

1 Corinthians

Let us continue with an outline of 1 Corinthians, which Paul wrote in around 54 A.D. from Ephesus. We know from the content of 1 Corinthians that Paul is responding to some news he has received—more precisely, to some questions he has received from the Corinthians. Part of 1 Corinthians consists of answers to questions the Corinthians have asked, so we see a certain level of maturity on the part of the Corinthians who say, “Now that I am a Christian, what about marriage, what about sexuality, what about authority?” and so forth. We can probably safely say that a part of the Corinthian church has those questions and they raise those in the hope, perhaps, that as Paul addresses them, it would help the Corinthian church. It is very possible that there were some people in the Corinthian church who said, “The best way we can contribute to the health of the church is to ask Paul some questions.” That is sometimes a very helpful means whereby you can get involved in resolving church issues or questions—not so much by standing up and lecturing and telling, but perhaps by asking a person who you think is trustworthy and who has the trust of other people.

It is possible that is going on here, because the first major section, 1 Corinthians 1:10 to 6:20, deals with Paul's responses to questions from the Corinthian community. I should be a little more precise: this first section does not deal so much with written questions, but with issues that are brought to Paul by messengers from Corinth who communicate to him about the Corinthian church. First Corinthians 1:10 to 4:20 deals with the problem of factions and the theme of disunity. The issue of particular loyalties to one person versus another shows you that problem, and so here Paul deals with particular questions concerning factions within the community. Chapters 5 and 6 deal basically with immorality and arrogance issues that are also brought to Paul. So first Paul responds to oral questions and reports that he receives, then, beginning with Chapter 7, he gets involved in more specific questions, possibly written questions.

In chapter 7 to chapter 16, Paul deals with questions that have been brought to him. Sometimes in your NIV translation, for instance, or also in other English translations, you will see a quotation in the beginning of a chapter that makes a statement, and then Paul will deal with that. It is most likely that those statements are specific questions that have been brought to Paul. Chapter 7, as you are quite aware, deals with marriage. Connected with those questions are questions of divorce and then also celibacy—how these should all be viewed. Paul takes a very careful approach to the issue of celibacy.

Chapters 8 to 11 deal with food and idolatry: food dedicated to idols and questions of freedom. Here the Gospel of grace is being qualified in a good and careful way. In verse 11:2 and following through the end of chapter 14, Paul deals with questions concerning worship and spiritual gifts. Then the well-known chapter 15 deals with the resurrection. You see that Paul is dealing with the influence of neo-platonic philosophy. The teaching on the bodily resurrection of Christ and the believers is a very significant conclusion to his argument that what you do with your body is important now. Perhaps you remember from 1 and 2 Thessalonians that I said Paul argues from the end, from the coming of Christ. In the resurrection chapter, Paul again draws attention to the future of what happens to the body, certainly beginning with the physical resurrection of Jesus. But he says there again—massively against their philosophy—that God is redeeming body and mind. The entire passage that speaks of being sown in weakness, being sown into death, and being physically raised immortal, speaks about that fact that God has created matter and matter is good. He will deal with that, even to the point of the resurrection. So the future hope is tied up with physical renewal, which is so strange, so foreign, so non-platonic to the Corinthians' ears. For them it is a very strange concept that there is a future to the body and that God is the creator of the physical universe as much as He is the creator of the soul. So the resurrection

chapter fits right into the whole mentality and the problem of the Corinthians. It is not just some excursus.

Chapter 16 deals with Paul's plans of a collection. It is something of a concluding section, but again you see that Paul is trying to help the Corinthians to understand that when they look beyond and give support to others, they are actually maturing in their Christian understanding of fellowship, and corporate-ness: being together rather than being individuals. I have already mentioned that the Corinthian church was a very individualized and separated type of church.

