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July 18th: 1 Samuel 9 & 1 Corinthians 16

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Saul is marked out for the kingdom. Reading other people's mail.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Samuel chapter 9. There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish, the son of Abel, son of Zeruel, son of Bekurath, son of Afir, a Benjaminite, a man of wealth. And he had a son whose name was Saul, a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he.

From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people. Now the donkeys of Kish, Saul's father, were lost. So Kish said to Saul his son, Take one of the young men with you, and arise, go and look for the donkeys.

And he passed through the hill country of Ephraim, and passed through the land of Shalisha, but they did not find them. And they passed through the land of Sheolim, but they were not there. Then they passed through the land of Benjamin, but did not find them.

When they came to the land of Zath, Saul said to his servant who was with him, Come, let us go back, lest my father cease to care about the donkeys, and become anxious about us. But he said to him, Behold there is a man of God in this city, and he is a man who is held in honor. All that he says comes true.

So now let us go there. Perhaps he can tell us the way we should go. Then Saul said to his servant, But if we go, what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God.

What do we have? The servant answered Saul again, Here I have with me a quarter of a shekel of silver, and I will give it to the man of God to tell us our way. Formally in Israel, when a man went to inquire of God, he said, Come, let us go to the seer. For today's prophet was formerly called a seer.

And Saul said to his servant, Well said, come, let us go. So they went to the city where the man of God was. As they went up the hill to the city, they met young women coming out to draw water, and said to them, Is the seer here? They answered, He is, behold, he is just ahead of you.

Hurry, he has come just now to the city, because the people have a sacrifice today on the high place. As soon as you enter the city you will find him, before he goes up to the high place to eat. For the people will not eat till he comes, since he must bless the sacrifice.

Afterward those who are invited will eat. Now go up, for you will meet him immediately. So they went up to the city.

As they were entering the city, they saw Samuel coming out toward them on his way up to the high place. Now the day before Saul came, the Lord had revealed to Samuel, Tomorrow about this time I will send to you a man from the land of Benjamin, and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel. He shall save my people from the hand of the Philistines, for I have seen my people, because their cry has come to me.

When Samuel saw Saul, the Lord told him, Here is the man of whom I spoke to you. He it is who shall restrain my people. Then Saul approached Samuel in the gate and said, Tell me, where is the house of the seer? Samuel answered Saul, I am the seer.

Go up before me to the high place, for today you shall eat with me, and in the morning I will let you go and will tell you all that is on your mind. As for your donkeys that were lost three days ago, do not set your mind on them, for they have been found. And for whom is all that is desirable in Israel? Is it not for you and for all your father's house? Saul answered, Am I not a Benjaminite from the least of the tribes of Israel? And is not my clan the humblest of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin? Why then have you spoken to me in this way? Then Samuel took Saul and his young man and brought them into the

hall and gave them a place at the head of those who had been invited, who were about thirty persons.

And Samuel said to the cook, Bring the portion I gave you, of which I said to you, put it aside. So the cook took up the leg and what was on it and set them before Saul. And Samuel said, See what was kept is set before you, eat because it was kept for you until the hour appointed, that you might eat with the guests.

So Saul ate with Samuel that day. And when they came down from the high place into the city, a bed was spread for Saul on the roof, and he lay down to sleep. Then at the break of dawn Samuel called to Saul on the roof, Up, that I may send you on your way.

So Saul arose, and both he and Samuel went out into the street. As they were going down to the outskirts of the city, Samuel said to Saul, Tell the servant to pass on before us, and when he has passed on, stop here yourself for a while, that I may make known to you the word of God. 1 Samuel chapter 9 is a strange start to the story of Saul's kingship.

However, as is usual with biblical narrative, the details matter and are an important part of the meaning. Reading closely and paying attention to those things that we might initially think are extraneous details, we will learn a lot more than we would do otherwise. This story is dense with narrative elements that connect with and play off other stories in illuminating ways.

