and through idolatry, as we will see), the Corinthians had better be careful lest God may have to say of them also: 'in this wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die' (Numbers 14:35).

¹I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud,

and all passed through the sea,

²and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,

³and all ate the same spiritual food,

⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink.

For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.

⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

Watch out that you do not fall

⁶Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did.

⁷Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, 'The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play'(Exodus 32:6).

⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day (Numbers 25:1ff).

⁹We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents (Numbers 21:5-6).

¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer (Numbers 14:36-37).

¹¹These things happened to them to serve as an example and they were written down to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come.

¹²So if you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.

¹³No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it.

Their ancestors failed to reach the Promised Land because they gave in to desires that led them to evil. The examples (*tupos*) given by Paul relate in one way or another to the sin of idolatry, and involve eating and drinking. He has chosen his examples well, for the Corinthians are facing the same danger of worshipping false gods, by their failure to discipline their desires to enjoy, without discernment, the festivities of their non-Christian friends and acquaintances. In the pagan festivals there was often a close association of feasting and sexual immorality.

The Corinthians are putting Christ to the test, just as their ancestors 'tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying: Can God spread a table in the wilderness?' (Psalm 78:18-19). It was when the people complained and wanted to go back to Egypt (to eat and drink and worship the gods there) that God made the threat quoted on the previous page (Numbers 14:35). These examples, says Paul, were 'written down to instruct us' (see 9:10). They are too self-confident: 'watch out that you do not fall'.

Good pastor that he is, Paul does not want to push them to the other extreme. His aim is not to fill them with fear but to take them to the foot of the cross. Hence his magnificent statement in verse thirteen. However difficult the test they must never doubt God's fidelity (see 1Thessalonians 5:24) and ever-present grace. We must pray as Jesus taught us: 'Do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one' (Matthew 6:13). Aware of our capacity to 'desire evil' and in following this desire to resist grace and to be unfaithful to Christ, we must not be self-assured. Rather, we must heed the warning given by Jesus to his disciples: 'Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41). Paul assures the Christians in Corinth that if they look to God for the grace to resist temptation, they will always find it. If they look to their own 'knowledge', 'rights' or 'freedom', they will surely fall.

Addressing the Corinthians as ‘my dear friends’, Paul draws the obvious warning from the examples which he has given from the history of Israel. They must above all else avoid worshipping false gods. Then, appealing to their better judgment, he looks once again at the situation where their eating of the food offered to idols takes place in the very temple of the idol. Earlier he spoke about the scandal which such behaviour could cause to their weaker brethren (see 8:10). Now he looks at the danger inherent in such behaviour for those actually taking part.

The key to this passage is in the word ‘sharing’ (Greek: *koinōnia*). This can mean simply doing things together: participating in a common action; for example ‘partaking’ (Greek: *metechō*) of the one bread. It can also mean being in communion, with God and with each other. The two expressions, ‘sharing in the blood of Christ’ and ‘sharing in the body of Christ’ must be read in relation to each other. Paul is surely speaking of the communion which they have with Jesus himself who poured out his life’s blood for us on the cross, and who gave himself for us in all the many ways that he relates to us as man, in his human existence (his ‘body’, see commentary on 5:3). It is our being in communion with Jesus’ self-giving as man (his ‘body’) that binds us into one community and therefore into one ‘body’ (see 6:15) with all the other participants in the Eucharist.

When they join with non-Christian participants in a celebratory meal in the temple of an idol, they are participating with them in a meal. In this sense they become one body with them. Are they so sure of themselves that they can be confident that they will not be seduced into becoming one with them also in the religious cult that they are celebrating? From enjoying what they see as a civic ceremony with for them no religious significance, are they really strong enough to avoid the contagion of idolatry, slipping back into previous attitudes under the influence of their non-Christian associates? The theme of divine jealousy (see Deuteronomy 32:21) is part of the theme of the anger of God (see commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10). God cannot pretend that things are other than they really are. If they worship false gods they will suffer the consequences. The Corinthians keep saying that they are ‘strong’. Paul warns them: they could easily fall (see 10:12).

¹⁴Therefore, my dear friends, flee from the worship of idols.

¹⁵I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.

¹⁶The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

¹⁷Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

¹⁸Consider the people of Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices partners in the altar?

¹⁹What do I imply then? That food sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?

²⁰No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be partners with demons.

²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

²²Or are we provoking the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ

²³ *'All things are lawful'*
but not all things are beneficial.

'All things are lawful'
but not all things build up.

²⁴**Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.**

²⁵**Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience,** ²⁶**For 'the earth and its fullness are the Lord's'** (Ps 24:1)

²⁷**If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience.** ²⁸**But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice', then do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience —** ²⁹**I mean the other's conscience, not your own.**

For why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?

³⁰**If I partake with thankfulness, why should I be denounced because of that for which I give thanks?** ³¹**So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.**

³²**Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God,** ³³**just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved.**

^{11:1}**Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.**

We must look beyond the law and beyond our rights to see what is beneficial to, and builds up, oneself, the community and especially those who need special care. As always, love is to be our guide, and love, as Paul will say later 'does not insist on its own way' (13:5).

Having warned them of the dangers of joining in the banquets that are held in the precincts of the pagan temples, Paul now looks at two other situations in which they may be confronted with eating food that has been offered to idols. The first is when they buy meat in the market place. It may in fact be meat that has been offered to idols. Paul's advice is to buy the food without making inquiries and to do so in good conscience. This follows on the principles enunciated in chapter eight.

The second situation is when they are invited to someone's home. Here Paul's advice is the same: eat what is put before you and thank God for it. However a problem could arise here in that another Christian may know that the food that is placed before them has previously been offered in a temple, and may be troubled in conscience over the matter. Paul's advice here is for the 'strong' Christian to forgo his rights in order to avoid scandalising his brother or sister for the love of whom Christ died (see 8:11). To forgo one's rights in this way is to act out of love. At the same time Paul hints that the 'weak' have no right to force their views on others. All must attempt not to give offence (compare Romans 15:1-3) and to 'do everything for the glory of God'.

Finally, once again, Paul offers his own example for their imitation, and explains why: he wants them to imitate him, because he is imitating Christ. Paul's solution to the problem facing the Corinthian church is to draw them with him to the foot of the cross, so that together they can contemplate him who made of his life an offering to others in love.

When Paul wrote the following words to the Galatians, he was expressing one of his deepest convictions. We can be sure that it expresses one of the traditions that he would have handed on to the Corinthians as well:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

– Galatians 3:27-28

However, it appears that after Paul's departure from Corinth a practice arose which was justified on the basis of the equality of the baptised, but which Paul feels the need to correct as being a misunderstanding of his teaching. Some of the women, when they pray and prophesy in the liturgical assembly, are doing so with their heads 'unveiled'. Paul may be referring to their failing to cover their heads with a veil, though from what we know of the customs of the day, it is difficult to see why such behaviour would have been considered shameful. It seems more likely that he is objecting to their having their head 'uncovered' in the sense that they are letting their hair hang loose. To do this in public was considered shameful. Whatever it was that they were doing, Paul is plainly shocked that they would behave like this in the liturgical assembly. It is possible that Paul may have feared that this behaviour was approaching the kind of behaviour associated with some of the mystery cults, but it seems from his argument that his main problem was that in failing to wear their hair, or cover their head, in the expected female way, they were confusing the sexual differences between man and woman, and therefore the natural order ordained by God.

In many ways the light of the gospel caused Paul to see beyond the thought-horizon within which his contemporaries lived. The position of leadership exercised by women in the churches under Paul's direction indicates his openness to their using for the good of the community whatever gifts they had from the Spirit of Christ. Paul also saw that the differences between the sexes, like other differences, were not of ultimate significance. What ultimately matters is to be 'in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28) and to live a life of 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). However, the differences between male and female remain, and since, in the culture of the day, the behaviour of the women was causing division, Paul feels the need to correct it.

²I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I handed them on to you.

³But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and man [NRSV 'the-husband'] is the head of woman [NRSV 'his-wife'], and God is the head of Christ.

⁴Any man who prays or prophesies with something on his head disgraces his head,

⁵but any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled disgraces her head — it is one and the same thing as having her head shaved.

⁶For if a woman will not veil herself, then she should cut off her hair; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or to be shaved, she should wear a veil.

Paul's understanding of the male-female relationship

Presumably the person or persons who were praying in this way would have argued for their position on the basis of freedom: 'all things are lawful' (6:12 and 10:23). They would also have enthusiastically endorsed Paul's statement quoted on the previous page. They may also have argued that it was important to do away with any symbol which reinforced the male dominance prevailing in the Jewish and also in the Greco-Roman societies of the day. The superior physical strength of the male, and the opportunities for leisure and for education which were possible for some men but generally unavailable to women, supported a widespread prejudice that the male was 'naturally' more intelligent than the female. Decision-making should be in the hands of the male, while the female should remain in a position of servitude to him. Girls were married by parental decision to men who had completed their education, had learned a trade and could support a wife and family. This plus the customary age difference meant that a girl who had just become a woman and had no education other than what she received at home, left the protection of her father's home and came under the authority of her husband. Her role in the home was obvious and crucial, but in public she was expected to be, as it were, invisible.

Women would have found belonging to a Christian community a remarkably liberating experience. They were fully part of the assembly and could play a leading role in public prayer and prophecy. Of course we must remember that the assembly took place in a home. However, some, including Paul, are shocked at the way in which some of them are comporting themselves when they pray and prophesy. Perhaps this may also be giving the church a bad name in the general community. In any case, Paul commands them when they are taking part in the liturgical assembly to continue to wear veils or to wear their hair in an appropriate way as was expected of women in public.

We might have expected Paul to follow the line of argument which he used in regard to the eating of meat. He might have begun with a statement that hair style or the wearing of veils was a matter of no objective consequence. He might then have gone on to ask the women to follow custom so as not to disturb those who were unable to grasp their intentions, and not to cause scandal to those outside the community. His argument, in other words, would have been on the basis not of rights but of love. He might even have reminded them of the imminent coming of judgment, and advised them not to distract themselves by causing disagreements in the community over such relatively unimportant matters. In fact, however, he argues in quite a different way. He begins by stating something that he sees as not requiring proof: God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the male, and the male is the head of the female. In using the word 'head' Paul could be referring to authority. However, since there is no indication in this passage that either authority or obedience is the issue, it seems best to understand 'head' in the sense of 'source'. Christ receives his life from God; man receives his life from Christ 'through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (8:6); and, as Paul will demonstrate from Scripture in the following verses, woman receives her life from man. This God-given hierarchy includes a pre-eminence in dignity and glory, from God to Christ, from Christ to man, and from man to woman. To behave in a way that disregards this order is to bring shame upon oneself and upon any community which allows it. Let us now attempt to follow Paul's argument.

Since his argument is about divinely-willed order, Paul alludes to the Genesis story, where we are told that ‘God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him’ (Genesis 1:27). Then God says: ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner’ (Genesis 2:18); ‘the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man’ (Genesis 2:22). We think also of the statement of the Psalmist who praises God ‘because you have made man a little lower than God, and crowned him with glory and honour’ (Psalm 8:5).

In fact, the Psalmist is not speaking of males but of human beings. God’s intention in creating human beings is to clothe them in divine glory. In this way the invisible majesty of God is made visible through a creature made in God’s image. Moreover, in the Genesis story the reference to ‘man’ being in the image of God refers to both man and woman. The Hebrew is *’ādām* (‘human being’), not *’ish* (‘male’). The text goes straight on to say: ‘male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:27).

