

XXXIV. The Communion of the Saints

May 13/15, 2014

1 Corinthians 16:13-24

Aim: To grow up in our faith and to demonstrate love in our communion with all the saints.

This may have been the most difficult letter Paul ever had to write. The Corinthian church was in a terribly low state, beset by contamination with the world and befuddled and confused by complex questions. The greater part of 1 Corinthians is in the form of rebuke and correction. The first fourteen chapters deal primarily with errant behavior, and chapter 15 deals with errant theology. In an earlier letter (which we do not have), Paul had addressed these twin perils of contamination and confusion, but his letter evidently had not brought about the desired effect. It had to be with a heavy heart, then, that he took up his pen again to write these words of correction and instruction. And now, at long last, we have reached his concluding words.

A. Five Final Exhortations (1 Corinthians 16:13-14)

Paul writes five short, pungent, pithy instructions that call the Corinthians away from the sins that had polarized and paralyzed them.

In 1 Corinthians 16:13-14 Paul gives five final imperatives, five last commands, to the Corinthians. They are to be alert, firm, mature, strong, and loving. These commands are, in many ways, the positive side of what in earlier chapters the apostle has told the Corinthians not to be.

1. Be Alert (16:13a)

¹³*Be watchful...*

‘Be watchful’ is a note that has been sound many times throughout the letter. It speaks of an alertness to the dangers which are threatening the continued health and existence of the church, and a willingness to take the necessary action to ameliorate the situation. He calls them to watchfulness because they had been heedless and had let all kinds of dangerous ideas and practices into the church. The same challenges face us in our contemporary church. Lack of vigilance is still a major cause of defection from the pure gospel of Christ and so it remains a primary duty of under-shepherds, but also of every individual member of God’s flock, to be alert and resist error.

‘Be on the alert’ comes from one word, *grēgoreō*, which can mean ‘to watch,’ ‘be awake,’ ‘be vigilant,’ and, figuratively, ‘be alive’ (as in 1 Th. 5:10). The term is used some 22 times in the New Testament, often in reference to Christians’ being spiritually awake and alert, as opposed to being spiritually indifferent and listless.

The Corinthians seemed normally to be in a spiritual and moral stupor. They were not alert in any worthwhile way. They allowed their previous pagan ideas and habits to come back into their lives and destroy their faithfulness to the Lord and their fellowship with each other. They substituted human wisdom for God’s Word (1:18-2:16); they were factions (1:10-17; 3:9; etc.), immoral (5:1-13), litigious (6:1-8); they had confused and perverted ideas about marriage, divorce, and celibacy (7:1-40); they were self-indulgent (10:1-13) and indifferent to the welfare

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

of others (10:23-33); they misunderstood and misused their spiritual gifts (12-14); and, above all, they were unloving, exemplifying all the things that love is not (13:1-6).

2. Be Firm (16:13b)

...stand firm in the faith...

‘Stand firm in the faith’ is clearly the corollary of such vigilance. Wrong thinking and teaching can only be identified when the truth is clearly understood and believed. He calls them to firmness of faith because they had been extremely fickle and easily impressed with the thinking of the world. So it is always of primary importance in any congregation that ‘the faith’ must be taught and learned, as without that solid foundation it will be impossible to ‘stand firm.’ At the beginning of chapter 15, we say that it was ‘the gospel...in which you stand (15:1). Now again, we are reminded that there is no other solid foundation on which to build.

Another principle for powerful living is standing ‘firm in the faith.’ The Corinthian, like many of the Ephesians, were being ‘carried about by every wind of doctrine’ (Eph. 4:14). They would not take a firm stand on so many things. Little was certain and absolute; much was relative and tentative. The ‘faith’ of which Paul speaks here is not the faith of trusting but the faith of truth, the content of the gospel. Satan cannot take saving faith away from us, but he can, and often does, obscure the content of our faith, the sound doctrines of God’s Word. If we do not hold fast to right interpretations of Scripture, we are certain to slip into wrong thinking, wrong belief, and wrong behavior. Many of the Corinthians apparently had come to look on the truth of God itself as foolishness, being corrupted by the influence of their unbelieving friends and neighbors (1:18-21). Human philosophy and wisdom had all but obliterated their view of God’s Word. By trying to combine human wisdom and God’s wisdom they had undermined the uniqueness and the authority of God’s revealed truth.

3. Be Mature (16:13c)

...act like men...

