

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 19 March 2006

No. T0410

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The Church - The Body of Christ and Its Hope: 1 Corinthians 16

Our talks on 1 Corinthians began in April and May last year when the first ten chapters were considered. In the past five weeks we have looked at chapters 11 to 15 and today we come to the final chapter, number 16. After considering chapter 16, we will then conclude by summarising very briefly the teaching of the whole letter.

Last week, we thought about the great and fundamental teachings of chapter 15 concerning the resurrection of Christ and its consequent hope for the church. It may seem an anti-climax that, immediately after this, the apostle Paul deals in chapter 16 with matters which in comparison with the tremendous truth of the resurrection seem relatively trivial. But it is dangerous for us to look on any part of the Word of God as trivial since we are told that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, 2 Timothy 3:16. We remind ourselves that 1 Corinthians is one of the main sources of teaching in the Bible as to how the local church should conduct itself and it is the Holy Spirit of God who brings these matters in chapter 16 to the attention of the church, then and now.

To help structure my comments, I would like to group the verses in chapter 16 into five sections.

1. Verses 1-4 deal with church collections.
2. Verses 5-12 Paul's, Timothy's and Apollos' plans.
3. Verses 13-14 contain exhortations.
4. Verses 15-18 will be serving the saints, and finally
5. Verses 19-24 comprise the closing greetings.

Church Collections

One of the reasons for Paul writing this letter was to respond to a series of questions raised with him by the Corinthians - see 1 Corinthians 7:1. Here at the start of chapter 16 Paul turns to another of these questions, this time relating to church collections. Paul emphasises that giving should be a normal part of the life of any church, not just for special occasions. From verse 2 we see that the giving should be: first - regular "on the first day of the week"; second - individual "every one of you"; third - systematic "lay ... in store"; and fourth - proportionate "as God has prospered him".

So, giving is expected of every believer, whatever their financial resources may be. And that giving requires thought and should not be haphazard. If I get an increase in pocket money or grant or salary or pension, I take that as God prospering me and I should readily want to return part of that to Him. What part that may be is between the Lord and me. In the Old Testament times, the part was legally fixed at one tenth, a tithe. In this time of grace, there is no fixed part specified by Paul or anyone else in Scripture. Rather, my response should be in the context of the greatness of the free grace shown to me by God.

It is interesting that the church collections were on the first day of the week, Sunday, the Lord's Day. This was a crucial day in the early church's weekly calendar. Acts 20:7 tells us that they met on the Lord's Day to break bread in remembrance of the Lord and His death. The Lord's Day reminds us of Christ's resurrection, a time of new beginnings. It is a day of response from God's people to Him and appropriate that this should include the response of giving financially to the Lord's work.

It would seem from these first four verses that the believers in Corinth were collecting for the poor saints in Jerusalem; a fitting response from one group of believers to another, all part of the one body of Christ. The responsibilities for collecting and delivering the gift were all local, though Paul would help if they wished. As already instructed in 14:40, all things were to be done in an orderly fashion and so in verse 3 Paul instructs that more than one representative from the church in Corinth should be responsible for delivering the gift to Jerusalem.

Paul's, Timothy's and Apollos' plans.

All three of these men devoted themselves full time to the Lord's service and it is important to note the factors that governed the plans which they made. It is clear from these verses that all of them looked to the Lord for His guidance.

In a sense their plans were flexible as they sought to see precisely what the Lord had in mind for them and exactly when and where. When presented by the Lord with an opportunity, Paul made maximum use of it - see verse 9. We see another good example of this in Acts 16:6-12, where Paul journeyed west, not certain quite where God wanted him to go as the Holy Spirit closed door after door, until he received a message to go to Macedonia. He went immediately. Little wonder that blessing followed both in 16:9 and in Acts 16:14, 15, 33 and 34. Where God works, the devil is never far away in opposition, as indicated by 1 Corinthians 16:9 and Acts 16:16-24.

Paul was an apostle and Apollos wasn't but Paul did not impose his will on Apollos as verse 12 indicates. Each servant of the Lord is answerable only to the Lord. We aren't told why Apollos did not wish to go to Corinth at that time, but he may have been sensitive to not wishing to stir up any further divisive feelings in Corinth of the sort referred to in chapters 1 and 3 where some in the Corinthian church were saying "I follow Apollos". How needful for a servant of God to be sensitive! And how good to see that Paul and Timothy and Apollos showed neither rivalry nor criticism of each other. A servant should never seek to magnify himself or his own position.