It is not these texts that are driving Paul. He is being driven by the kind of cultural conviction that is expressed in statements like the following: ‘A woman shall not wear a man’s apparel, nor shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for whoever does such things is abhorrent to the Lord your God’ (Deuteronomy 22:5). For Paul, as for all his contemporaries, the created order, including the superior place of the male, is a given. He is using Scripture, as is his custom, to illustrate and support his point.

The conclusion, then, is that when a woman is moved to pray or to prophesy in the liturgical assembly she should exercise control over her appearance and not wear her hair like the men, uncovered. That Paul’s interest is in maintaining the order of creation as willed by God is supported by his reference to the angels. The angels watch over the created order. In a special way they watch over the assembly at prayer: ‘I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the angels I sing your praise’ (Psalm 138:1). A woman should behave in a way that reflects this order, ‘exercising authority over her head’ by wearing her hair correctly and keeping her head veiled.

⁷For a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and glory [NRSV ‘reflection’] of God; but woman is the glory [NRSV ‘reflection’] of man.

⁸Indeed, man was not made from woman, but woman from man.

⁹Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for the sake of man.

¹⁰ For this reason a woman ought to have control over [NRSV ‘a symbol of authority on’] her head, because of the angels.

¹¹Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman.

¹²For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things come from God.

¹³Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head unveiled?

¹⁴Does not nature itself teach you that if a man wears long hair, it is degrading to him,

¹⁵but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

¹⁶But if anyone is disposed to be contentious — we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

Paul himself seems to be aware of the danger of taking his argument from order too far, for he insists that ‘in the Lord’ man and woman are mutually interdependent. However, since all things come from God, the order established by God must be respected in all things, including the relationship between the sexes. The distinction between the sexes should not be blurred in the way people dress when praying or prophesying. The way this ordered relationship is to be exercised must also reflect the fact that they are ‘in the Lord’, with all that this means by way of mutual sensitivity, care for the weak, respect and, above all, Christian love. But the order itself remains unquestioned. For Paul, being in Christ transcends any differences there are between man and woman (Galatians 3:28), but it does not dissolve them.

As though aware that he is struggling to support his conviction, Paul attempts an argument from ‘nature’. The natural order was the principal norm of behaviour in Stoic ethics. Nature gives women plentiful head covering (unlike men who are prone to baldness). Only ‘soft’ men (see the commentary on 6:9) wear their hair in an effeminate way. If nature covers a woman’s head, so runs Paul’s ‘argument’, she should follow nature’s example and keep her head covered. Finally, having run out of arguments, Paul appeals to custom.

The gospel is continually uncovering ways in which our horizon of thinking is limited and biased. We should not expect Paul to be able to see all the implications of the gospel free from any unconscious influence from attitudes that prevailed in his day. Our task is to try to find the key insights which inspired his writing, not to repeat the form which his writing took in an environment which was, in many ways, different from ours. Otherwise we are in danger of making the same mistake in regard to the New Testament which the Pharisees of Jesus' day were making with respect to the Old. There is no substitute for following Jesus' advice: 'Go and learn what this means'(Matthew 9:13).

Were Paul writing today, he would have written differently. But he is a pastor, concerned with the life of the Corinthian community, and, since he was closer to the situation than are we, we should assume that his advice was not only good, but required, for the peace of the community, for the growth in wisdom of the women involved, and for the good of the gospel in the actual situation prevailing in Corinth.

While our understanding of the divinely-ordered relationships between man and woman is no longer the same as Paul's, we can still learn from his teaching in this passage. He reminds us that there is a unique and special grace in being man, and a unique and special grace in being woman. He reminds us that in our efforts to liberate each other from definitions that are restrictive and unjust, we must do so 'in the Lord', and out of love. As he said in the previous passage, we are to seek not our own advantage but that of the other (10:24,33). He reminds us, too, that we must retain a profound respect for the divine order in which men and women are different and are meant to mutually enrich and support each other. We see now that some of the ways in which Paul understood those differences were conditioned by his culture, but the fact remains that we can only be the poorer for denying or confusing the differences.

¹⁷Now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.

¹⁸For, to begin with, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine.

²⁰When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. ²¹For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk.

²²What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I commend you? In this matter I do not commend you!

Unfortunately Paul does not give us enough information here for us to be able confidently to reconstruct the manner in which the church in Corinth celebrated 'the Lord's supper', so named because it was a meal shared by the Christian community in memory of Jesus to nourish the fellowship Christians have with each other because of their communion with him. It is clear that it was celebrated in a home. It is also clear that it was celebrated in the evening. The formal proceedings, if we may speak in these terms, began with the breaking of bread and ended with drinking from the cup. In between was a meal. We can presume that people brought what they could afford and that the food was shared.

Perhaps the problem arose from the fact that size of the community prevented them all eating at the same table, and that when the people gathered for the Eucharist, they sat with their peers according to their social status (see 1:26), with the result that the well-off ate well and the others not. It was not a truly shared meal. They are coming together 'as a church' (ekklēsia), called there by the Lord, to share in 'the Lord's supper' at 'the table of the Lord'(10:21), and the well-off are enjoying a better meal than the poor. This is another example of division (schisma, see 1:10; 12:25) in the community.

Paul looks beyond the human situation to that of divine providence, and sees in their 'factions' (hairesis) God's way of sorting out whose behaviour will stand up to the final judgment. His warning is clear. Their coming together to celebrate their communion is meant to be 'for the better'. In fact it tells against them.

Anyone who is of the opinion that being a Christian automatically means being saved should reflect carefully on this and the following passages. It is true that we can be totally confident in the fidelity of God: salvation is certainly possible, and is certainly offered. Nothing can change that. But Paul's warnings to the Corinthian community remind us that we can reject the offer and behave in ways that bring condemnation at the judgment. Paul's criticism here is quite blunt: in excluding the poor, they are excluding Christ. They may be going through the gestures, but it is 'not really the Lord's supper'.

The celebration of ‘the Lord’s supper’ has its origin in the expressed will of ‘the Lord Jesus’. Paul gives us our earliest account of the last supper, predating Mark by perhaps ten or so years (Mark 14:22-25). It is not surprising that the gospel account that is closest to Paul’s is found in Paul’s disciple, Luke (see Luke 22:19-20). The translation ‘betrayed’ makes it impossible for us not to think immediately of Judas. In the gospels the Greek *paradidōmi* generally has that sense (see, however, Luke 10:22). Paul uses it in a different context. He uses it three times for Jesus’ giving himself up for us (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2,25), and speaks of the Father ‘who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us’ (Romans 8:32). Paul emphasises the sacrificial aspect of Christ’s self-offering, as well as the communion with Christ and with each other that the supper is meant to express and to nourish while we wait for the final communion that is the goal of our life and that will happen when ‘he comes’.

The Lord’s supper celebrates the ‘new covenant’. The reference is to the meal which ratified the covenant made between God and the people at the time of Moses. The people declared: ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient’ (Exodus 24:7). The blood of the slain animals was sprinkled on the altar, symbolising God, and on the people, thus uniting in a life-union both parties to the covenant. ‘This’, said Moses, ‘is the blood of the covenant that God has made with you, containing all these rules’ (Exodus 24:8). Then the elders ascended the mountain of God. ‘They gazed on God, They ate and drank’ (Exodus 24:11).

Jesus wants his disciples to ‘remember’, when his life is so brutally taken from him, that he is not just a victim of his enemies. He has always given himself for them. On the cross this self-giving will reach its consummation (‘He loved me and gave himself for me’, Galatians 2:20). When he breaks bread this night and when he shares the blood-red wine, he gives them a special meaning symbolising the final offering he is about to make. When they take and eat this bread, he wants them to know that it is his body they are taking. It is his whole person that he is giving, everything he is and everything he has done in sharing the human condition: his weakness, his brokenness, his dying — and all as a gift of love to nourish them on their journey to the Father. When they take the wine and drink it, he wants them to know that it is his life poured out for them that he is offering them. It is his Spirit that they are drinking into their thirsty souls (see 10:16). Yes, his life is about to be taken from him, but he wants them to know that he is giving it for them as his final act of love. When they share this meal, he wants them to ‘do this’, to do what he is doing.

²³For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was given up [NRSV ‘betrayed’] took a loaf of bread, ²⁴and giving [NRSV ‘when he had given’] thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’.

²⁵In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’.

²⁶For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.

³⁰For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

³¹ But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged.

³²But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another.

³⁴If you are hungry, eat at home, so that when you come together, it will not be for your condemnation.

About the other things I will give instructions when I come.

Paul has just reminded the Corinthians of Jesus' prophetic gesture at the last supper when he gave them broken bread and poured out wine to share, proclaiming what was about to happen to him and what it meant to him as a self-offering for them. Jesus wanted them to receive the offering he was making of himself when they received the broken bread and the poured out wine. He wanted them, when they shared this meal, to be bound together in love through their communion with him.

We have already seen serious failures in the way that the Corinthians are behaving during what was supposed to be a sharing in Jesus' Eucharistic meal. They must partake of this meal in a manner that is consistent with Jesus' gift of himself in love. To eat the bread of the Lord and to drink his cup while failing to give one's own body and to pour out one's own life in love is to make a lie of the Eucharist. They must answer to God for such behaviour. We could repeat here Paul's words earlier in the letter: 'When you thus sin against members of your family [for whom Christ died] ... you sin against Christ' (8:12).

Paul urges them to take stock of their behaviour, and not to forget that they are partaking in 'the body': they are sharing in the communion of love won for them by Jesus' gift of his 'body'. To realise this demands that they do what Jesus did. If they do not, they will suffer the consequences of their failure. Perhaps, says Paul, some of the sufferings which have afflicted the community are to be seen in this light. If so, Paul reminds them that God uses such suffering to bring about repentance. Let them take warning from this and change their behaviour, lest they find themselves condemned in the final judgment (compare 5:5; see the reflections on divine 'punishment' in the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:10).

Rather than the well-off enjoying a pleasant meal with their associates while their poorer brothers and sisters go hungry, they should wait on one another, and let the shared meal be a statement of their shared life, the life of Jesus, broken, poured out and given to them. This is what it means to share 'the Lord's supper'.

The way in which Paul introduces this topic indicates that, once again, he is replying to a question put to him by the Corinthians. The first concerned celibacy (7:1); the second was about eating food that had been offered to idols (8:10); and now the third is about ‘spiritual gifts’ (Greek: pneumatika). To this point in his letter, Paul has not only responded to the two earlier questions, but also brought up matters that were concerning him, matters that were causing divisions in the community. Besides the failure of the community to confront a case of incest (5:1), and their use of pagan courts to sort out their differences (6:1), he has addressed the whole question of ‘knowledge/wisdom’ (1:17ff), of the way in which some women were conducting themselves when the church gathered to pray (11:3ff), and of the behaviour of some of the richer members at the Eucharist.

The special importance of this present matter of ‘spiritual gifts’ is indicated by Paul’s reiteration of how keen he is that they understand what he is about to say. It goes to the heart of the key problem that lies behind all the matters which have occupied his attention to this point, and in his reply Paul brings all the strands together. Let us begin by attempting to identify the question that he is answering. In verse two, Paul refers to their experience as pagans (which, incidentally, seems to indicate that the church consisted mainly of convert Gentiles). A common feature in all the different cults that were practised in Corinth, indeed throughout the Greco-Roman world, was a desire to achieve some control over one’s life by knowing the future, and by having the assurance of the protective patronage of a god or goddess. Certain people – so it was believed – were chosen by the gods as mediums through whom the divine knowledge and will were mediated. This happened in either of two ways. In some cases, the medium was taken over by the god, and in a trance or ecstasy, uttered unintelligible sounds inspired by the divine spirit. These utterances were then interpreted, often by the cult priests. Alternatively, the mediums retained the use of their faculties which were lifted to a higher plain of insight from which they uttered responses received from the god.