‘Act like men,’ Paul continues, or as in the stirring translation of 1611, ‘Quit you like men’ (literally, ‘show yourselves to be men’). Back in 3:1, Paul has had to rebuke them, as ‘infants in Christ,’ for still not being ready for solid food. Their quarreling and jealousies are symptoms of arrested spiritual development, suitable only for the nursery, indisputable evidence of chronic immaturity. ‘Grow up’ has been a consistent message all the way through the epistle (e.g., 14:20). And the mark of the grown-up spiritual man is courage. He stands firm on the foundation of Christ and the gospel, knowing the convictions God has given him and being prepared to defend those convictions at whatever cost.

A third principle for powerful Christian living is being mature, which Paul expresses here as ‘act like men.’ The basic idea is that of mature courage. The mature person has a sense of control, confidence, and courage that the immature or childish person does not have. Again we see that Paul’s command is for the Corinthians to be the opposite of what they normally were. They were characterized by anything but maturity (3:1-2; 4:21; 14:20).

4. Be Strong (16:13d)

...be strong.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

‘Be strong’ (literally, ‘be powerful’) is an exhortation only possible to fulfill through the strength that God supplies, in and through the gospel, and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. He calls them to courage and strength because that is what it takes to stand against the contamination of the world. Such strength does not reside in any Christian by nature, but it is indisputable evidence of the work of God in us when we are empowered to do what is right without fear or favor. This strength is all about confidence in God and His truth, and it results in initiatives of righteousness and carries them through to a conclusion. Lack of this strength had produced the divisive factions in Corinth; the tolerance of gross sin within the church (5:1-5); the lawsuits between believers (6:1-8); and the abusive behavior at the Lord’s Table (11:17-22).

‘Be strong’ is Paul’s fourth imperative for Christian living. As here, the Greek term (*krataioō*) is frequently used in the New Testament to denote inner, spiritual growth. The verb is in the passive voice, and literally means ‘be strengthened.’ We cannot strengthen ourselves; that is the Lord’s work. Our part is to submit ourselves to Him in order that He *can* strengthen us (cp. Eph. 6:10; 2 Tim. 2:1). Only a strong spirit can successfully battle and overcome the flesh. Again, that is where the Corinthians were weak (cp. 3:3; 3:18; 4:10; 11:30).

5. Be Loving (16:14)

¹⁴*Let all that you do be done in love.*

‘Let all that you do be done in love’ is therefore a suitable conclusion to this series of exhortations, and also to the letter as a whole. He calls them to love because they have fallen into the trap of being selfish and critical. There were plenty of people in Corinth who were partial and prejudiced toward many of their fellow believers in a way that true Christian love (*agape*) cannot possibly be. That was why the marks of division afflicted the body in Corinth and from that lack of love all the other defeats and difficulties, demerits and diseases, flowed. A panacea is a universal remedy or cure, and these days we do not really believe in them; we have been cheated by false claims too many times. But love is God’s panacea for all our human ills.

The fifth principle for powerful living is the most comprehensive, and without it the others could make us crusty, militant, and hard. So Paul says, ‘Let all that you do be done in love.’ Love complements and balances everything else. It is the beautiful, softening principle. It keeps our firmness from becoming hardness and our strength from becoming domineering. It keeps our maturity gentle and considerate. It keeps our right doctrine from becoming obstinate dogmatism and our right living from becoming smug self-righteousness. Love is what the Corinthians needed most, and is what believers of all ages have needed most.

In many ways, verses 15-24 flow out of and illustrate the command of verse 14: ‘Let all that you do be done in love.’ Paul’s closing words are not simply niceties that Paul threw in at the end of his letter as a matter of custom or courtesy. As much as any part of Scripture they are part of God’s Word and are given to us for a divine purpose. The passage is introduced with a command for them to love (v. 14) and concludes with the assurance that they themselves are loved (v. 24).

B. Three Faithful Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:15-18)

¹⁵*Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints—* ¹⁶*be subject to such*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. 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. Give recognition to such people.

1. The Household of Stephanas (16:15a, 17)

Having given these instructions, Paul moves to give some positive examples. From what we have seen in this letter, we might have gotten the impression that there wasn't a single good person in the church at Corinth. Paul's words reveal that this wasn't the case, specifically mentioning Stephanas and his household, Fortunatus and Achaicus. These three are present with Paul in Ephesus, presumably having brought the letter from the congregation in Corinth, to which this letter is his reply. Paul hints that Stephanas has supported his ministry during troubles that are not yet ended.