At points it's like watching a film, where subtle thematic snatches in the soundtrack, details of the cinematography and subtle features in the setting serve subliminally to create a richer and more evocative scene for most viewers, and greatly heighten the attention of those who are more alert to such matters. An intelligent cinophile will pay attention to lots of details of a scene, and readers of the scriptures must learn to do the same. The theological message of scripture is often to be found in the artistry by which stories are told, inviting comparisons and contrasts, framing stories by other stories, juxtaposing characters, carefully foregrounding certain details by the way that the story is structured, etc.

1 Samuel chapter 9 is a good example of this. Many readers might wonder why so much of this chapter is devoted to details that aren't seeming to serve any greater purpose. However, observant readers will recognise that this text is communicating a lot in those details, the details that fill out the surface picture.

Saul is introduced to us as someone who comes from a wealthy family. The language used of Kish here is also used of Boaz in the Book of Ruth. Saul is a man of Benjamin.

In Genesis chapter 35 it is in the context of Benjamin's birth that Jacob is told that kings will come from his loins. In chapter 36 of Genesis, immediately afterwards, there are a

number of ways in which we might see connections between Benjamin and Saul and Esau and Edom. The first king of Edom is called Bela.

The first son of Benjamin was called Bela too. In that chapter we are told of a man who was looking after the donkeys of his father when he found springs. We also encounter a king of Edom called Saul, who was most likely king at the same time as Saul was king in Israel.

Later Benjamin was treated as the chief of the brothers by Joseph. The kings would ultimately come from Judah, but it was fitting that the first king came from Benjamin. There were only 600 fighting men of Benjamin left at the end of the Book of Judges.

They were almost completely exterminated by the rest of the nation after the sin of Gibeah. Saul himself comes from Gibeah, compared to Sodom in Judges. As we read on in the story, it will invite comparison with that earlier story.

Saul means asked. In 1 Samuel chapter 1 verse 20, the meaning of Samuel's name is given. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, I have asked for him from the Lord.

The language of lending Samuel to the Lord in chapter 1 verse 28 also relates to Saul's name. It seems that there's some connection between the identities of Saul and Samuel. They're connected in some strange way.

Saul becomes, in some respects, a new son to Samuel, just as Samuel replaced the unfaithful sons of Eli, Hathanai and Phinehas, Saul replaces the unfaithful sons of Samuel, Joel and Abijah. Saul is introduced as a physically attractive and physically imposing man. In the Old Testament, the attractive physical appearance of characters can be a sign of the positive role that they have to play.

It's an auspicious sign of someone who's going to play a significant role at the head of the people. Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, Solomon are all described in these sorts of ways. Saul is also taller than everyone else.

He is the giant of Israel. That's important to remember when we read the story of David and Goliath. Saul is the most handsome man in Israel.

He is also the tallest man in Israel. From the outset, he is introduced to us more as a romantic hero than as a future political operative. As we shall see, however, that is no accident.

The king is the lover of his people. Politics is suffused by Eros. The king is someone who excites love, loyalty and desire.

He is someone who ideally has a strong physical presence, charisma, charm, virility. The

connection between politics and Eros is perhaps most overt in the story of Samuel too. In choosing a king for his people, the Lord is choosing a bridegroom for them.

Our own politics continue to have such elements. Nations don't elect their leaders purely on the basis of policy and competence, but can be drawn to them as persons. This story is told in a way that draws the reader's attention to this dimension of kingship.

The story of Saul begins with lost donkeys. In the Book of Judges, donkeys appear on several occasions, representing the princely authority of Judges' sons. Donkeys are also associated with Judah's royal status in Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49, verses 10-11.

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples. Binding his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he has washed his garments in wine, and his vesture in the blood of grapes. There might be subtle reminders here of the tragic story of Gibeah too, which Saul reverses in some senses, but ends up repeating in others.

That horrific story began as follows, in Judges 19, verses 1-3. In those days, when there was no king in Israel, a certain Levite was sojourning in the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, who took to himself a concubine from Bethlehem in Judah. And his concubine was unfaithful to him, she went away from him to her father's house at Bethlehem in Judah, and was there some four months.

Then her husband arose and went after her, to speak kindly to her, and bring her back. He had with him his servant, and a couple of donkeys. Both of these stories are a quest for the lost.