Judaism knew both these kinds of experiences, as did the early Christians. The more dramatic experience is, of course, the one involving the inspired babbling, whether or not the person also experienced a kind of trance. Besides the inner experience of release and communion with God, there was the powerful impression given to others. A likely source of the question put to Paul is these ‘others’ who are so impressed with the obvious ‘spiritual gift’ of those in the community who uttered these unintelligible sounds, that they wondered anxiously why they did not ‘have the Spirit’.

¹Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed.

²You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak.

³Therefore I want you to understand that ...

³Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says 'Let Jesus be cursed!' and no one can say 'Jesus is Lord!' except by the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthians are impressed by those who display the gift of tongues. Those who do not have it are being made to think that they do not have the Spirit. Paul reassures them. It is their acceptance of Jesus as Lord (compare Philippians 2:11) that demonstrates that their gifts are truly spiritual (pneumatika) and that they truly have the 'Spirit of God' (pneuma theou), the 'Holy Spirit' (pneuma hagion).

This is a reassurance; it is also a challenge, for Paul is not just speaking of words here. He is speaking of the way we live. Did not Jesus himself say:

Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

To reject Jesus crucified is to align oneself with those who consider him accursed (anathema, see Galatians 3:13). This takes us back to the first theme developed by Paul in the early chapters of this letter (see especially 2:6-16). To take pride in 'knowledge' that causes one to despise the poor broken ones whom Jesus loves and for whom he gave his life is to reject Christ crucified. To enjoy a feast with one's peers while the poor go hungry is to reject Christ crucified. As Paul said to the Galatians, to preach a gospel other than the one preached by Paul is to find oneself 'accursed' (Galatians 1:8-9), for it is to reject the Holy Spirit of God. Later in this letter Paul will write: 'Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord' (16:22). They will know that the Spirit of the risen Jesus is dwelling within them and inspiring their lives, if in their prayer, their attitudes, their decisions, their words and their actions, they live the life of the crucified and risen Jesus:

If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

– Romans 10:9

The Spirit who inspires them to look to Jesus as their Lord and Saviour is the same Spirit who causes them to look to God as their Father;

Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'

– Galatians 4:6 (see Romans 8:15)

Having invited the Corinthians to join him in contemplating their crucified Lord, Paul is now ready to look more closely at the 'spiritual gifts' about which they are seeking clarification.

Paul is responding to a question about ‘spiritual gifts’ (pneumatika). He has already used the adjective pneumatikos (‘of the Spirit’) when speaking of the gift of wisdom (2:13), of the fruits of his own ministry (9:11) and in relation to the Eucharist (10:3-4). However, and not by accident, when he comes to reply to their question, he chooses to speak not of ‘spiritual gifts’ but of ‘grace-gifts’ (charismata), gifts of ‘grace’ (charis). He prepared the Corinthians for this when, at the beginning of the letter, he praised God for the many gifts of grace (charismata) experienced in the community (see 1:7). Later he spoke of some of them having received the gift of celibate love while others were called to celebrate their love through sexual communion (see 7:7).

In choosing to speak of charismata, he is emphasising that there is no place here for self-glorification, ostentation, or envy. The gifts of which he is speaking are gifts of divine grace, and as he wrote earlier: ‘What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?’ (4:7). He emphasises that there is a variety of these gifts of grace in order to draw the attention of the Corinthians away from their fascination with the more striking phenomenon of inspired speech or, as it is sometimes called, glossolalia. The Corinthians are seeking assurance that they are in communion with Jesus through the gift of his Spirit. Paul assures them that there are many ways in which the Spirit is manifested in people’s lives. Whatever way they have been gifted by grace, Paul assures them that it is one and the same Spirit that they are experiencing.

Furthermore, they can be sure that it is the risen Lord, Jesus himself, who is giving them his Spirit, and that whatever gift they receive it will always be in view of carrying out Jesus’ ministry (diakonia). As we saw when commenting earlier on Paul’s referring to himself as a diakonos (3:5), the reference point is always God. Jesus is the servant of the Lord. His ministry is that of carrying out the will of God. Paul is speaking here of the variety of ways in which the gifts of grace enable Jesus’ disciples to continue this service. Finally, whatever their gift, with it comes all the power of the Creator, making each disciple an instrument of God’s creative and redeeming will. Notice the Trinitarian dimension of Paul’s teaching. Each member of the community has a special share in the communion of love which has its source in God. It is mediated to us through Christ, the Lord, by the gift to us of the Spirit of love that binds him to the Father.

⁴Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit;

⁵and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord;

⁶and there are varieties of ways of exercising power [NRSV ‘activities’], but it is the same God who activates all of them in every one.

⁷To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for a good purpose [NRSV ‘the common good’].

⁸To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom,

and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit,

⁹to another faith by the same Spirit,

to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit,

¹⁰to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy,

to another the discernment of spirits,

to another various kinds of tongues,

to another the interpretation of tongues.

¹¹All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Each disciple has his or her special gift through which the Spirit is manifest, and it is given for the good of the person who receives the gift and for the good of the community. There is only one Spirit and so all who experience God’s gift of grace should experience being bonded to others who are enjoying the same communion. There is only one divine Breath breathing into the various instruments of God’s orchestra. We should expect a divine harmony. Since God is the almighty Creator, if we open ourselves to the will of the Lord, and if we allow his Spirit to fill us and to activate us, we can be sure that the will of God will be done through us. Since God is love, from our communion in the triune life of God, and according to the unique gift of the Spirit with which each of us is graced, God’s all-powerful love will bear fruit in our lives.

Paul gives examples of various gifts of grace which manifest the Spirit. He begins with wisdom, the gift which enables us to receive God’s self-revelation. It is wisdom which enables a person to see in Jesus’ dying on the cross the revelation of who God really is. Then comes ‘knowledge’ – whereby we are able to grasp the meaning of revelation and its implications for living. The Corinthians have been priding themselves in their knowledge (see 8:1), but forgetting that true spiritual knowledge is related to both wisdom and love. Then comes ‘faith’ (see 2:5), the gift which enables us to hear the gospel, to recognise it as God’s gift, and to open our minds and hearts to accept it and to base our lives upon it.

‘Healing’ and ‘the working of miracles’ will be mentioned again (12:28-30). The power of God, which is the power of infinite love, can work wonders in the heart, mind and body of those who open themselves to it. We do not necessarily have the wisdom to know what is truly beneficial (12:7). We can be like the baby that wants bread but reaches out for a stone (Matthew 7:7-11). However, we can expect God’s power to be working in our lives to make possible the next step of love, whatever that may be. ‘Prophecy’ will be treated at length later in the letter (12:28-29; 13:2,8; 14:6,22). Some are given the gift of being able to discern what is and what is not a manifestation of the Spirit (see 1Thessalonians 5:19-21). Paul leaves to the end the gift which so fascinates the Corinthians namely ‘various kinds of tongues’ (Greek: glossa, hence ‘glossolalia’), along with the necessary complementary gift of its interpretation (see 12:28,30; 13:1,8, 14:2-28).

In writings from the Greco-Roman world we frequently find the city, the state, humanity itself and the world compared to the human body, and for much the same reasons for which Paul uses the illustration here. The human body illustrates how diverse elements can be bonded into an organic whole. The church is composed of a diversity of people – illustrated here by Paul through the categories of ‘Jews or Greeks, slaves or free’ (compare Galatians 3:28). Each person has, as he has already said, his or her own special gifts of grace, and in the church all are bonded into a single community. Because of the comparison with the human body, Paul speaks of the church as ‘one body’ (see already, 10:17).

Special to this body and so setting it apart from all other bodies, is the fact that it is created by the Spirit of God and that its life is sustained by the same Spirit. Paul refers to baptism, the communal rite of entry into the body which is the body of Christ, since it is his Spirit that gives it life. We are reminded of his words earlier in the letter: ‘You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (6:11). He speaks also of drinking of the one Spirit, referring to all the different ways in which the life of the body is sustained by the nourishing gift of the Spirit. We met the same combination of ideas when Paul referred earlier to the experience of the people of Israel in the desert: ‘all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ’ (10:2-4).

The Spirit is the one principle of life in all the members of this one body. Since the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the body belongs to Christ. It is ‘the body of Christ’ (12:27); ‘one body in Christ’ (Romans 12:5). Paul refers to the body here simply as ‘Christ’. It is one with him, for it is his life of communion with God which is the life of the church, and it is his mission which the church continues.

Paul is doing two things here. He is using an image commonly used in the Greco-Roman world to say that the Christian community is like the human body in that it has diversity but a single principle of life. He is also saying that the Christian community is a body, the body of the risen Christ, for it is his Spirit that is the body’s principle of life.

¹²For just as the body is one and has many members,

and all the members of the body, though many, are one body,

so it is with Christ.

¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into one body —

Jews or Greeks, slaves or free —

and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Each has a place in the body of Christ

¹⁴Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.

¹⁵If the foot would say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁶And if the ear would say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body.

¹⁷If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?

¹⁸But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.

¹⁹If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

²¹The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you'.

²²On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³and those members of the body which we think less honourable we invest with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; ²⁴whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, ²⁵that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.

²⁶If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

²⁷Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Paul's illustration is self evident. In context and reading between the lines, we see that he is encouraging those in the Corinthian community who are anxious because they do not have the 'spiritual gift' of inspired speech. Do not be anxious, he is saying. You do not have this gift, but you have your own, you share in the life of the body, you have the Holy Spirit, you are needed by the community and have your part to play in living Jesus' life and in carrying on his mission.

He is also pointing out the stupidity of anyone thinking that the only important gift is the one which he or she has, as though it was that gift alone which identifies the whole of the body, while other gifts are of no real significance.

We should not miss Paul's reference to God in verses eighteen and twenty-four. Throughout this illustration it is the will of God that we are observing. Likewise his mention of 'dissension'(schisma, see 1:10ff; 11:18) and 'caring for one another'(merimnaō, see 7:32-3) in verse twenty-five. Paul's focus remains on the Corinthian church. The weaker members need special care.

Earlier, Paul spoke of the profound personal union that exists between the Christian and Christ, such that we belong to him (6:15-16). The community (the 'body'), too, belongs to him (see 3:22; Galatians 3:29; 5:24), for it is his Spirit who gives his life to the body, drawing each member into his communion with the Father.

Just as God ‘arranges’ (Greek: *tithēmi*) the various members of the body as God chooses (12:18), so God ‘appoints’ (*tithēmi*) variously gifted members of the church. Paul lists a diversity of gifts of the Spirit (12:4), ministries commissioned by the Lord (12:5); ways in which the power of God is effective in the community and in the world (12:6).

He begins with the apostles: those who, like himself, are given the gift to lay the foundations of the church (see 3:10). When speaking of his own ministry earlier in these terms, he called it a ‘grace of God given to me’ (3:10; also Galatians 2:9; Romans 15:15). A ‘grace given’ is exactly what Paul is speaking of in this passage: a charisma. He writes to the Romans of having received ‘grace (*charis*) and apostleship (*apostolē*) to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles’ (Romans 1:5). It would seem that Paul restricts the term ‘apostle’ to those who have experienced the risen Jesus (see 15:7) and have been commissioned by Jesus himself for the founding of Christian communities.