The household of Stephanas was the 'firstfruits' of Achaia, the southern province of Greece, in which both Athens and Corinth are located. The 'firstfruits' were the part of the crop that was planted first and therefore and was harvested first. Its appearance was a sign to the farmer that the remainder of the crop would also soon be ready to harvest. The conversion of Stephanas and his household was a sign that God was ready to reap an even greater harvest of souls in Corinth and the rest of Achaia. The believers to whom Paul wrote this letter were all a part of that harvest.

The 'firstfruits' was the choicest part of the early harvest offered in sacrifice to the Lord (Ex. 23:16). Paul uses this imagery for the exemplary quality of the service of this household to others as expressing their special status as the 'first reapings' of Paul's harvest in the province.

To Stephanas Paul adds the names Fortunatus and Achaicus. These were probably manumitted slaves (set free by Stephanas?) bearing the nicknames 'Lucky' (that is 'lucky' to be free!) and 'Achaicus' (after the province where he found his freedom). It was as if the church came with these men, since Paul says they made up for his absence from the Corinthians. It is thus evident that Stephanas and his colleagues were the sources of some of the reports of trouble back in Corinth. Most probably they were also the bearers of the letter from the Corinthians (see 7:1).

As evidence of the commitment of Stephanas was his journey, along with Fortunatus and Achaicus, to visit Paul at Ephesus. If the three conveyed the letter mentioned in 7:1, Paul may have been ironic: he has rejoiced to have had postmen calling upon him even if the mail was disconcerting. 'Fortunatus' is Latin, meaning (obviously) something like 'fortunate.' 'Achaicus' (= 'of Achaia') might have been a slave, either freed or unreleased. And their presence with Stephanas would have been understandable if they were members of his household.

2. The Service of Stephanas (16:15b, 18a)

What was it about the household of Stephanas that qualified them to be examples to others? These people were devoted to service and were refreshing to the spirit, and were, therefore, superlative examples of Christian living.

a) Devoted to Service (16:15b)

The word 'devoted' is translated in the KJV as 'addicted.' The word Paul used and the tense it is in give us to understand that at a certain point in their lives, Stephanas and his household decisively and deliberately dedicated themselves to serving others. They set themselves apart, not for positions of leadership, but for service.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

The basic meaning of *tassō*, ('devoted') is 'to set in order.' Frequently it means to set, appoint, assign, ordain, or designate a specific person or group of persons to a specific work or office. It is used in Romans 13:1 to indicate that human governments are 'established by God.' In Acts 13:48 it is used to teach that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ is 'appointed to eternal life.' One expressive translation of *tassō* is 'addicted,' as it is rendered in the King James Version. The Stephanas household had 'addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints.'

'Devoted themselves' is in an intense form in the Greek, emphasizing that Stephanas and his household served entirely on their own initiative. It is perfectly appropriate for a church to assign ministries and responsibilities to its members. But Stephanas and his family and servants did not wait to be appointed. They appointed themselves to the 'ministry' of service to fellow believers. They spontaneously assigned themselves to help meet any need they saw among the saints. Their service was self-motivated and self-assigned. 'Ministry is from *diakonia*, which means 'service.' The one who does such work is a *diakonos*, from which we get the English 'deacon.'

The truth is that most of us would find it rather shocking to hear the word 'addicted' connected with Christian service. Our view of Christianity tends to be that it has its place, but it certainly shouldn't be an addition. But Paul is saying that Christianity existed in Stephanas and his household as an acute fever. For most of us, it is noting more than a dull habit.

Paul's concern is to show that they have not become 'his' men. They are gospel men, just as he is, and as every member of the congregation should be. Their devotion to gospel service is conclusive proof of this. Some of the super-spiritual members, who were looking for a more sophisticated wisdom and a greater demonstration of power than Paul seemed able to supply, might well have despised them for the ordinariness of their practical Christian love. They were not 'spiritual' enough. But the implied rebuke of verse 17b indicates that they provided what the 'super-spirituals' did not, in the way of practical help and refreshment to Paul and his circle.

b) Refreshing the Spirit (16:18a)

Paul was in Ephesus when these men visited him. They served as a connecting link between him and the church. This was refreshing to Paul and he trusted their return would be just as refreshing for the church. Their example of 'service' and 'refreshment' is the very embodiment of love that the letter has been advocating, and everyone in Corinth should acknowledge this and emulate their example.