That ought to be good enough in terms of an outline, so we see a little of what is happening with the Corinthians. Let us look briefly at some major themes in Corinthians. I at least want to mention a few points. In 1 Corinthians, there is not a great deal of exposition of doctrine about a major truth. First Corinthians is very much an application letter, answering the questions of how the truth of Christ applies to some of these areas that I have outlined here. When Paul speaks about Christ, he applies the truth about Christ in the midst of their situation. He does that by using a Greek term that was familiar to their ears: namely, that Christ is wisdom. Initially, the Corinthians would say, "Wonderful, that sounds intellectual. That sounds like exactly what we need for our educated minds. Christ, the one we serve, is wisdom." Initially, they can still continue in this misconception that what they do in their lives, their morality, and their interpersonal relationships, is kind of disconnected from Christ. They have this wonderful, enlightened understanding that Christ is their wisdom. This idea is sharply disrupted when Paul identifies that wisdom as a wisdom that is lived out. It is not just a logical, esoteric concept. It is actually lived out. It is a way of life. Christ is your wisdom. Paul brings in this Jewish understanding that wisdom is where true knowledge is applied to life. That is wisdom: true knowledge is applied to life. He teaches them that, as they are connected with Christ the Lord, wisdom, they are led to a life of application, of living out the truth about Christ. They cannot remain fixed in their concept of ideas; they must come to practical application.

The second main point concerning Christ, I believe, regards the resurrection, which I have just referred to. Paul spends a whole chapter describing how their Lord was physically raised and has begun a physical life of immortality. He has been raised from the death physically and He rules physically now. Although He is invisible to us now, He will come back into the visible world. Thus we know that the future life is a physical life as much as it is a mental and spiritual life. You see that those two points, then—that Christ is our wisdom for life and has been raised physically—are both major thrusts against the neo-platonic teaching of the times.

The other area besides teaching about Christ is what Paul teaches about human beings. We find that the Corinthian church was so happy to hear the Gospel of grace with their ears, because it tickled their ears nicely and they said, "Wow, I get something and there is no cost. I receive forgiveness and there are no strings attached. I am freed, I am forgiven, and then I can please myself. Hooray! Hallelujah! That is the Gospel we wanted to hear all along. Paul has given us what we wanted. We can be saved, we can be glad about our salvation, and then do as we please." This is a perfect, classical case of antinomianism, and we see in parts of the letter to the Corinthians how Paul deals with the understanding that they feel they can now do what they want.

For instance, 1 Corinthians 6 verse 12 says this (and I believe Paul is quoting here something that he heard from them): "Everything is permissible for me." So the philosophy in their minds was, "Now that I have the Gospel of grace, now that I am forgiven, everything is permissible for me." Their neo-platonic separation of body and mind received further fuel from this wrongly understood Gospel of grace. It was as if they said, "We have always thought that it does not matter what we do with our bodies, and now

the Gospel tells us that everything is okay. Whatever I do, everything is permissible for me, so let me do it.” Paul deals with that challenge carefully in 1 and 2 Corinthians, perhaps most pointedly clarified in 2 Corinthians. We will return to that, but Paul basically says, “Let the grace of God bear fruit in your life. Have you been freed by God's forgiveness to please yourself, to live in your God-alien ways, to pursue your God-alien philosophy, to continue in your habits that do no good to you and are an offense to the living God? Is that what grace is about? Simply for God to cut you some slack in order for you to continue to conduct your life like pigs in the pig stall? Is that the purpose of salvation? Is that liberty? Or are you called by grace into a life of growing in godliness so that you bear fruit, so that you can pass on the forgiveness you have received, so that you can live under and pass on the authority that you have received from God, so that the love, sacrifice, kindness, strength, and abilities that you are receiving you can make useful for others to the glory of God?” That is the purpose of grace. There is a purpose; there is a goal. Any church that struggles with antinomianism—with taking grace as “cheap grace,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it—any church that misunderstands grace in that way needs to understand what Paul is going after in appealing to them.