The lost concubine in Judges, and the lost donkeys in 1 Samuel, both involve an accompanying servant and some donkeys, and both involve a woman. In Judges, the woman is the concubine, who ends up being dismembered, a concubine that also symbolizes the people, with the Levites symbolizing the wicked rulers. In 1 Samuel, the woman is the bride, Israel, represented by the women Saul meets in the city.

In the story of Saul, the appalling end to Judges is being repaired, a better bridegroom is coming for the bride. Benjamin, the son, the tribe that was almost utterly destroyed at the end of the book of Judges, is also being restored. The way that the story is told highlights the lack of intention of the figures involved.

Saul and his servant are following lost donkeys. As Saul is about to turn back, his servant happens to mention that there is a man of God in the city, who might be able to tell them where the donkeys are. The servant happens to have a quarter of a shekel of silver to give to the man of God.

The seer just happens to have come into the city for a sacrifice, etc. The point of all of

this is that the Lord is superintending all events. This is not something engineered by man.

Rather, these are the signs that the Lord is orchestrating events. As they go to the city, Saul meets young women coming out to draw water. Now, we've read in scripture of many people meeting women drawing water at wells.

It's what's been called a type scene. Abraham's servant meets Rebecca at a well. Jacob meets Rachel at a well.

Moses meets Zipporah at a well. Jesus meets the Samaritan woman at a well. Saul's encounter with the women here should attract our attention, especially when we look more closely and see further parallels with the story of Abraham's servant meeting Rebecca.

There is a similar series of events in both places. The women come out to draw water. This phrase is very rare, but it's found both here and in Genesis chapter 24.

They are both looking for someone. Abraham's servant is looking for a bride for Isaac. Saul and his servant are looking for the donkeys.

However, Samuel, unbeknownst to Saul, is looking for the new king of Israel. In both cases, the Lord will identify the person he has selected to the seeker. In both cases, the one who is sought comes out soon afterwards.

So we read, Behold, Rebecca came out. And then, Behold, Samuel was coming out. In both cases, there is then a meal and the revelation of a secret and a great and significant match made that would shape Israel's history thereafter.

These are two stories of chosen persons, one selected for marriage, the other selected for kingship. Rabbi David Fulman observes the importance of what is occurring here. Isaac and Rebecca was the marriage of the son of Abraham and Sarah.

It was the first step towards the fulfillment of the fruitfulness and multiplication of Abraham's seed that had been promised to him, a first step in moving towards a greater people. Saul was the first step towards the fulfillment of the promise that Israel would become a kingdom. It constitutes Israel on a greater level.

Israel is not just a multitude of people. It isn't just a nation. In relating to a king, they are far more robust as a collective entity.

They become a we, symbolized by the king himself. Coronation is a sort of marriage on a national scale. And this story is the betrothal, the point when Samuel appoints Saul as the future bridegroom, as the designated prince.

Recognizing the character of this relationship will help us to observe things about

marriage and things about kingship that we might not otherwise have recognized. For instance, consider Samuel's warning to Israel in the previous chapter. They wanted a king to act on their behalf, yet the king would rule over and oppress them.

This is similar to the dynamic that intrudes upon marriage after the fall. The woman desires her husband. She wants a man to act on her behalf, but he will end up ruling over her and oppressing her.

The story switches from Saul's perspective to Samuel's perspective. We learn that Samuel has been told beforehand that he will encounter Saul, and that the Lord identifies Saul to Samuel. Samuel here is like Abraham's servant, but seeking a bridegroom for the daughter of the Lord.

Samuel delivers his secret to Saul, much as Abraham's servant delivered the secret to Rebekah, yet it's still cryptic at the beginning. It's not necessarily clear at the outset that it is the kingdom that is in view. Saul's response to Samuel reminds us of Gideon's response to the angel of the Lord in Judges 6, verses 12-15.

And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor. And Gideon said to him, Please my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian. And the Lord turned to him and said, Go in this mite of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian.

Do not I send you? And he said to him, Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. Saul is a humble man. He is a dutiful, faithful, and considerate son.

God is not giving Israel a bad man, but a man suited for the role in a great many ways. We will see Saul replaying the sins of the judges in many respects in the chapters that follow, and it draws our minds back to specific stories in the specific failures that he makes. But this will be a tragic twist for a man who has so much going for him.