Paul was grateful that his three friends had come from Corinth to be with him. They had ministered to the apostle in specific ways. They had 'supplied what was lacking' on the part of their fellow Corinthians (v. 17). But more than that they genuinely befriended Paul, by being with him, by encouraging him, and by identifying with his ministry. In so doing they 'refreshed' Paul's spirit and the spirit of the Corinthian church that had sent them.

He notes appreciatively that these three refreshed his spirit as he expects they will also refresh the spirits of the Corinthians upon their return.

3. The Commendation of Stephanas (16:16, 18b)

It seems that these men are about to return to Corinth conveying Paul's reply, which he is very conscious may not be well received by some of the church's factions. He does not want Stephanas and his group to be rejected by his opponents just because his reply is unfavorable to

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

many of their attitudes and positions. So twice he commends these returning members to the church as fine examples of faithful Christian workers.

It is easy to see why Paul stressed the service of Stephanas and his household. The Corinthians were by and large anything but addicted to service and refreshing the spirit. They were addicted to childishness, selfishness, criticalness, and permissiveness. When the church got together, instead of being refreshed, they were depressed and agitated. They really needed the examples Paul used. Therefore, he calls upon them to ‘submit’ to and ‘acknowledge’ these men.

a) Submit (16:16)

Paul asks them to ‘be subjected to such’ as Stephanas, who is a ‘fellow-worker’ (*synergos*). If it is asked why the apostle takes pains to exhort the Corinthians to offer due respect to such as Stephanas, it may be that polarization in the church (cp. 1:12; 3:4; etc.) had left the household of Stephanas in relative isolation – they might have been felt to be ‘of Paul.’

It is that neither here nor anywhere else in this lengthy epistle does Paul speak of ‘authority figures’ or officials such as elders/bishops and deacons. We know that Paul appointed such persons to order and govern the churches (Acts 14:23; Phil. 1:1). Doubtless such leaders were part of the church in Corinth, though there is no hint of them in either First or Second Corinthians. The Corinthians were to ‘submit’ to Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus on account of their dedicated ministry to the saints. We don’t even know if any or all were elders!

b) Recognize (16:18b)

Paul specifically requests the church to ‘acknowledge such men.’ It wasn’t just that these men served as the connecting link between Paul and the church but also how they served that made them refreshing to the spirit.

Epiginōskō (‘acknowledge’) signifies recognition of something for what it really is. Paul tells the Corinthians to recognize these faithful, godly workers for what they are. He is calling for respect and appreciation, which sometimes will be public and sometimes private. Proper appreciation of deserving persons in the church not only is not wrong but also is pleasing to the Lord. Typically, the Corinthians were neither respectful nor appreciative. Each member was too concerned about his own prestige and recognition. They were much more inclined to criticize each other than to praise each other.

‘Therefore recognize such’ constitutes a brief commendation of these men: let the Corinthians prove their attachment to Paul by both heeding his letter and showing respect to those who have conveyed it to them.

4. The Return of Stephanas

Doubtless Paul prayed that the combined effects of the Letter and the presence of Stephanas and Timothy would be sufficient to hold the line against doubters, disputers, and usurpers in Corinth. This, however, did not prove to be the case. Timothy did indeed arrive, but probably did not remain long, returning to Paul in Ephesus. Paul himself immediately came to Corinth for what must have been a ‘nightmarish’ visit. He was opposed and miscalled in a context of very serious disorder within the church (2 Cor. 1:23-2:1; 2:5-11; 12:20-13:3). The church in Corinth was now divided between his supporters and opponents led by a particular individual (2 Cor. 7:12). But that is another story whose threads must be picked up in the reading of his Second Letter.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

C. Asian Fellowship Greetings (1 Corinthians 16:19-20)

1. Hearty Greetings (16:19-20a)

¹⁹*The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.* ²⁰*All the brothers send you greetings.*

The apostle proceeds to share greetings from all the churches in the Roman province of Asia and from Aquila and Priscilla, that husband and wife team who were so mightily used of the Lord. In the Septuagint, ‘to salute’ or ‘to greet’ (*aspazomai*) is the equivalent to the Hebrew ‘to seek for peace’ (e.g., Ex. 18:7). These simple words of greeting remind us of the deep interest and affection Christians have, no matter where they are found, in their fellow Christians and how heartily they desire their well-being.