Fortunately Paul does not say what is often said in churches: “You have received grace, so you had better straighten out now.” Such an attitude is disjointed. With Paul, their growth in godliness is an outgrowth of the grace they have received. Stay with grace, stay with the mercy of God. Do not disconnect and start your own agenda. Always stay connected to grace, but the mercy, the sacrifice, the love of God toward you has a goal: to bear fruit in your life. Grace works; it creates space and moves you in a certain direction. You cannot stay still. I find it very hard to believe that you can hold a deep-seated grudge for 30 years and confess every week how merciful Christ is to you. I know, however, that some pains that we have experienced in life sit very deep and are very hard to get out and to bring into the light of God's forgiveness toward us. I am quite aware of that, and I do not want to belittle the great challenge of reconciliation. But, you see, grace, the true grace, the expensive grace of God, compels you to deal with that. Perhaps over the course of years, yes, God is patience and has great forbearance, but His grace compels us forward so that there would be fruit growing out of that. It is through that grace that, in the end, you can look the person in the eye or look straight at the situation that you have suffered from and say, “This has been the most painful thing in my life, but because of the grace of God, I can be gracious.” That is what Paul is pursuing with 1 Corinthians. Not a cheap grace, an antinomianism, do what you please, persist in whatever you are stuck in, but let that grace that God is giving you bear fruit in your conduct: moral conduct, sexual conduct, and in your life in general.

To achieve that, Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians a difference between flesh and body. We must be careful about how we define these words in the various letters of Paul, but in 1 Corinthians, the difference between flesh and body is this: “flesh” is that which is against God's purposes. “Body” is the physical body that God created and that needs to be used as an instrument of godliness. Paul gives here, and specifies in Romans even more, a clear distinction against platonic thought. And that is this: Plato divided the world into mind and body. As I have told you, body is the lower area. It is insignificant; it is to be overcome. Mind is that which is good. By contrast, Paul divides things into fleshly and spiritual. You can either live a life in your mind and in your body that is against the purposes of God—that is “flesh.” Or you can live in your mind and in your body a life that is dedicated to the purposes of God's Spirit. Paul, then, in Romans deals with that division: living according to the flesh or living according to the Spirit. Some people misunderstand that and say that Paul is teaching living according to the mind versus living according to the body, but that is absolutely wrong. That is what Plato taught, but God's Word teaches that your mind and your body can be fleshly, or your mind and your body can be spiritual. “Spiritual” means according to the purposes of God, surrendered to the purposes of God, under God's authority. “According to the flesh” means independent of God, a philosophy that says people's minds

are autonomous; it is a morality that says, "I do as I please; nobody is to tell me my business." That is started in 1 Corinthians in the division between flesh and body.

Paul makes it very clear that there is a difference, then, for the Corinthians, between eating and sexuality. I have not explored that issue a lot but I suspect that many philosophies, including the Stoic one, identified sexuality and food. Definitely Platonic thought said that food and sexuality were the same thing, whereas the Gospel clearly says that we need food to live. There is a clear need for that. In terms of sexuality, there is a spiritual aspect to that. When Paul teaches about marriage and speaks about sexual intercourse, he makes it very clear that there is a spiritual, emotional union that goes far beyond the physical act, and therefore it is not like eating food. I cannot go into that area in detail, but I think you will encounter people who will tell you that sexuality and food are pretty much the same. Paul teaches that there is a deeply spiritual aspect to sexuality, so if you have intercourse with a prostitute, you are becoming one with that person. There is a spiritual union, and you cannot get out of that. That union is established like glue, which is why it is so important to speak with younger people about the reality and the truth of sexual union and what that really implies. Paul is quite explicit about that in 1 Corinthians because of this neo-platonic thought that says, "What I do with my body does not matter." It does matter because the soul, mind, and body are deeply connected and the whole person is involved in that act. There is a substantial difference between sexuality and food. These are some of the main points that Paul outlines and addresses in regards to teaching about Christ and humanity.