Exhortations

Verses 13 and 14, contains five exhortations, which are as appropriate today as when written. First, watch, be constantly alert to detect any attack by the enemy against God's truth as set out in the Bible. That attack may be either direct or subtle, the latter requiring particular vigilance. In this letter, Paul points out a host of ways in which the enemy had been successful in bringing into the church all sorts of evils which the Corinthians had not detected because they were not in a watchful frame of mind. The second exhortation is to stand fast in that truth, be stable to preserve it whatever the cost. Third, act like men, be courageous, don't be cowards. Fourth exhortation, be strong through the inward strength supplied by God. Ephesians 3:16 speaks of the need to be strengthened with might by the Spirit in the inner man. Fifth and last but by no means least, do everything, yes literally everything, in love. I understand that all of these exhortations imply not one-off actions but continuous actions. So I need to watch and keep on watching, stand fast and keep on standing fast, and so on.

Serving the saints.

Just a reminder that in the New Testament the saints are God's people. The instant a person becomes a born-again Christian, God calls him or her a saint, someone who is set apart for His holy purpose.

As far as I can tell, Stephanas is mentioned only in 1 Corinthians. From 16:15 we see that he and his family were the first converts in Achaia, which is the southern part of what we now call Greece and in which Corinth was situated. From 1:16 we see that Paul had baptised Stephanas and his household and from 16:15 we are told that the household of Stephanas had addicted or devoted themselves to serving the saints. The local church at Corinth had not appointed them to undertake that service; they themselves before the Lord had determined that this would be their area of service for Him. We are not told precisely what that service involved but it would be wide ranging and demanding - in verse 16 it is described as labouring.

Also in verse 16 Paul endorses the value of serving the saints and encourages the believers in Corinth to take account of the qualities of Stephanas and those like him.

Paul goes on in verses 17 and 18 to underline how he himself had been refreshed and rested by a visit from Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus. Not everyone at Corinth accepted Paul's teaching, even though he was an apostle. He must have been dismayed by that. But here were three brothers in the Lord from Corinth who did value God's word and who set out to encourage Paul, thereby serving one of God's people.

What an encouragement and challenge the verses in this section are. We can't all be great teachers or preachers but surely in various ways we can all serve the saints, encouraging them and benefiting the whole of the local fellowship with whom we meet. Seeing my fellow-believers as saints of God somehow elevates their standing and makes it a privilege to serve them.

Closing Greetings

In Bible times Asia broadly was what we now call Turkey. Paul was writing from Ephesus which was in the then Asia and he conveys the greetings of the surrounding churches to the believers in Corinth.

He also passes on the warm greetings of Aquila and his wife Priscilla who, of course, would know many of the Christians at Corinth as they had lived there - see the beginning of Acts 18. It is outside the scope of this talk, but I do recommend to you a study of this lovely Christian couple. They are referred to six times in the New Testament, always together, always attached to the Lord's people wherever they lived, always serving the Lord - a fine example to all Christian couples.

Despite the problems at Corinth, all the Christians in the region were prepared to add their greetings to those of Paul. A good thing to keep loving our fellow-Christians even when difficulties arise between us!

In verse 20 Paul encourages them to greet each other with a holy kiss. I understand that it was and still is normal in that part of the world for people, whatever their sex, to greet each other with a kiss. It would be the equivalent of the handshake in this part of the world. Just note out of interest how careful the Holy Spirit is to guard against any excesses; the kiss of greeting must be holy.

Paul must normally have dictated his letters but we see from verse 21 that he personally writes these last few words, perhaps to avoid any doubts as to whether the letter actually comes from him.

Verse 22 is very solemn. Only those who have a real love for the Lord Jesus Christ, His full title, belong to Him. All others shall be cursed - see the word anathema in the Authorised Version of the Bible, which should be followed by a full stop. In the Authorised Version, the next word is Maranatha, which means the Lord will come, not maybe but certainly. A great certainty for the believer, but a solemn warning of future judgement for those who at the time of their death or at the coming of the Lord do not know Him as Saviour.

I appeal to any listener who has not yet taken Jesus as Saviour and Lord to do so while there is time. The Bible does not teach that there is an opportunity to avoid judgement once death has occurred or the Lord has come.