Where were these ‘churches of Asia’? Apart from Ephesus we know of congregations in Troas, Colosse, Laodicea, and the hose churches of Aquila and Prisca in Ephesus and of Philemon and Apphia in Colosse. Doubtless there were others as well. As well as the Pauline churches of Ephesus and Laodicea, John later addressed churches in Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, some of which may also have been in existence in the fifties.

Verses 19-20 convey greetings from ‘the churches of Asia’ – these are probably churches that lay in the vicinity of Paul’s ministerial base at Ephesus – and from ‘Aquila and Priscilla’ along with their home-based congregation. Finally Paul sends a ‘global’ greeting from ‘all the brothers and sisters’ from the churches of Asia. The assemblies sent their greetings, but so too did the individual members. Paul is concerned to do all that he can to strengthen these links of brother love and fellowship both between the congregations and between individuals.

Acts 18:18-19 tells us that these Aquila and Priscilla had met Paul when he arrived in Corinth, where they had settled when the Jews had been expelled from Rome by the decree of the Emperor, Claudius. As a fellow-Jew and a fellow-tentmaker, Paul had stayed and worked with this Christian couple who then accompanied him when he left Corinth and traveled by sea to Ephesus. It was they who met Apollos in the synagogue of Ephesus and ‘explained to him the way of God more adequately,’ encouraging him to travel on to Corinth where ‘he greatly helped’ the believers (Acts 18:24-28). We know from verse 20 that they also established a congregation in their own house. To judge from Romans 16:3, 5, the couple went back to Rome not long after 1 Corinthians was written, and there accommodated a Christian church. According to 2 Timothy 4:19, it appears that Priscilla and Aquila traveled again to Ephesus, if 2 Timothy were destined for the Christian community in that city. Seemingly affluent, they were often on the move.

2. Holy Kiss (16:20b)

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

The exhortation to greet one another with a holy kiss is a reminder of the affection Christians are to have for each other and of the spirit of unity that is to prevail in their midst. The ‘holy kiss’ (cp. Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26) was a culturally acceptable way to indicate the bonds of mutual love and respect that exist among God’s people. Such a ‘kiss’ must have helped transcend and overcome the divisions and difficulties so evident in this church. So long as people can keep talking to one another and respecting one another, there is hope of reconciliation. It is a kiss of peace and friendship (contrast the kiss of Judas Iscariot). A warm handshake today and a hearty greeting express that same spirit of affection today.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

In Scripture, kissing in a romantic sense between a man and a woman is referred to only twice, in Proverbs (7:13) and in the Song of Solomon (4:11). Every other reference has to do with the expression of affection between men and men, and women and women. The kiss was given on the cheek or forehead and represented essentially what a hug or warm embrace represents today.

And even though in the early church the practice of the ‘holy kiss’ was a beautiful, pure, and meaningful expression of brotherly love (cp. Rom. 16:16; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Th. 5:26; 1 Pe. 5:14), it came in later centuries to be abused. It was practiced so indiscriminately, for example, that a church council in the 6th century outlawed the kissing of dead bodies.

Paul was speaking of the genuine and spontaneous expression of brotherly or sisterly love, which in that day was often expressed by a kiss. A warm, affectionate handshake or an arm around the shoulder can express the same affection. In most of the church today the danger is in showing too little affection rather than too much.

D. Paul’s Finishing Postscript (1 Corinthians 16:21-24)

The ending is in two distinct parts: a stern warning and an affectionate affirmation of love.

1. Autograph (16:21)

²¹I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

The final few verses of the letter form a postscript and are written in Paul’s own hand (see Gal. 6:11-18; Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17; Phm. 19). The preceding part of the letter was dictated to a scribe, who, however, is not identified (cp. Rom. 16:22). Was the amanuensis Sosthenes, the co-sender (1:1)?

At this point Paul takes the pen himself to sign his own name. It was his custom to dictate his letters to a scribe, and then sign his own name, a custom that may have been necessitated by his poor eyesight.

It appears that the apostle’s normal practice was to dictate his letters to a secretary, yet concluding them with his own handwriting (Rom. 16:22; Col. 4:18; 2 Th. 3:17). Verses 21-24, written personally by Paul, display a concern that must have won many hearts. There is also the consideration that because some letters purporting to be from the apostle were forgeries (cp. 2 Th. 2:2), he may have thought it was wise to pen his own conclusion.