We need to move on to 2 Corinthians soon. Obviously, there are many detailed themes in 1 Corinthians that I have not addressed, the most difficult ones being the place of women in the church and in marriage, the question of tongues as non-understandable forms of speech, or as real human languages (which is more my view), the question of head covering for women, and the question of eating food dedicated to idols. I thought that was an old theme until I taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a gentleman from Indonesia said that is quite common there and the question arises all the time of whether you should go to your friend's house and eat food that has been dedicated to idols. So that is not completely passé as a question, and there are also principles that follow from that, which Paul deals with.

It is very difficult for me to move so quickly across these issues, particularly the very important issue of a woman's place in the church, so I will spend a few minutes and tell you a few points on that issue, because that is one of the issues relating to the Corinthian church and relating to bringing them from where they are to a godly understanding of what should be a pattern for their lives

I cannot do justice to this issue in this brief time, but I can bring you a few points that are important when you approach that subject from 1 Corinthians. Obviously you will need to look beyond what I can tell you here. First of all, I have a feeling, at least from my understanding of the church in Germany, but I suspect this may also be true in the United States and many other nations represented here. The place of women in marriage and in the church has not really been right, traditionally speaking. I have seen too many men who treat their wives as a second-class citizen in the marriage. They treat their wives as somebody who cannot think straight, who cannot be consulted, who cannot give advice, who just needs to be really minding her own business. I have heard that far too often. That is absolutely, horribly wrong, because the goal of sanctification of man and woman is that they would come back to the original design of God's creation and that is a complementarian design. I do support authority and submission. I do support structure. I see it clearly outlined in Scripture, but not on the back of an abused, second-class, suppressive status of the woman. If that reality is not dealt with, we may as well forget the entire theological discussion. That problem of second-class citizens must be dealt with directly, and then we can sit down peacefully and say, "What place does God give you and what place does God give me? I

do not have any kind of agenda. I will take the place God gives me as a male. You take the place God gives you as a female. We know that we respect each other as persons of equal dignity, importance, and weight before God. We are to respect each other, but we will also follow the functions that God designed for you and me, not because I am more capable than you, but because that is God's wise design." We must say this, but it must all be spoken on top of a reconciled and a peaceful place of man and woman being recipients of God's grace and equal importance.

So I think that, rather than go into these difficult passages and hammer certain theological themes, you need to start in the beginning. You cannot build good, godly order on the back of unresolved problems. I think the problem of racial reconciliation has to deal with that as well. We cannot merely put band-aids on top of things that are really wrong. They have to be healed. If you come out of families or churches where women were second-class or third-class citizens, you must ask yourself: "What place does a woman have in God's creation?" I can tell you I have heard some women present the Gospel in a wonderful way. I, for one, am not someone who believes that women cannot communicate or speak or teach wonderfully. The issue is only, "What place does God give us in marriage and in the church? What place does He give us?" We need to think about that on the basis of reconciliation. I have had to learn a lot in my own marriage so that I can honestly say to you I value my wife at least as much as myself. Her insight, her questions, her perspectives, her sense of what is going on, her discernment—I lose out if I do not pay attention to her input. It is the same in the church. We had some mature women in the church that I was involved with in Germany. They were not even recognized as deacons or deaconesses. That was not the issue, but their wisdom and their advice had to be sought by us as elders. We would have been absolutely foolish if we had ignored their great sense of weak and overlooked people in the church—needs in the church that I was oblivious to. These women were such an important part of the health of the church. All of that has to be intact before we talk about functions. There must be a sense of not just a pat on the back, or that we will just give the women something to do, but a real, genuine sense that we need each other for the health of the church. We really need each other and we are going to live that out by taking each other seriously. I was shocked when I heard one woman in the church that I go to say that she feels so good that her pastor is really taking her seriously. That should not be something surprising; that should be the norm. We must listen to each other and take each other seriously, and then we can look at what 1 Corinthians 11 says about head covering and authority and submission. What does 1 Corinthians 14 say about women being quiet in the church? (I interpret this in the sense of teaching authoritatively.) We cannot discuss this in an atmosphere of the poison of subjugation and of second-class citizens. It just will not work. So that is my main appeal, not so much for the discussion, although I do have a certain conservative position on eldership and on headship in the family, but it must be on the basis of this sense and clarity of mutual support and recognition.