Once the community is formed in response to the proclamation of the gospel by the apostle, it assembles in prayer and the risen Jesus continues to speak to the assembly through the prophets (Greek: *prophētēs*). Paul has already listed prophecy as a manifestation of the Spirit (see 12:10), and he will speak of its importance later. The ‘teachers’ (*didaskalos*) explain the implications for the life of the community of the words spoken by Christ through the prophets, as well as the word of God in the sacred Scriptures (Romans 12:7).

‘Deeds of power’, ‘gifts of healing’ and ‘various kind of tongues’ (once more in the last place) have already been listed among the manifestations of the Spirit (see 12:10). Paul adds two other gifts of grace, two other beneficial ‘manifestations of the Spirit’ (12:7): ‘forms of assistance’ (*antilēmpsis*) and ‘forms of leadership’ (*kubernēsis*). Luke has Paul speak of the first when exhorting the presbyters of Ephesus to ‘support the weak’ (Acts 20:25). The second concerns the exercise of organisational leadership (compare 1Thessalonians 5:12; Romans 12:8). Because the Corinthians have a distorted view of the value of ecstatic speech (*glossolalia*), Paul indicates his intention to refocus their admiration towards ‘the greater gifts’. He will pick this up in chapter fourteen. However, first he must speak to them of love, for there is no gift of grace without love.

28 And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.

29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

30 Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?

31 But strive for the greater gifts.

And I will show you a still more excellent way.

¹If I speak in tongues, human and angelic [NRSV 'of mortals and of angels'], but do not have love,

I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

²And if I have prophetic powers,

and understand all mysteries

and all knowledge,

and if I have all faith, so as to move mountains,

but do not have love,

I am nothing.

³If I give away all my possessions,

and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [or 'to be burned'],

but do not have love,

I gain nothing.

We have already noted that the Corinthians were fascinated by the phenomenon of inspired speech, 'glossolalia', from the Greek *glossa* (tongue) and *laleō* (speaking). Those who prayed in this way thought of themselves as having the 'spiritual gift', and those who did not were anxious that they might not have the Holy Spirit. Paul will address this matter in the following chapter. However he has prepared the Corinthians for his response already in 12:3, and by placing glossolalia at the end of his list of manifestations of the Spirit (12:10, 28:30). He begins here by speaking of this phenomenon in the most extreme and exalted way, only to say that without love it is just a babble of meaningless sounds. If disciples of Christ are so caught up in communion with him that the incomprehensible sounds which they utter are genuine expressions of prayer, this will surely be apparent in their love of others which will, like their speech, extend beyond the bounds of reason and logic.

He goes straight on to list four other ways in which the Spirit can be manifested, and makes the same basic point. Prophetic powers (see 12:10,28), understanding all the mysteries revealed by God (see 4:1), having no limits to one's knowledge (see 1:5), and having the kind of faith in God which makes everything possible (see Matthew 17:20) – these are gifts of grace only to the extent that they express love. If faith is real, and not mere words, it will bear the fruit of love (Galatians 5:6).

Finally, Paul leaves the matter of charisms to look at the most amazing and heroic deeds of which human beings are capable, only to say that not one of them leads a person to advance on the way to salvation unless it is motivated by and expresses love. We are reminded of the words of Jesus: 'What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?' (Luke 9:25). Generosity that is not self-seeking will be characterised by love. It is unclear whether Paul wrote *kaukēsomai* ('to boast'), speaking generally of the most extraordinary deeds that human beings can boast of, or *kauthēsomai* ('to be burnt'), thinking more specifically of heroic sacrifice of one's life for some noble cause. Either way, without love, nothing is gained.

The word 'love' (Greek: *agapē*) has not featured so far in this letter. Paul mentioned it in passing in 4:21, and briefly in a text which pointed in the direction of this present passage: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' (8:1). The verb (*agapaō*) has appeared twice, also without any development (see 4:21; 8:3). For an introductory treatment on the significance of *agapē*, see the commentary on Galatians 5:6. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul named *agapē* as capturing the essential meaning of the Torah (Galatians 5:1). He also listed it as the first of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

Though the word has not featured so far in this letter, the reality has been central to everything that Paul has written, for it is not any kind of 'love' to which Paul is referring here (see also 1Thessalonians 3:12, 5:13). He is speaking of the love that is revealed in 'the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20). Immediately after the introduction to this present letter, Paul writes: 'Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose' (1:10). He goes on to demonstrate the futility of their so-called 'knowledge', for they lack the 'mind of Christ' (2:16); they lack wisdom; they lack the ability to recognise in the cross the revelation of God (1:13; 1:17ff). He counters their boast of having power by declaring that the only real power is the power of the cross (1:18) – the power of love.

He goes on to reprimand them for their failure to stand up for the truth and to protect the community against the persistent immoral behaviour of one of its members. Once again he speaks of the cross: 'Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed' (5:7). It is the love revealed in Jesus on the cross which demands of them 'sincerity and truth' (5:8). The Corinthians are claiming to be free to do anything they like (6:12). Paul reminds them: 'You were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body' (6:20). He makes the same point later (7:23) when advising them not to concentrate on changing their state of life but on giving their 'unhindered devotion to the Lord' (7:35). Knowledge without love can be destructive: 'Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up ... Anyone who loves is known by God' (8:1,3).

Criticising them for their insensitivity in eating food offered to idols in spite of the hurt it is causing others in the community, Paul reminds them that it was for these others that 'Christ died' (8:11). He presents his own practice of becoming 'all things to all' (9:22) as a model for them to follow. He draws their attention again to the cross (10:16), and, in the light of the cross, he appeals to them: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (10:24). The inspiration for such behaviour is the example of Jesus, an example which Paul himself tries to imitate: 'I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (10:33 - 11:1). In criticizing their behaviour at the community assemblies, he once more refers to the mystery of the cross. Christ expressed the meaning of the cross for him when he celebrated his last supper. They should do the same, otherwise 'it is not really the Lord's supper' that they are eating (11:20).

Love

It is by the test of love that their claim to have special knowledge is shown to be false. It is by the test of love that Paul condemns their approaching pagan courts to solve their community problems. He uses the same test to condemn their attitude to the blatant incest of one of their members. It is by the test of love that he assesses the married and the single state, and whether or not they should eat meat offered to idols. Even one's way of dressing is to be judged by the same criterion.

Paul has just demonstrated the catholic nature of the church: everyone has a different gift, and all are needed that the church may live and witness to the glory of the exalted Christ. There is place for every expression of love in the community which is the body of Christ, and without love no gift can claim to be from his Spirit. It is this gift of love to which he now turns.

Paul's claim is that Christ sent him 'to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power'(1:17). When he was among the Corinthians the only thing that occupied his attention was 'Jesus Christ and him crucified'(2:2). The hymn to love to which we now turn is no exception, and we will not be able to understand or appreciate it unless as we reflect upon it we contemplate him who showed us what true love is when he gave his life for us on the cross.

Here and in the rest of verse four, the New Revised Standard Version translates Paul's verbs as adjectives. By using verbs in the present tense, Paul is not simply listing various qualities that pertain to love. In true Semitic style he is telling us what love does.

'Love never stops caring' (Greek: makrothumeō). This is listed by Paul among the fruits of the Spirit (see the commentary on Galatians 5:22). As noted there, the focus is on our sharing in God's magnanimous love by persevering in doing good and not allowing ourselves to be put off by opposition or suffering. It is often translated 'slow to anger'. This, however, is a negative way of rendering something which is very positive. 'Long-suffering' is better. It features as a description of the Lord in the credal statement found in Exodus 34:6 and repeated in Numbers 14:18, Psalm 86:15, Psalm 103:8, Psalm 145:8, Nehemiah 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2. It is a sharing in the passionate and persistent caring of God that is revealed most persuasively in Jesus 'loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

'Love acts always in a kind way' (Greek: chrēsteuomai). This is also listed by Paul as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Whatever gifts of grace we may or may not have been given by the Spirit, the more excellent way is the way of love which can be recognised by the kindness with which we treat others:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

– Ephesians 4:32

Through the gift of love we share in the kindness of God (see Romans 2:4). God is frequently spoken of as 'kind' (or 'good', chrēstos), particularly in the psalms (for example, Psalm 25:8). It is this same picture of God which is given us by Jesus, notably in his description of the way in which the father welcomed home his wayward son: 'While he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him' (Luke 15:20). It is this same compassionate and persistent love that Jesus himself manifested in the way he lived and in the way he died. It is a gift to us from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (John 19:34). This is the gift of the Spirit, the fountain of living water which flows from Jesus' breast (John 7:38).

Love never stops caring [NRSV 'Love is patient'];

love acts always in a kind way [NRSV 'love is kind']

What love does not do

^{4b}love does not act out of jealousy or envy [NRSV 'is not envious']

it does not boast [NRSV 'or boastful']

or behave arrogantly [NRSV 'or arrogant']

⁵it does not behave indecently [NRSV 'or rude']

or insist on its own way

Having described the love of which he is speaking in terms characteristic of the love of God revealed in Jesus, Paul goes on to say what love is not. Again he uses verbs, because he wants to point to what love does not do. His description is relevant to the way the Corinthian community has been behaving.

The first verb (Greek: *zēloō*) can be used positively or negatively, depending on which direction one's zeal takes. In fact Paul has just used it in a positive sense when he encouraged the Corinthians to 'strive for the greater gifts' (12:31). Here Paul is directing his criticism against those in Corinth who have what they consider important spiritual gifts and who apply their zeal in preventing others from sharing in them (hence 'jealous'). On the other side, Paul is also critical of those who have their heart set on having these 'spiritual gifts' that give a person a certain prominence in the community, and who apply their zeal to acquiring them (hence 'envious'). Paul has already accused the community of harbouring this vice (see 3:3), which he has listed elsewhere as one of the 'works of the flesh' (Galatians 5:20), and so as contrary to the fruits of the Spirit.

Love does not boast (Greek: *perpereuomai*) This verb occurs only here in the New Testament, though Paul has often had occasion in this letter to criticise those who are boasting of their gifts.

Love does not behave arrogantly (Greek: *phusioō*). Paul has already criticised the Corinthians a number of times for being arrogant (4:6; 4:18-19; 5:2; 8:1).

Love does not behave indecently. As used in this letter, the connotations of 'decent' are sexual (7:36; 12:23). There is a modesty, a tenderness and a delicacy which is proper to love in its sexual expression (see 6:12-20).

Love does not seek its own way, nor insist upon it. According to Paul, it is because the Jews sought miracles, wanting proofs of divine power that satisfied their expectations, that they found the cross a scandal (1:22-23). It is because people were concentrating their attention on changing their state of life that they were failing to give unhindered devotion to the Lord (7:27). We are reminded of Paul's earlier admonition: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (10:24).

Paul continues to use verbs, not adjectives. While neither ‘giving way to irritation’ nor ‘brooding over wrongs’ occurs elsewhere in this letter, it is not difficult to imagine the behaviour of those in whom these feelings were aroused as they saw their freedom to behave as they wished being criticised by others in the community. We can imagine the feelings of irritation and resentment which some experienced at not being able to take people to court (6:1-8), or behave sexually as they wished (6:12-20), or divorce (7:10-16), or eat meat offered to idols (8:1ff), or wear any kind of hair style they wished (11:2-16), or dine well with their friends at the Lord’s supper (11:17ff). Nor is it difficult to imagine similar feelings being aroused in those who were pressured into eating meat against their conscience, or who came to the assembly only to find themselves humiliated.

Love ‘takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.’ We think of Paul’s statement to the Thessalonians about those who ‘have not believed the truth but took pleasure in unrighteousness’ (2Thessalonians 2:12). The truth, as always in Paul, refers to the ultimate reality of God as revealed in Christ on the cross. True love does not indulge in behaviour that is contrary to God’s will (5:8), but only such as radiates the reality of God.