Paul now picks up the stylus, to inscribe his own personal greeting to the congregation founded through his ministry, ‘with my own hand.’ This is a guarantee of the genuineness of the letter, like a personal signature, because even at this early stage in church history false letters were apparently circulating, supposed to have Pauline authorship (see 2 Th. 2:2). This greeting, however, is startling in its final confrontation of the issues that have been addressed throughout the letter.

It would seem that there was nothing more for Paul to do except to sign his name. He has given the church five short exhortations (vv. 13-14) and urged them to learn from the example of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (vv. 15-18). He has shared greetings from other Christians and exhorted the Corinthians to show affection for each other (vv. 19-20). The letter seems complete. But Paul wasn’t content simply to tack on his name. With pen in hand, Paul not only signs his name but proceeds to write some surprising words.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

2. Anathema (16:22a)

²²*If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.*

The failures of the Corinthians, which have been so obvious throughout this letter, all stem from one root problem, an absence of love for the Lord. No matter whether it has been proud wisdom, unfettered sexual behavior, wild litigiousness, self-display, or willful unbelief, a greater sin has inspired all of these, that is, failure to love the Lord Jesus. His love for His people underlay the death He died – by crucifixion – for our sins.

The Greek word translated ‘love’ (*phileō*), employed here, which means ‘to have tender affection,’ occurs elsewhere in Paul’s writings just once. It is not as strong a word as *agapē*, (supreme love), and is never commanded to be given to God. An implication of this verse, however, is that such minimal affection is an element of the love that is acceptable to God. Paul indicates that it is a dreadful matter to be a professing Christian and in spite of this not to be obedient to the Lord. Evidently, there were such people at Corinth.

If a person does not ‘love the Lord’ with tender affection, then he obviously has no supreme love (*agapē*) for Him, and thus no part in Him at all. He should be considered ‘accursed’ (*anathema*), devoted to destruction.

Anathema (literally, ‘set aside’) was used by pagans and Jews for ‘accursed.’ Verses like this cause a good deal of hemming and hawing among many Christians today. Christians have always felt a bit uncomfortable about the psalms in which David called for a curse upon God’s enemies. But Jesus Christ has been given absolute pre-eminence by God and a curse rests upon all who do not recognize this and live accordingly.

Verse 22 is not an apostolic excommunication of any individual. It is a profound and searching challenge of all. Paul is expressing a strong sentiment with pastoral intent, namely, that those Corinthians who do not love the Lord begin to do so and to demonstrate that love ethically. Only God knows the heart, and Paul is content to express the essential test of real Christian faith and to leave the outcome between God and the individual’s heart.

Because Paul is addressing believers in this letter, there is only one conclusion that we can draw: if the Corinthians continued in their sins, it was evidence they didn’t really love Christ and, therefore, were not truly saved. Are we clear on this? If the general tenor of our lives is disobedience rather than obedience, we don’t love or know Christ, no matter how loudly we may protest to the contrary. And if we don’t love Christ, we stand under His condemnation.

3. Maranatha (16:22b)

Our Lord, come!

Embedded in Paul’s Greek is his quotation of two Aramaic words, but without translation (cp. Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). These could mean, ‘Our Lord has come’ (*Maran atha*) or ‘Our Lord, come’ (*Marana tha*). The similar prayer in Revelation 22:20 (‘Come, Lord Jesus’) probably determines that Paul had the latter in mind. The Aramaic words *Marana tha* within Paul’s Greek text are like an archaeological inscription that sheds valuable light on the times from which it came. These words allow us to overhear the worship in the earliest Jewish church after Jesus’ resurrection. They make clear that from the beginning Jesus was worshiped as the exalted *Mara*, ‘Lord,’ and that the believers prayed to Him, pleading for His return.

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

The word *Maranatha* is Aramaic, meaning ‘Our Lord come.’ Scholars are uncertain whether it was used as a word of confession ‘Our Lord has come,’ a word of expectation, ‘Our Lord will come,’ or simply a prayer, ‘Our Lord, come’ (Rev. 22:20). Most scholars are inclined to interpret it in one of the latter two senses, thus connecting it with the second coming of the Lord rather than His first coming.

Maranatha probably transliterates *marana tha*, two Aramaic words which in combination mean ‘Our Lord comes,’ or ‘O Lord, come!’ (cp. Rev. 22:20). Its occurrence here is probably a warning to those who, in disobeying Paul’s directives, indicate that in his view they do not love the Lord and that they need to consider their ways before Christ appears.