Now the thing that I am so intrigued by in 1 Corinthians is found in 11:2–3. Let us turn to that briefly, because I think there is a highly theological origin for us to reflect on regarding equal significance and different function in marriage and in the church between male and female. I find that for myself to be one of the central reasons why I am not an egalitarian. I am part of the complementarian camp, and that means I do not believe that man and woman, in marriage and in the church, should be equal in all respects. I think people who believe that are missing something, because of 1 Corinthians 11, and so I am a complementarian—but please understand, on the basis of true, sincere, mutual respect and not just lip service. This is what Paul says about man and woman: "Now I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ." Here, man, male, is under authority. "And the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God." See, that is the really shocking thing, because you would not question from your understanding of the New Testament that Jesus is God. Jesus is the eternal Son of God. Jesus is the mediator of creation. He is co-equal with the Father. He shares all the truths of divine nature as the Father. So there is absolute equality in terms of divine nature between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And

yet Paul can say that the head of Christ is God. How can he say that if there is equality? He can say that because the mystery of the Godhead holds both—equality and functional differentiation—in its own self. So God, without creation, without male and female, has a pattern, a principle of equality and mutual love and service, which is perfect in its character, while there is also differentiation in function so that the Son can say to the Father, “Your will be done.” The Father is clearly the head of the Son. There is equality and order in the Godhead and that principle, that beautiful character of the Godhead is to be reflected upon and made visible in marriage and in the church, so that human beings who live according to the purposes of God somehow reflect part of the character of God. That is why I am not an egalitarian—not because I think there should be a male monopoly or any of that nonsense. No, it is rather because I believe the assignment of function is to reflect God's character so that people outside of the church can see that we, male and female in marriage, have a mutual respect and love, mutual sacrifice, mutual giving, seeking the good of the other one, and yet we have an authority and submission structure where we have an order. We have a togetherness and a mutual respect that says, “There must be some kind of a structure here, but it is never a political power struggle; it is more an order of authority and submission.”

So I think that marriage and the church, in terms of their gender-specific functions, are to reflect God's character and not the attitude that women are inferior. We must be so careful there, and it will take a lot of work—not for us only to speak about it, but also to demonstrate in our lives that we can get those two things together: equality of dignity and difference of functionality. We need to demonstrate that this way is better than any feminist, egalitarian, or any other approach that is being pushed at the church and at Scripture from the outside in order to make good the wrong that has been done. You must understand that the egalitarian push is partially a reaction to the wrongdoing of the church in regard to the dignity of women. I do not blame those who overreact, but I do not want to cooperate with their overreaction out of guilt. I want to stay still and say, “There are some real questions being asked; there are some real problems that we have, but let us not capitulate. Let us recover the Gospel. Let us recover why we are here and why we are man and woman in marriage and in the church. Let us reflect the glory of God.” And 1 Corinthians 11 gives us a blueprint of what is going on here. Do not misuse authority and submission as a means of creating second-class citizens because the Father never treats the Son that way.

The commission of the husband is to give his life as Christ has given His life for the church. This obviously does not mean that a human being, a man, could atone for his wife, but that he is to be that sacrificial and that ready to seek the good of his wife in all matters: physical, spiritual, and emotional. What a commission! What a testimony, and what a sign to a hurting world that has no clue about that kind of love! Because then you can also speak about the fact that there is an authority and submission structure, but that will not be a real problem. I know from my own wife that she is willing and disposed to be my helpmate and to surrender herself willingly to me as she sees my sacrificial love for her.

Obviously, women also should not say, “Well, the reason I cannot do what is biblically asked of me is because you are so difficult and you are not doing what you are supposed to.” That is just an excuse. We both need to work on our sides, but I know that my wife is being won over by my actions, so submission is not really a problem. Being treated like a second-class citizen is a problem. We have a lot of Gospel work to do, and I am afraid we are generally on the same level as the Corinthians who evidently had that problem. The women's liberation movement comes very much from a sense of independence, a sense of not accepting certain structures, and also from a sense of male abuse.