^{5b}**Love does not give way to irritation [NRSV ‘or irritable’]**

or brood over wrongs [NRSV ‘or resentful’];

‘It takes no pleasure in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.’

7Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone [NRSV 'bears all things'] it believes all things, hopes all things, and endures whatever comes.

'Love has space enough to hold and to bear everything and everyone'. The long paraphrase is based on two facts. The first is that the Greek *panta* is not limited to things. The second is that the Greek verb *stegō* derives from the word for 'roof' (Greek: *stegā*), hence the connotation of space and of containing. Love is about having space in one's heart, space for people, space to hold problems, disappointments and pain, as well as joys, hopes and dreams. Paul is thinking of the heart of God 'from whom are all things, and for whom we exist' (8:6). He is thinking of the heart of Christ 'through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (8:6). Their crucified Lord has space in his heart for all the members of the Corinthian community 'together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours' (1:2). He has space in his heart for the whole human race for which he offered his life (1:13; see also 9:2).

Love 'believes all things'. Paul continues to speak of the close union of love and faith (Galatians 5:6; 5:22; 1Thessalonians 1:3; 3:6; 5:8; 2Thessalonians 1:3). To believe is to be open to God's self-revelation, to accept what we come to know when we listen to God, and to act accordingly. God knows every one and every thing with the knowledge of one who loves. In other words, God continually believes in us and in our possibilities for good. God respects our freedom, but he cares passionately enough for us to be 'angry' with us (see 1Thessalonians 1:10), and to persist in drawing us, through the realities of our life, to him and to each other. To this end he offers us the possibility of repentance when we fail, and believes in our capacity to be converted. For us, too, believing and loving are inseparable. For a fuller reflection on faith we refer the reader to our commentary on Galatians 2:16.

Love 'hopes all things'. The word 'hope' occurs in 9:10. It is linked closely with faith and love also in Galatians 5:5-6 and 1Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8. One who loves is attentive to present communion with the one loved. But the present moment is not static or isolated; rather, it points to and opens up a future communion for which we long, and to which we are called. Our present union encourages us to leave the future confidently in the hands of him in whom we have placed our trust. For a fuller reflection on hope we refer the reader to our commentary on Galatians 5:5.

Love 'endures all things'. This was a central theme in Paul's Thessalonian correspondence where a major concern was persecution (2Thessalonians 1:4; 3:5). Endurance is linked with faith, hope and love in 1Thessalonians 1:3. Paul is speaking, for the only time in this letter to the community in Corinth, of the ability to remain faithful to love in the midst of opposition. The supreme example of this is Jesus on the cross.

Paul now contrasts love with the three charisms which have featured most in this letter: prophecy, speaking in tongues and knowledge. Whatever the relative value of these gifts of grace and manifestations of the Spirit – and Paul has already indicated that he is going to discuss this (see 12:31) – unlike love which ‘never ends’, they all belong to this passing world. They are necessarily partial and incomplete.

In verse eleven Paul contrasts them using the example of a child and a mature adult. Compared to love which belongs to maturity (perfection, fulfilment), speaking in tongues is like the babbling of a child; the enlightenment that comes with the gift of prophecy is like the thoughts of a child; the knowledge we receive now is like the reasoning of a child. If the Corinthians want to grow up and mature, let them seek love.

Verse twelve takes us to one of the most important Old Testament texts relating to the gift of prophecy given to Moses:

When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face — clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord.

– Numbers 12:6-8

The Hebrew text reads ‘mouth to mouth’, not ‘face to face’, and though there are two texts that leap beyond the accustomed limits and speak of Moses and God being ‘face to face’ (Exodus 33:11; Deuteronomy 34:10), the Jewish commentators all agree that Moses saw only a reflection or image (the ‘form’ of God). Paul’s ‘in a mirror’ captures this well. The communication received by other lesser prophets was ‘in riddles’. So it is with Christian prophets. Face to face seeing is for ‘then’ (the final age), not ‘now’. Paul said earlier: ‘anyone who loves God is known by him’ (8:3). This knowledge that comes with communion in love will be perfect only ‘then’.

Unlike the charisms which pass, the three defining qualities of the Christian life, faith and hope and love (Galatians 5:5-6; 1Thessalonians 1:3) remain. The greatest of the three is love. If they want to ‘strive for the greater gifts’ (12:31), let them pursue love.

⁸Love does not come to an end.

But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.

⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.

¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly [or ‘in a riddle’], but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide [‘remain’], these three; and the greatest of these is love. Pursue love

^{1b}Strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy.

²For those who speak in a tongue do not speak to other people but to God; for nobody understands them, since they are speaking mysteries in the Spirit.

³On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation.

⁴Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church.

⁵Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.

Having ensured that the Corinthians will read his words within the context of love, Paul now turns to the precise issue concerning which they have sought his guidance. Paul has profound respect for whatever way the Spirit of Jesus chooses to manifest his presence. All gifts of grace are needed in the body that belongs to Christ, and each person is to be grateful for whatever gift he or she receives. However, Paul is presented with a situation in which the Corinthian community is impressed in a distorted way with the more spectacular gift of speaking in tongues. Those who have this gift are tending to think of themselves as superior to the others, and those who do not have it are anxious and envious. He has already indicated that he wants them to ‘strive for the greater gifts’ (12:31). It is to this that he now turns.

Instead of focusing on speaking in tongues he wants them to recognise the greater importance and value of prophecy, because prophecy, in which revelation is communicated through intelligible language, is a gift given with a view to building up the community. In other words, it is given for others, and therefore more directly related to love.

In no way does Paul devalue speaking in tongues. It is a gift of grace and a most valuable gift of grace for it is a gift of prayer: a way of communing with God when one is drawn by grace beyond the limits of thought, of reason and logic. When a person speaks in tongues, he or she is ‘speaking mysteries in the Spirit’. Drawn by grace into intimate communion with Jesus through his Spirit, a person is taken into the realm of mystery, and so of divine revelation.

However – and this is Paul’s point – one is also speaking mysteries in another sense: one’s words do not communicate with others in a comprehensible way. Since Paul’s focus here is on the Christian assembly, and on building up the community in love, on ‘encouragement and consolation’ (see also 1Thessalonians 2:12, 5:14), he emphasises the special value for the community of prophecy. This is the gift given by Jesus’ Spirit that enables a person to speak for Jesus; to speak the truth in love in a way that communicates revelation to others in a comprehensible way. It is less spectacular, and therefore less likely to tempt to arrogance the person who has the gift, or to envy, the one who does not have it. It is also more important when it comes to building up the community. Speaking in tongues is a gift given for one’s own personal communion with God. Prophecy is given for others. They are to remember that ‘not all things build up’ (10:23).

The perspective within which Paul is writing is made abundantly clear in the opening sentence when he says: ‘so that the church may be built up’ – an expression he repeats in verse twelve. Those who are given the gift of speaking in tongues are taken beyond where words have meaning into a kind of interior silence. Mostly when the mind is silent, so also should be the lips. However, in certain cultural situations, there is an expectation that the prayer be shared. When this is the case, it finds expression in the rhythms of wordless speech or song. Using a number of illustrations, Paul makes the obvious point that such speech does not communicate meaning. Even though through the gift of speaking in tongues others can be attracted into a similar prayer, it remains true that this gift is a personal one. For words which are essentially unintelligible to have revelatory value for others in the assembly, it will be necessary for the Spirit of Jesus to move either the person with the gift of tongues or another to interpret what it is that God is communicating through this inspired prayer. This is needed ‘so that the church may be built up’.

The Corinthians are ‘eager for spiritual gifts’. Well then, says Paul, don’t be carried away with your fascination for the more spectacular gift of speaking in tongues. Rather, pray to God that he will give you the gift to be able, in intelligible words, to reveal what it is that the Spirit is saying to the community. In other words, ‘strive especially that you may prophesy’(14:1).

^{5b}One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up.

⁶Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you speaking in tongues, how will I benefit you unless I speak to you in some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or teaching?

⁷It is the same way with lifeless instruments that produce sound, such as the flute or the harp. If they do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played?

⁸And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?

⁹So with yourselves; if in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air.

¹⁰There are doubtless many different kinds of sounds in the world, and nothing is without sound.

¹¹If then I do not know the meaning of a sound, I will be a foreigner to the speaker and the speaker a foreigner to me.

¹²So with yourselves; since you are eager for spiritual gifts, strive to excel in them for building up the church.

In the assembly pray for the gift of prophecy

¹³Therefore, one who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

¹⁴For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive.

¹⁵What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also.

¹⁶Otherwise, if you say a blessing with the spirit, how can anyone in the position of an outsider say the 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since the outsider does not know what you are saying?

¹⁷ For you may give thanks well enough, but the other person is not built up.

¹⁸I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you;

¹⁹nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul is not simply speaking here of prayer. He is speaking of prayer which is expressed in sound, and in the assembly. He is declaring his preference for the kind of prayer which bears fruit in building up the community, and for this he clearly favours the sharing of prayer in intelligible words and not in the unintelligible speech of glossolalia.

What is the point, asks Paul, of others saying 'Amen' to your praise of God or to your prayer of thanks for the wonderful deeds of God when no one knows what you are talking about? If you are going to communicate your prayer to others, then you had better engage your mind as well as your spirit.

Paul begins by suggesting to those with the gift of speaking in tongues that they pray for the gift to be able to express what is revealed to them in intelligible words. He ends by expressing his preference, in the assembly, for the gift of prophecy in which the revelation is given for others and in words that convey meaning.

That Paul is not in any way down-playing the gift of speaking in tongues becomes obvious when he thanks God for having given him this gift. Nevertheless 'in church', that is to say in the assembly – and this is the whole point of his reply – five meaningful words that make sense to others and that convey God's revelation to them, are of more value than 'ten thousand words in a tongue'.

In his hymn to love, Paul spoke about all our present experiences of God being necessarily partial and immature, like those of a child (Greek: *nēpios*), when compared to the immense and incomprehensible reality of God (13:11). Earlier, he explained his own apparent lack of wisdom in proclaiming the gospel by the fact that he had to speak to them like children, because they were not mature enough to take in the full message of the gospel (3:1).

He repeats the image here. It would be wonderful if they could retain the innocence of a child (*nēpiazō*), but they are not children (*paidion*), and so they should learn to do what a child cannot do, evaluate matters wisely. Their fascination with the spectacular gifts is rather childish. If they want to appear to others to be mature, and if they want to be so in reality 'to the measure of the full stature of Christ' (Ephesians 4:13), they should judge things as they really are. In the present context, they should appreciate the relative value of glossolalia and prophecy in the assembly.

As he is wont to do, Paul cites Scripture to support his point. Hearing what to them was the babble of the Assyrian language in the streets of Jerusalem did not bring about a change of heart in the people of Judah. In the same way, the babble of glossolalia when heard by unbelievers does not lead to conversion. Whereas when they experience their hearts being revealed through the intelligible words of prophecy, they can be moved to conversion.

In verse twenty-two Paul is saying that while glossolalia may impress unbelievers, it does not inspire belief in the way that prophecy does. When nonbelievers join the Christian assembly (an interesting piece of information in itself) and hear tongues, their reaction is to think that the community is simply out of its mind. When, however, through words of prophecy, they find their inner heart being revealed, they experience the presence of God and the assembly as a place where God continues his saving action (compare 1Kings 18:39; Isaiah 45:14-15; Zechariah 8:23).

20 Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults.

21 In the law it is written, 'By people of strange tongues and by the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people; yet even then they will not listen to me,' says the Lord (Isaiah 28:11-12).