Why would Paul close this letter by making a reference to the coming of the Lord? Was it to comfort the Corinthians? This is the conclusion most of us are inclined to draw (cp. 1 Th. 4:18), but it may not be Paul’s primary purpose here. Throughout his letter, he has dealt with the Corinthians’ sins, so it seems logical to regard this reminder of the Lord’s coming as one final warning about their sins. It is very solemn to think about meeting the Lord when our lives are falling so short of His expectations.

In this context, *Maranatha*, an Aramaic term meaning ‘Our Lord, come,’ is Paul’s appeal for the Lord to come and take away those who are ‘accursed,’ the nominal, false Christians who are always such a great threat to the church. *Maranatha* thus contains an implied invitation to those lost church members to receive Christ before God takes them away and the opportunity for salvation is forever gone.

When we really love someone, we long to see them, to be reunited with them, never to be separated from them. Our love for the Lord Jesus is expressed therefore in the joyful, prayerful expectation of His return. Such an expectation will not allow us to put roots down in the culture of Corinth, or in any other costly location, but keep us living for the heavenly realities and the resurrection morning.

So Paul ends his letter by appealing to the Corinthians for greater consecration and by cautioning them about their sins. He hammered on these themes throughout his letter so it isn’t surprising to find him emphasizing them in his conclusion.

4. Grace (16:23)

²³*The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.*

The letter ends, not with the curse, but with a blessing of grace and love. Grace is the great characteristic of the ruler who came to be our rescuer. It flows from the Lord Jesus to everyone whose heart is open to receive it. ‘Grace,’ a very precious word, sums up the infinite yet unmerited love of God to those who are being led to final glory (cp. 1:3-9).

What does Paul mean by ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus’? According to 2 Corinthians 8:9 it is that voluntary, unconditioned mercy by which Christ surrendered His riches in the presence of God to come among us in the poverty of birth, life, and death to bestow upon moral paupers the wealth of God’s salvation. Paul is praying that they and we will grasp that this ‘grace of the Lord’ but also express it in graciousness to others.

5. Love (16:24)

²⁴*My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

1 Corinthians – Lesson 34

Because Paul's heart has been mastered by that grace, his love flows out to 'you in Christ Jesus,' in Corinth. It is a striking ending that illustrates and enacts the message of love with which the letter pulsates. Paul's love is not just directed to some of the congregation, to those who agree with him, or receive Timothy, or honor Stephanas. If they are in Christ Jesus then Paul loves them, warts and all, with all their squabbles and childishness, their pride and prejudice. For he loves them as Christ loved Saul of Tarsus when He captured his heart on the Damascus Road, and as that same Christ loved and still loves the pagans and sinners of Corinth, with all the patience and long-suffering, compassion and self-sacrifice that sent Him to the cross, in the manifestation of the power and wisdom of God. In the end, the final words of the gospel are love and grace. That is the way of the cross. That is the way of ultimate victory. That is the mark of true spirituality. That is the heart of the gospel.

Following his benediction of 16:23, Paul adds his assurance that his love is with 'you all,' probably to alleviate the pain which some will feel when hearing the stricture of 16:22 and the severe criticisms which the letter is replete, a letter which Paul would admit later had caused both them and him considerable sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8).

The last sentence of the letter is that Paul's own 'love be with all' of them in Christ Jesus. Paul is asking God that they will realize within themselves the love their apostle has for them. Why does Paul conclude his letter on this note? Almost certainly it is because the Corinthians were at risk of serious alienation from Paul. It was important, therefore, for them to know within their being that he loved them.

There is a good lesson here for any who are alienated from friends or family. We need to have and express love to those who have wronged us and with whom we seek to be reconciled. Love is essential for healing the wounds of division.

6. Looking Ahead

With these words the reader (Stephanas?) comes to the end of the scroll sent from Paul. Did this church heed Paul's words? When Timothy arrived did he find changed hearts and changed behavior? Doubtless some were chastened by the powerful words of this letter. It appears, however, that many remained stubbornly at odds with Paul, so that he, too, must now come to the city. That visit was followed by two further letters and the diplomatic efforts of Titus before Paul would come for the last time to this city. The Letter to Romans, written from Corinth, is relatively calm in tone. Perhaps by then this church and its apostle were reconciled.

Join us this fall as we resume our Bible study after a summer break by picking up the continuing saga of Paul and the Corinthians – in Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians.

For next time: End of Bible Study. Summer break!