The Hellenistic, Greco-Roman world was full of male chauvinism and legalized suppression of women. Obviously, some of that would come out, with the women saying, “I am free in Christ; I do not care for

this structure anymore; I am coming out of this.” So there is an overreaction to suppressive systems because of the liberty of the Gospel. Everything is justified now, but Paul says the purpose that we have is to reflect the glory of God. The grace of God and the forgiveness of God enable us and make us free to be reconciled as man and woman in marriage, to be reconciled as male and female in the church, and then in that mutual respect to see that there is a structural differentiation. By saying this, I may disappoint some of you: I do believe that there is an appointment for men to be elders and to be teachers of the Word of God. I do understand 1 Corinthians 14 in that sense. There is a good ground to say this particular passage in 1 Corinthians 11, where it speaks about women prophesizing, speaking from the Word of God and instructing, and the like, is more in the private sphere—for example, around the table. There is good ground to say that the public worship has a certain order—but, please understand, not because males are more capable or women are less capable. There is a certain order given, but on the other hand, we also need to recover Titus 2:4, which speaks about the instructional commission of women to women. Most of the living churches have at least 60% of women in the church. So if women are to instruct women, women will be doing the majority of the teaching in the church. There are many areas that we need to look at and recover, without being driven by an agenda of absolute equality in all things. We must rather be guided by a more relaxed sense of, “What place would God want us to take?” I can honestly tell you I would not mind not being the head in my family. In fact, I would rather not have the responsibility of looking out for the spiritual welfare of my family. I am such a bad person in that sense. I am afraid God has given me that job because I am so bad at it; I have to learn something about it. Perhaps my wife would be much more apt at that kind of care. Perhaps I have received certain functions because I need to grow. That is possible, but this difference of function is definitely not because of ability or disposition. We should not say, for example, that women should not teach because they are easily misled. Some men are very easily misled. I am merely giving you some foundation; there has to be a lot of discussion and further biblical searching. I am conservative in my understanding of Scripture, but I am emphasizing that we cannot simply shove this structure onto a history that may require a lot of forgiveness, a lot of reconciliation, and a lot of rapprochement in marriages and in the churches. This is so that we can come from a place of peace to these functions that God has given us.

Let us deal now with a few questions that may have been raised by what I have just said. First, let me give a brief definition of headship. In this passage, it is a question of authority. There has obviously been a lot of discussion about what authority and headship mean. I think that, in the Pauline usage, there is a reference to authority and responsibility. It is not a matter of telling everyone what to do, but it is rather, a matter of being responsible for one’s household and the welfare of those in it. So headship is responsibility as much as it is anything else. I believe that at times, in a marriage, for instance, there may come a point where a decision has to be made, and I think a final decision of the head of the household is okay so long as his wife knows that she has been heard very carefully and very thoroughly and that she can trust him. If I look at my own marriage, those kinds of calls have not been very frequent at all, because we have debated, dialogued, and prayed together. I have tried to exercise that responsibility together with my wife so that we can discern together where we need to go.

I think it is a leadership issue in the sense of initiating. I would want to see men initiating in terms of the family’s devotions, or the church’s needs for its spiritual growth. It is good for men to exercise leadership in terms of visionary foresight. But again, when you are involved in that kind of process, consult your wife. Be involved with the women of the church when you debate or when you think about growth. Yes, there should be male leadership, vision, moving forward, and giving of directions, but not in your little group, or, worse yet, as one man just standing there and saying, “This is the way we are going to go, even if it is over a cliff.” So here is a certain responsibility and leadership activity, but it is not in disregard of the opinions of your wife or the women in your church. It is with your wife. It is with the church: consulting, listening, and working together. And I come back to the Godhead understanding.

We need to reflect how God deals with Himself within the Godhead. God says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased.” There is such a love and such a service there.