22 Tongues, then, are a sign not for believers but for unbelievers, while prophecy is not for unbelievers but for believers.

23 If, therefore, the whole church comes together and all speak in tongues, and outsiders or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are out of your mind?

24 But if all prophesy, an unbeliever or outsider who enters is reproved by all and called to account by all.

25 After the secrets of the unbeliever's heart are disclosed, that person will bow down before God and worship him, declaring, 'God is really among you.'

²⁶What should be done then, my friends? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

²⁷If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be only two or at most three, and each in turn; and let one interpret.

²⁸But if there is no one to interpret, let them be silent in church and speak to themselves and to God.

²⁹Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said.

³⁰If a revelation is made to someone else sitting nearby, let the first person be silent.

³¹For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.

³²And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets,

³³ for God is a God not of disorder but of peace.

It is wonderful that each person has his or her own special gift of grace (12:7,11). One must, of course, be grateful for any and every gift that comes from the Spirit of God, and this includes the beautiful gift of prayer that finds expression in the gift of tongues. In the assembly, however, they must discern which gifts actually build up the community.

Since, as Paul says, ‘God is a God not of disorder but of peace’, the chaos which the Corinthians are experiencing in their reunions comes, not from the inspiration of the Spirit, but from their lack of proper attention to the Spirit and their failure properly to discern. Paul lays down a number of basic organisational principles.

First, as regards the gift of tongues, if those who have this gift are not also given an understanding of God’s revelation which they can share with the community in an intelligible way, then they should remain silent and enjoy their gift at home.

Secondly, as regards those with the gift of prophecy, the numbers speaking should be limited and time should be given for other prophets to evaluate the revelation and to apply it to the life of the community. It is interesting to note the immediate qualification which Paul adds in verse thirty. He knows that some discipline is needed in the meetings, but he knows also that it must be flexible and leave room for the surprise of the action and intervention of God’s Spirit.

It is important also they they remember that the various manifestations of the Spirit in the different prophets (the ‘spirits of the prophets’) are such that when one prophet speaks, the prophet, and the community itself, must be sensitive to the way in which the Spirit deals with this prophecy through the other prophets present in the assembly.

The editors of the New Revised Standard Version place this passage within brackets indicating a level of uncertainty as to whether it belongs to Paul's letter. The content is problematical, but if this were the only argument brought forward against Pauline authorship, we would have to suspect that people who would prefer Paul not to have written it have excluded it on ideological grounds. Such 'advocacy exegesis' would, of course, be unacceptable. However, there are a number of problems with the text. The bulk of it, verses thirty-four and thirty-five, are found after verse forty in some manuscripts. This has led some to the suspicion that it might be a comment written in the margin by someone who wanted to introduce synagogue practice into the church, a comment mistakenly included as part of the text itself by a copyist. The trouble with this suggestion is that it is hard to know what to do with the words 'as in all the churches of the saints' and with verse thirty-six.

Furthermore, verse thirty-six begins in Greek with $\bar{\epsilon}$, which is much stronger word than the English 'or' and sounds as though it is a reaction against the two previous verses, and we should not be surprised that Paul would disagree with the sentiments expressed in them. They can hardly be his words. If he is giving a command that women are to be silent in the assembly, why did he go to such trouble earlier to insist that when women prophesied in the assembly (one cannot prophesy in silence!) they must dress appropriately (11:3-16)? Furthermore, the reasons given in verses thirty-four and thirty-five have nothing to do with the very things that Paul has been stressing in this whole section. They do not argue from the basis of what builds up the church. They do not argue from love. Rather, the argument concerns the relative authority of husband and wife. Granted Paul's acceptance of a social order which he understood as being part of God's design (see 11:30), such thinking is not in itself entirely foreign to Paul, but it fits poorly here.

Among the numerous suggestions offered by scholars in an attempt to understand this section, one is that, while welcoming the spiritual leadership given by women when, under the inspiration of the Spirit, they share their prayer or prophecy with the assembly, Paul may have judged it better for order that they stay within their customary role and not take part in public discussion. In other words the accepted 'order'(14:34) was to be broken only under the inspiration of the Spirit. A better suggestion, in my view, is to see 14:33b-35 as Paul's expression of a view held by a faction in the Corinthian church, a view which he challenges in verse thirty-six. Who are they to demand that the women be silent? Do they think they are the only one's inspired? If this suggestion is correct it highlights the difficulty of reading Paul's response without having access to the letter to which Paul is responding.

^{33b}*As in all the churches of the saints,*

³⁴*women should be silent in the churches.*

For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says.

³⁵*If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.*

For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.

³⁶**On the contrary! [NRSV 'Or'] Did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?**

³⁷Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord.

³⁸Anyone who does not recognise this is not to be recognised.

³⁹So, my friends, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues;

⁴⁰but all things should be done decently and in order.

A prophet is a person who, by God's grace, is tuned to the Spirit of Jesus and can recognise when Jesus is speaking. Of course, not all who 'claim to be a prophet' are in fact prophets. Paul is challenging those in the Corinthian community who claim to be prophets or to have special spiritual powers. They are to recognise the authority of the risen Lord in what Paul has written. The Lord is speaking through his servant, Paul, who is also a prophet (compare 7:40). Paul goes further. The community can be assured that anyone among them who rejects Paul's words is demonstrating his or her lack of genuine spiritual gifts.

He concludes by summarising the gist of his response. They have been especially eager to speak in tongues. Paul hopes that his words will have persuaded them of the superior value of the gift of prophecy. He is not suggesting that it is up to them to choose the gift they will receive. All is gift and we must be grateful for any gift that is offered to us. However, as Paul has argued, in the assembly, they should recognise the special value of prophecy as a gift given precisely to build up the community. They have betrayed their immaturity by being like children in their fascination with the spectacular. Paul hopes that they will now think in a more mature way.

Always sensitive of the danger of divisions within the community, Paul insists that he is not downgrading the gift of tongues. He does not want those without it to use his words to turn the tables, as it were, on those who have been enjoying something of a reputation because of their ecstatic prayer. Paul is not speaking against this gift, and he does not want them to forbid it in the assembly. However, as he wrote earlier: 'God is a God not of disorder but of peace' (14:33). Let everything be done in a way that does not bring shame upon individuals or upon the community, but rather manifests the harmony which is always a sign of the presence of God's Spirit among them.

A further problem affecting the Corinthian community is that ‘some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead’ (15:12). Paul deals with this problem firstly by insisting on the central place of the resurrection of Jesus for Christian faith. It is something which he has ‘received’ and has ‘handed on’ to them and which they in turn have ‘received’. These are technical terms used for the handing on and the reception of tradition (see Galatians 1:9,12; 1Thessalonians 2:13; 2Thessalonians 3:6). Paul has already used the same terms in referring to the Eucharist (11:23).

What he is about to declare to them is essential to the ‘good news’ (gospel) which he and the Corinthians have in common. It is the good news about Jesus (9:12; see Galatians 1:7; 1Thessalonians 3:2), which is also the good news ‘of God’ (1Thessalonians 2:2,8,9), because it is from God, and because what is revealed in Jesus shows us who God really is and what it is that God wants for us. God chose Paul to proclaim this gospel to them (1:17), and he has committed himself faithfully to carrying out this mission (9:16,18). He reminds them how they welcomed the gospel. It is the foundation and the very essence of the new life which they are now experiencing, a life which is leading them to salvation. This is ‘the grace in which we stand’ and ‘our hope of sharing the glory of God’ (Romans 5:2). It is ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith’ (Romans 1:16).

Scholars are agreed that from the second part of verse three to verse five Paul is quoting a traditional faith-formula. He begins with the fact of Jesus’ death, reinforced by the other fact of Jesus’ burial. He adds two traditional interpretations of Jesus’ death. The first is that it was ‘for our sins’. He has already spoken of Jesus having been crucified for them (1:13); they were ‘bought with a price’ (6:20). Christ died for them (8:11); he gave his body for them (11:2). We recall also his words to the Galatians to whom he wrote that Jesus ‘gave himself for our sins’ (Galatians 1:4); he also wrote of ‘faith in the Son of God loving me and giving himself for me’ (Galatians 2:20). In his letter to the Thessalonians, composed while he was in Corinth we read: ‘God has destined us for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that we may live with him’ (1Thessalonians 5:9-10).

The second interpretation added here by Paul is that Christ died ‘in accordance with the scriptures’. In other words, we must look for its meaning by reflecting on God’s saving design as revealed in the sacred writings.

¹Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news

that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received,

in which also you stand,

²through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you — unless you have come to believe in vain.

³For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received:

that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,

⁴and that he was buried

^{4b}**and that he was
raised
on the third day
in accordance
with the scriptures**

⁵**and that he ap-
peared
to Cephas,
then to the twelve.**

The second element of the tradition is that Jesus ‘was raised’ (see already 6:14): ‘we believe that Jesus died and rose again’ (1 Thessalonians 4:14; see Galatians 1:1). ‘Was raised’ is in the perfect passive in Greek. The passive indicates God as the one who raised Jesus; the perfect refers to a past action the effects of which continue in the present. Paul is effectively saying: ‘God raised Jesus and he is now alive’. As with the statement concerning Jesus’ death, so here, Paul adds two brief traditional interpretations. ‘On the third day’ (see Luke 9:22; 18:33) seems to have both a historical and a theological reference. The historical reference is to the fact that on the third day the women found the tomb empty (Luke 24:7). The theological reference is to the fact that in the language of the Bible the third day is God’s decisive day, the day when God reveals who God really is (see Exodus 19:11-16). Whatever may happen now (today), and in the foreseeable future (tomorrow), the decisive day (the third day) belongs to God. Notice the distinction in Luke 13:32-33 between ‘the third day’ and ‘the next day’. God will triumph in the end. The resurrection is God’s triumph over the intentions of those who crucified Jesus (Acts 10:40). The reference to the scriptures has the same function as in the previous verse concerning Jesus’ death. We must look for its meaning by reflecting on God’s saving design as revealed in the sacred writings.

The third element of the tradition concerns the experiences which were the basis for belief in the resurrection of Jesus. It is important to note that Paul’s intention in this passage is not to prove that the resurrection happened. He therefore makes no attempt to describe the experiences to which he refers. He takes them as known and familiar to his readers. The expression ‘appeared to’ (Greek: *ōphthē* + dative) does not of itself indicate a miraculous seeing with the eyes. Paul is stating that the risen Jesus allowed certain people to experience in some way his living presence.

The traditional faith-formula continues, giving special mention to Cephas, the acknowledged leader of the Twelve after Jesus’ death (compare Luke 24:34), and to the Twelve – those who were chosen by Jesus (see Luke 6:12-16), who were with him from his baptism by John right through to his death on the cross, and who played a foundational role in witnessing to his resurrection (see Acts 1:21-22; 1:3; 13:30-31).

The way in which Paul introduces these verses indicates that he is no longer quoting from the traditional faith-formula, but is adding to it, with a view to expanding the base of evidence and to include himself as a witness to the resurrection. It has been suggested that the ‘more than five hundred brothers and sisters’ may refer to the Pentecost experience of the Jerusalem community recorded in the second chapter of Acts. Paul chooses to mention that some of these have died. This is perhaps an indication that some in the Corinthian community were anxious in the same way that the Christians in Thessalonica had been, thinking that only the living would be able to enjoy eternal communion with Jesus and that death removed a person from the possibility of salvation (see 1Thessalonians 4:13-18).