Verse 23 is Paul's normal ending to his letters to the churches in the New Testament. How lovely to see that in this case he adds verse 24. Despite the fact that many at Corinth had rejected him and his teaching, he wants the final words to be that he still loves them in Christ Jesus. Paul's enduring love for all the people of God is crystal clear throughout his writings.

Finally, could we spend a short time reviewing the teaching of 1 Corinthians. We have seen that the letter was written by Paul to the whole church at Corinth. In the very first verse of the letter Paul underlines the fact that he is an apostle and therefore what he says carries authority. While he is writing to respond to specific questions raised with him by the Corinthians, Paul judges it essential first of all to deal in the first six chapters with matters more fundamental to the spiritual state of the church at Corinth than those questions which they raised. Those fundamental matters included an emphasis on spiritual as opposed to human wisdom, the need to be united in Christ and not be divided in following different human figures, the fact that only God reveals things of heaven, an underlining of the only foundation on which Christian service and reward can be based and the need to identify and deal with any form of immorality in the church.

Even when from chapter 7 Paul does turn to deal with the Corinthians' specific questions, he extends his comments to encompass wider spiritual aspects which have a bearing upon the questions being raised. Isn't it amazing that this church which had so many problems and deficiencies should receive such marvellous writings as the meaning of the Lord's Supper in chapter 11, the wonder of love, as perfectly seen in Christ, in chapter 13 and the extensive consideration of the fact and consequences of Christ's resurrection in the longest chapter in the book, chapter 15.

Everything points to the church at Corinth being large in numbers, with many intellectuals in the company. By the standards of the world they would be a successful church - big in numbers and high in intellect. But in terms of true spirituality they were desperately low. See 3:1-3 for the Apostle Paul's summary of their spiritual state. There he describes them as infants, immature in spiritual things, not capable of digesting the meat of the truth of God, still following the principles of the men of the world.

Can I give you my personal impressions of three of the main messages of 1 Corinthians? First, I am struck by the authority which Paul attaches to the teaching of the book. As I said a few minutes ago, right at the start of the letter he states his apostleship but he re-emphasises that from time to time, for example in chapters 4 and 9. This authoritative writing is addressed to the whole church at Corinth and is a pattern as to how the church there should operate. But not only the church in Corinth, but also, as in the words of 1:2, "all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord." Nowhere does it suggest that the teaching of 1 Corinthians should alter over the centuries as political, social and moral attitudes change. The church today should be as subject to the teaching of all of 1 Corinthians as the church at Corinth ought to have been in AD 60 or thereabouts. The challenge for each Christian today is whether the fellowship of believers with whom he or she meets does indeed accept and follow all of this authoritative teaching.

My second over-all impression from 1 Corinthians is how easy it would be to arrive at a false impression of the spiritual state of any Christian fellowship. It would be so easy to look at outward appearances such as existed with the church at Corinth - a large number of people attending, a high level of intellect, and an ability to conduct eloquent debates. I hasten to say that I am not suggesting for one moment that there is an inherent problem with large numbers or with good intellect or with eloquence. But 1 Corinthians brings home to us the fact that these things which

naturally appeal are not necessarily the marks of true spirituality. Paul emphasises that the Corinthians were actually very weak spiritually, despite outward appearances. They needed to view things from God's, not man's side, to have heavenly, not earthly, wisdom, to understand and obey God's unchanging pattern for the conduct of church matters and to live in love with each other. I ask myself, what is the true spiritual health of the local Christian fellowship of which I am a part?

The third and last of these personal impressions is the marvellous way in which Paul wrote to these believers at Corinth, balancing on the one hand a forthright stand for the truth of God and correcting the Corinthian believers, with a true love for them on the other hand. He starts by thanking God for them in 1:4 to 8, throughout his letter he calls them "brethren" and as we have seen his very last words to them in 16:24 emphasise his love for them in Christ.

Some of us perhaps are inclined to let things pass on the grounds of love. Others of us may veer in the opposite direction and seek to stand for truth but in a completely unloving manner. May we be challenged to display the balance of truth and love which Paul showed in this letter. In John 1:17 it says that "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." In Jesus there was a perfect balance between showing grace and displaying truth.

I trust that God will have blessed us in our considerations of 1 Corinthians and that the Christian church, wherever represented, may seek to follow the instructions set out in this book, part of the Word of God which lives and abides forever - 1 Peter 1:23.

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