James is the ‘brother of the Lord’ mentioned a number of times in Paul’s letter to the Galatians. He was the leading presbyter in the Jerusalem church (see Galatians 1:19; 2:9,12; Acts 15:13). Paul goes on to speak of the experience of the risen Christ shared by ‘all the apostles’, all those chosen as witnesses by the risen Christ. Being an apostle is the first of the gifts of grace listed by Paul (12:28).

Finally he speaks of himself. Earlier in the letter he asked: ‘Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus the Lord?’(9:1; see Galatians 1:12,16). He acknowledges his past as a persecutor of the church (see Galatians 1:13). Note that, as in Galatians 1:13, he is using the word ‘church’ not in its local but in its universal sense. Yes, he was a persecutor, but he can also point to his record as an apostle to demonstrate his fidelity to the commission given to him (see 4:12; also Galatians 4:11; 1Thessalonians 2:9; 3:5). Paul takes no credit for any of this. It is all due to ‘the grace of God that is with me’(see 4:7; Galatians 1:15-16; 2:9).

The gospel proclaimed to the Corinthians by their apostle Paul is the same gospel as has been proclaimed by the other witnesses to the resurrection. This is the gospel which the Corinthians have welcomed with faith, and it is this common faith which is the basis for the teaching to which Paul now turns.

⁶Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

⁷Then he appeared to James,

then to all the apostles.

⁸Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

¹⁰But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

¹¹Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

If Christ is not risen our faith is futile

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?

¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;

¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.

¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ — whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.

¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised.

¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.

¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

The problem which Paul is addressing is that some of the Corinthian community are saying that ‘there is no resurrection of the dead’. Paul gives no indication of the reasons which they offer to support their position. This passage constitutes his first response.

They cannot have it both ways. Paul has already established as fundamental to the gospel as proclaimed and as received that Christ has been raised from the dead (that is, from the realm of the dead, from Sheol/Hades). If they accept that Christ is risen, then it is illogical to deny the resurrection of the dead. If, on the other hand, they do not accept that Christ is risen, they should recognise the theological implications of their position.

The first consequence would be that what Paul has done as herald of the gospel and their acceptance of the gospel in faith has all been for nothing. Or, as he said earlier ‘the cross of Christ’ would be ‘emptied of its power’ (1:17). The second consequence would be that Paul and the other apostles mentioned in verses five to seven were liars and that the Corinthians have therefore believed a lie. Can they really believe that in the light of what Paul has stated in verses one to three above?

In a second wave, Paul points out other consequences that would logically follow on the rejection of the resurrection of the dead. If they deny that Christ is alive, they would have to deny the life that they are experiencing in the Christian community, including all the gifts of the Spirit on which the Corinthians have been placing such value. Can they really say that it has all been an illusion?

Even worse, if Christ has not been raised, this would mean that they were still locked in their sins. Yet he ‘died for our sins’ (15:3)! Furthermore, all their loved ones who have died, must have perished. Yet, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: ‘since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died’ (1Thessalonians 4:14).

It would mean that they are all to be pitied, having been duped into believing and living a lie and hoping for an illusory salvation.

The fact is, says Paul, that Christ has been raised, and that he is ‘the first fruits of those who have died’, the one in whom ‘all will be made alive’. If one human being, Adam, through what he did, can drag the whole human race with him into death, so one human being, Christ, through what he did, can draw everyone with him into life. To grasp the point of Paul’s argument we need to know something of the kind of speculation concerning Adam that was current in Paul’s day. Let us look first at the story of Adam as found in the Book of Genesis, and then at Jewish speculation of the first century AD.

According to Genesis, mankind (Hebrew: ’ādām) is fashioned by God from the clay of the earth (Hebrew: ’ādamāh), to enjoy divine communion in paradise. This life of intimate communion with God could be received only from God. By demanding independence, by demanding to choose for themselves what is good and what is evil (Genesis 2:9), humans forfeited divine communion; they forfeited life. The Genesis myth is not about immortality: they do not attempt to eat from the ‘tree of life’ (Genesis 2:9). God had warned them that if they did not listen to him, they would separate themselves from God, the source of life, and so die. When they disobeyed, God in his compassion protected them from immediate death, but they found themselves outside paradise (3:22-24).

A peaceful death in old age and in prosperity was never understood by the people of Israel as a punishment. It was only premature death or death without offspring that was linked with sin and understood as the result of failure to observe the covenant.

It is only in the writings of Judaism of the second and first centuries BC that we find physical death as such being linked with Adam’s sin. Some speculated that death could be blamed on the fallen angels; some blamed Adam; some blamed it on the fact that everyone has freely chosen to follow Adam’s example. Paul’s intention in the present passage is not to make a dogmatic statement about Adam, but to make use of current ideas to make a statement about Christ. Just as Adam, according to this interpretation, is the first human being in whose seed all humanity exists, and just as Adam’s death set the pattern for the death of every human being, so, because of what Christ has done, the life which he received in being raised from the dead is offered to every human being: ‘all will be made alive in Christ’. Paul has already insisted on the central place in their faith of the resurrection of Jesus. Now, by speaking of Jesus as the ‘first fruits’, he is assuring them that what happened to Jesus is meant also for those who share Jesus’ life.

²⁰**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.**

²¹**For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;**

²²**for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.**

²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.

²⁵For 'he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet' (Psalm 110:1)

²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

²⁷For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet' (Ps. 8:7)

But when it says, 'all things are put in subjection', it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him.

²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

It is the risen Christ who is at the centre of this whole section. Paul has portrayed him as the first fruits of God's harvest, as the one who offers life to all. Now he portrays the risen Christ as the one who, having conquered death, offers the whole of creation to his Father so that 'God may be all in all'. The victory of Christ will be complete at his coming (parousia) – a theme that was prominent in his Thessalonian correspondence (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:19). Paul has already alluded to it in the context of the Eucharist (see 11:26). Then, those who have welcomed the gift of life that he has won for them, 'those who belong to Christ', will share also in his resurrection from the dead.

There was much speculation in Paul's day concerned God's plan for bringing history to an end. Writers loved to develop highly imaginative accounts of judgment, punishment, salvation, and of a new heaven and a new earth. They also speculated that evil angelic powers had usurped control of this present age and that death was their ultimate weapon. By contrast, Paul's idea is very simple. God will have complete victory over every power that opposes him (compare Ephesians 1:20-21). God's will is to exercise this dominion through Christ (see 8:6). Christians are already experiencing this power in their lives, but incompletely. The outcome of the present time of struggle is not in doubt.

There must be a resurrection from the dead, otherwise the victory of Christ is not complete. Paul emphasises that 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death' by placing this statement between two quotations from scripture in which he sees God's design for the victory of Christ. When, at his coming, Christ has finally conquered death itself, he will have brought everything and everyone into submission to God's will and so into the sharing of God's life that is the paradise envisaged in the Book of Genesis as God's design for the human race. Earlier in the letter Paul wrote: 'you are belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God'(3:23). He wrote also: 'God is the head of Christ'(11:3). Paul has a most hopeful vision of God's design for the goal of history: 'all will be made alive in Christ'(15:22), and 'God may be all in all'(15:28). Being love, God will not force his design, but it is God's will to offer this life to all for our acceptance.

Paul returns to the illogicality of their position, this time from the point of view of their behaviour. It seems that some of them were being baptised vicariously for the dead. Paul makes no comment on the custom itself except to highlight the illogicality of such a practice if there is no resurrection of the dead. He goes on to demonstrate what a foolish life he is living if there is no resurrection of the dead. He is foolish to be boasting about how wonderful Jesus is to have given him the apostolate which he exercises and to have brought about such wonderful fruit in Corinth (compare 1 Thessalonians 2:19).

He is also foolish to be risking his life every day if it is all ultimately for nothing. We have no information to assist us in identifying the particular ordeal which Paul describes as 'fighting with wild animals in Ephesus'. It may be the same experience which he refers to in a later letter to the Corinthians: 'We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself' (2 Corinthians 1:8). If there is no resurrection of the dead, Isaiah was wrong to criticise the people of Jerusalem the way he did. Why not live in a carefree way if everything ends with death? We might add that the author of the Book of Wisdom was wrong to consider foolish the following sentiments:

Short and sorrowful is our life, and there is no remedy when a life comes to its end, and no one has been known to return from Hades ... Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that exist, and make use of the creation to the full as in youth. Let us take our fill of costly wine and perfumes, and let no flower of spring pass us by. Let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither.

– Wisdom 2:1,6-8

In conclusion, Paul quotes from the Greek poet, Menander (Thais, fragment 218), to advise his readers to avoid the company of people who persist in denying such a basic tenet of the Christian faith. To deny the resurrection of the dead is to demonstrate a complete failure to grasp God's design. It is to fail to know God. It is interesting that Jesus makes the same judgment of the Sadducees who also denied the resurrection:

Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?

– Mark 12:24

²⁹Otherwise, what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?

³⁰And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour?

³¹I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you — a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord.

³²If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it?

If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'

(Isaiah 22:13).

³³Do not be deceived: 'Bad company ruins good morals.'

³⁴Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more;

for some people have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.

³⁵But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?'

³⁶Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.

³⁷And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.

³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.

³⁹Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.

⁴⁰There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another.

⁴¹There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.

In an earlier section we noted that 'body' for Paul denotes the whole human being as we relate to others, to creation and to God (see 5:3; 6:13-15). Basing his argument on the design of God as revealed by Jesus, he has been arguing that the resurrection of the dead is an essential element of Christian faith. God wants everyone and the whole human person to share in the life of his risen Son. The question now arises: what will our humanity be like? When those who have been raised come with Jesus at the parousia, 'with what kind of body do they come?'

In verses thirty-six and thirty-seven Paul switches to the second person singular. This helps us understand the expression 'Fool'. He is playing the school master. He is asking those who are concerned about this matter to realise that they are showing their ignorance of God. He wants them to put aside any argumentative attitude they may have (they will learn nothing that way) and to take on the attitude of a student who is willing to listen and learn.

Paul scolds the imaginary pupil for not realising that the risen body would have to be quite different from the body we know now. His first illustration is that of a seed and a plant, an illustration that depends on the outmoded biological theory that seeds die before the plant comes into being (compare John 12:24). His point is that when the seed dies God creates a plant (which is obviously quite different from the seed). There is no point in our trying to imagine the resurrected body by looking at our present one.

The second illustration is based on an outmoded cosmological theory. The stars were thought of as living and immortal (and, in that sense, among Greek philosophers, as 'divine'). It is not useful as exemplifying transformation (earthly bodies do not become heavenly), but it does illustrate well the fact that there are many different kinds of bodies. The perishable element ('flesh') of living terrestrial bodies differs from one kind to another. The imperishable element ('glory') of living celestial bodies also differs from one kind to another. Since the risen body is a celestial creation, Paul envisages it as having the properties of such bodies: immortality, glory, and power – very different from our present terrestrial experience. Once again observation of nature warns us not to try to imagine the kind of risen body we will have as though it will replicate the body we now experience .

Paul uses four adjectives to describe the difference between the body we know in this present terrestrial existence and the body (the 'person') we will be when we are raised with Christ. We will be imperishable (Greek: *aphtharsia*, compare 9:25), for death will have been conquered forever. We will be raised in glory (*doxa*), sharing in 'the glory of the immortal God' (Romans 1:23), the glory of 'the Lord of glory' (2:8). As he writes elsewhere: 'He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Philippians 3:21). We will be raised in power (*dunamis*), sharing in the power of our risen Lord. In place of the body which we now experience, a natural body energised and enlivened by the human soul (*psuchikos*), our whole being will be an expression of our communion with God, energised and enlivened by the Spirit (*pneumatikos*).

Attention is once again drawn to Adam (see 15:22-23). The way we live and relate now (our 'body'), is patterned on that of Adam. We are fashioned from dust but we live by the breath that God has breathed into us. We are a 'living soul' (Genesis 2:7). By contrast, we experience the risen Christ as a 'life-giving spirit' (see also 2Corinthians 3:6). His way of being (his 'body') is 'of heaven', not from the dust. It is a 'spiritual body'. Our risen bodies will also be an expression, not of our human soul, but of our relationship with the divine Spirit. Paul underlines the future dimension of the risen life because of the expectation in the Corinthian community that they should experience some of the dimensions of the risen body already now. Paul is taking us back to his theology of weakness and the cross.

In calling Christ the 'last Adam', Paul is declaring that he is the first man of the final goal of history. He is also declaring that the first Adam was in view of the last: human beings have as their natural goal to be in the image of Christ. In our risen state we will be like the risen Christ, the 'man of heaven', 'conformed to the image of God's Son, in order that he might be the first-born within a large family' (Romans 8:29).

⁴²So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. ⁴³It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory.

It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.

⁴⁴It is sown an ensouled [NRSV 'physical'] body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is an ensouled [NRSV 'physical'] body, there is also a spiritual body. ⁴⁵Thus it is written, 'The first man, Adam, became a living soul [NRSV 'being'] (Genesis 2:7), the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.

⁴⁶But it is not the spiritual which is first, but the ensouled [NRSV 'physical'] and then the spiritual.

⁴⁷The first man was from the earth, a man of dust, the second man is from heaven.

⁴⁸As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven.

⁴⁹Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

We will all be changed

⁵⁰**What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable ['decay'] inherit the imperishable.**

⁵¹**Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed,**

⁵²**in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.**

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

⁵³**For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.**

Neither the living ('flesh and blood') nor the dead (Greek: *phthora*, 'decay') can defeat death (demonstrating in a final way the folly of any vainglory or boasting). It is Christ and Christ alone who has defeated death. Paul the prophet shares with them a truth that has been revealed to him (a 'mystery'). We are reminded of his words to the Thessalonians:

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever.

– 1Thessalonians 4:15-17

The element that is added in our present text – the fact that it is our present mortal body that is transformed – does not necessarily indicate a growth in Paul's thinking. He is responding to different questions. Paul focuses on the power of God, instantaneously transforming the living and the dead into the exalted state. He speaks in terms of a change of clothes. Ultimately, it is the life of the risen Christ that we are 'putting on'.

His purpose in referring to scripture – a combining of Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14 – is to demonstrate that the resurrection of the dead has always been part of God’s plan. Death which continually swallows its prey will itself be swallowed. It has been conquered by God in raising Jesus from the dead, and it will be conquered for all those who are in Christ. We should read also the Letter to the Ephesians:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

– Ephesians 1:20-23

Paul paints a picture of Death as a giant scorpion, injecting into us the poison of sin in order to bring us under its power. The Corinthians would have been exposed to the thinking of the travelling cynics who disparaged all law as being only an instrument of the powerful to shackle nature. Is Paul, too, saying that law is under the control of sin?

Before the terror of death, Paul can break into a prayer of thanksgiving, for we are already experiencing the victory of the risen Christ whose Spirit is transforming our lives by conquering sin in us and so robbing Death of its prey. His readers should live in such a way as to make this obvious. Our bodies are to be transformed, and so we must live, now, in this mortal body, without sin, and ‘excelling in the work of the Lord’.

⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’ [see Isaiah 25:8].

⁵⁵‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’

[Hosea 13:14]

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

⁵⁷But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

¹Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia.

²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come.

³And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem.

⁴If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

⁵I will visit you after passing through Macedonia — for I intend to pass through Macedonia —

⁶and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go.

⁷I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

⁸But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

The way in which Paul introduces this new topic indicates that it is the fourth of the questions addressed to Paul in the letter that was delivered to him (see 7:1; 8:1; 12:1). On one of Paul's visits to Jerusalem, he was asked if he could help to support the Christian community there. It seems that the Jews in Jerusalem were not entirely self-supporting and that they relied on economic assistance from Jews living abroad. The Jewish Christian community needed similar help. Paul expressed his readiness to help (see Galatians 2:20), not only because of their need, but also as a symbol of communion between the Gentile and the Jewish communities.

Paul mentions the churches of Galatia here, probably as a way of reminding the Corinthians that he is asking them to be part of a wider community project. He asks each person to give what he or she can afford and suggests that the contribution be collected 'on the first day of every week'. It appears that the tradition had already formed of having the regular assembly of the community on the day of the beginning of the new creation inaugurated with the resurrection of Jesus (compare Acts 20:7). Paul speaks also of how he plans to have their gift (Greek: *charis*) taken to Jerusalem.

He is keen to visit them and may even be able to spend the winter with them. However he intends to go via Macedonia and will not be able to leave Ephesus before Pentecost (May) because opportunities for his apostolic work have opened up in the area.

At this stage Paul is not yet sure whether or not he will go on to Jerusalem with the collection. It is possible that the idea of going to Rome is already in his mind. However, he did eventually get to spend a winter with them (56-57AD), during which he composed his Letter to the Romans. When he left Corinth, for the last time, it was to take the collection to Jerusalem. Luke gives a list of those who accompanied him (Acts 20:4).

Paul has already mentioned that he has sent Timothy ‘my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ Jesus, as I teach them everywhere in every church’(4:17). These verses function as a brief letter of recommendation. Obviously Paul expects the letter to reach them first. It will be going back by ship with the delegation, whereas Timothy must be travelling via Macedonia.

Because of the picture given of the Corinthian community in this letter, we are not surprised that Paul shows his fatherly concern to ensure that Timothy is welcome when he arrives. He is letting them know how important Timothy is to him and to the rest of the community in Ephesus. Timothy has no doubt matured in the years since he was in Corinth with Paul.

It appears that they must have asked Paul about Apollos in their letter. Apollos is in Ephesus and in contact with Paul. Paul has no objection to Apollos going to Corinth. In fact, he has been urging him to return with the delegation. This is interesting in light of the first part of this letter. It is not Apollos who is the problem. It is the group who are fastening on to him. We might speculate that his reluctance to return is related to this.

¹⁰If Timothy comes, see that he has nothing to fear among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord just as I am;

¹¹therefore let no one despise him. Send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I am expecting him with the brothers.

¹²Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. He will come when he has the opportunity.

**¹³Keep alert,
stand firm in your
faith,
be courageous, be
strong.
¹⁴Let all that you do
be done in love.**

In these concluding remarks, Paul picks up some of the central themes of the letter. 'Keep alert' is a reminder to the Corinthians to keep their eyes upon their Lord, to long for his coming and be prepared to meet him (compare 1Thessalonians 5:6,10). 'Stand firm in your faith' is an appeal to them to stay close to Jesus (compare Galatians 5:1; 1Thessalonians 3:8). It is also an appeal for them to base their behaviour on the traditions that they have been taught (compare 2Thessalonians 2:15), the kinds of traditions that Paul has been insisting on in this letter. They have been impressed by the gifts of the Spirit that they see themselves as possessing, but they have tended to forget the traditions of the other churches.

The expression 'be courageous' (literally, 'be manly'), occurs only here in the New Testament. This itself is interesting when we consider the important role this virtue played in Greek and especially in Roman ethical philosophy, where the accent is on self-reliance. Paul's understanding is quite different. His use of the expression here, followed by 'be strong', appears to be a reference to Psalm 27:14 where the same two verbs are used in the Greek: 'Put your hope in the Lord, be courageous, let your heart be strong, put your hope in the Lord'. Their courage and their strength is to be in reliance on God and on the love which God has revealed to them in the 'weakness' of the cross.

How better to sum up all that he has written in this letter than to appeal to the Christians in Corinth: 'let all that you do be done in love'. They know that the love to which he is referring is the love given them by God and demonstrated for them in the way in which Jesus gave himself for them. If they live in this love and if it is this love that motivates everything that they do, they will know what it is to be disciples of Jesus.

Stephanas has been mentioned earlier in the letter as one of the few people actually baptised by Paul (1:16). We find out here that he was the first convert in the Roman province of Achaia. He is clearly one of the leading figures in the Corinthian church and Paul urges the Corinthians to be 'subject' to people like Stephanas and others who were doing God's work (diakonia, see 3:5) among them (see 3:9). The divisions in the Corinthian church have created disorder and consequently a lack of peace and of love. To be 'subject' is to be in one's right place according to divinely willed order. The expression occurs in Psalm 8:7, a psalm quoted by Paul to emphasize the divine will that Christ subject every power to himself, and himself be subject to God, so that 'God may be everything to everyone' (15:27-28). This text is important for it highlights something that is central to this whole letter. The power of God, the power of Christ, to which everything is to be subject, is not arbitrary power, but the power of love - the power revealed on the cross. To be subject to such power is to be open to receive the freedom that comes when one is obedient to God's will.

It is possible that Fortunatus and Achaicus are part of Stephanas's household, perhaps slaves or ex-slaves now freedmen. Paul reassures the Corinthians that their visit has refreshed his spirit. In spite of the problems that Paul has had to address, they must have given him a quite positive report of the community. This would account for the positive things that Paul has said throughout his letter and also for the many expressions of affection. It is also a reminder to us not to overstate the problems that have taken up so much of the letter. Paul is sure that the Corinthians will be relieved to know this, as they may have heard reports that Paul was very distressed because of the news that was reaching him about how things were in Corinth.

¹⁵Now, brothers and sisters, you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints;

¹⁶I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them.

¹⁷I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence;

¹⁸for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. So give recognition to such persons.

¹⁹The churches of Asia send greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord.

²⁰All the brothers and sisters send greetings.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

²¹I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

²²Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come! [‘Marana tha’]

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

²⁴My love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

Paul sends greetings from the various Christian assemblies throughout the province of Asia, with special mention of the couple whom Paul had first met in Corinth and whose place of work he shared (see Acts 18:1-3). When Paul left Corinth they left with him and settled in Ephesus (Acts 18:18-19). One of the communities assembles in their home. In view of his special relationship with them (Acts 18:26-27), Apollos may well be one of the congregation there. Paul’s signature acts as a kind of seal, assuring the Corinthians that the letter is written with his apostolic authority (compare Galatians 6:11; 2Thessalonians 3:17).

The final three verses are liturgical and remind us that this letter would be read at the eucharistic assembly. The first is a formal declaration that anyone who refuses to be in a communion of affectionate love (Greek: *phileō*) with the Lord is not to partake of the Eucharist. Their rejection of love is a rejection of communion. As we noted when commenting on 12:3, to be accursed (Greek: *anathema*) is to be ‘handed over to God’ to be punished by him (see Galatians 1:8-9), in the sense that we have already defined (see 1Thessalonians 1:10). Only the love of God revealed in Christ comes between us and the effects of our sins. Without devotion to Christ we are left in our sin, without repentance, without forgiveness, and without hope.

The thought of this causes Paul to cry in Aramaic *Marana tha*, or perhaps *Maran atha*. The former is a plea addressed to the risen Christ to come. This fits with Paul’s earlier statement that at the Eucharist they ‘proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes’ (11:26). This is also the way the Aramaic has been translated into Greek in Revelation 22:20. The latter is a cry of joy that Jesus is truly present with the community when they gather at the Eucharist.

Paul closes his letter in his customary way: ‘The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you’. Here, however, he is moved to add a reminder of his own love for them. At times throughout the letter, he has had to speak sternly. He has done so, however, always as a loving father and always because of his apostolic authority to proclaim the gospel. His words are an expression of his love for them in Christ.