Samuel gives Saul the priestly portion of the peace offering. In Leviticus 7, verses 33-34 we read, Whoever among the sons of Aaron offers the blood of the peace offerings and the fat shall have the right thigh for a portion. For the breast that is waived and the thigh that is contributed I have taken from the people of Israel, out of the sacrifices of their peace offerings, and have given them to Aaron the priest and to his sons, as a perpetual Jew from the people of Israel.

This portion only belonged to the priests and their sons. So what's happening here is among other things a sort of adoption ceremony. Saul is seated in the seat of the firstborn.

He is given the firstborn's portion, the portion that belongs to the priest, Samuel himself. Samuel will now act as his father. Saul is now the one appointed to become the guardian of Israel to succeed his new father, taking the place of Joel and Abijah.

This story is one of the raising up of Saul, with a number of literal ascensions. Saul goes up the hill to the city, he goes up to the high place, he goes up to the head of the table, and then he goes up to the roof to sleep. Saul is being elevated as the new ruler here.

The chapter ends on the cliffhanger. Saul is about to hear from Samuel the message concerning the kingdom, that the Lord has appointed him to become the king who will lead Israel. A question to consider.

At the end of this chapter, what are some of the features of Saul and his character that set him apart as someone who's a good potential king? 1 Corinthians chapter 16. Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go.

For I do not want to see you now just in passing, I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.

So let no one despise him, help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now, he will come when he has opportunity. Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

Let all that you do be done in love. Now I urge you, brothers, you know that the household of Stephanus were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. Be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and labourer.

I rejoice at the coming of Stephanus, and Fortunatus, and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people. The churches of Asia send you greetings.

Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in

the Lord. All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord come.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Chapter 16 ends the first letter to the Corinthians. The end of such a letter is a reminder that we are reading other people's mail. We can consider some of the reasons why Paul and the other New Testament writers might have employed the epistle as the means for spreading their message.

Michael B. Thompson has written about this in terms of the Holy Internet. He describes the dissemination of information in the earliest church. He observes that contrary to theories of isolated communities built around the varying messages of different apostles and early church teachers, the first churches were bound together in a large network within which messages travelled with regularity and relative speed.

And this is something that we see in chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians. Thanks to the vast infrastructure of Roman roads and the sea lanes of commerce that joined places across the empire, it was possible for first century travellers to enjoy considerable mobility. There were also key hubs of communication for the early church, places like Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus or Corinth.

Christians in these and other localities would be expected to show hospitality to Christians from other parts of the world. And the epistle is a medium that was bound up with such a network. While we tend to regard epistles merely as texts, especially as we encounter them in our Bibles, if we imaginatively resituate them within their natural network of communication, other purposes can be revealed, purposes that that particular medium was able to serve.

For a fledgling movement, the Holy Internet that Thompson describes was a critical means by which the church could be built up. In the Book of Acts, we repeatedly see this Internet in action. While we may be tempted to read the accounts of the apostles' travels as if they were just filler, it was a crucial part of the means by which the early church was strengthened, encouraged and made secure in the truth.

The Holy Internet created bonds of mutual knowledge, concern, gift, support and service between churches. It established churches as examples to each other. It connected the church with its origins in apostolic testimony.

It ensured that believers were rarely more than a couple of degrees of separation from multiple eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry and resurrection. This network is one of the reasons why the apostles could boldly state that the work of Christ wasn't something

that occurred in a corner. News could travel fairly fast, especially in a closely networked set of communities, such as those of the early church.

Paul mentions several ministers here who were moving from place to place, who would be known to people in Corinth, but also to people in Ephesus, in Antioch and maybe also in Jerusalem. At the beginning and the end of various New Testament epistles like this, we can get a sense of the network. As we want to get to the ideas, we can be inattentive to the way that the early church was established, not merely through ideas, but through the constant circulation of apostles, evangelists, missionaries and various other servants to the church, through gifts, messengers, travellers, letters, news and other things like that.

If we resist the urge to top and tail Pauline epistles as if they were carrots being prepared for cooking, we might discover much insight in parts we would otherwise discard. For instance, even before Paul visited the city of Rome, he knew a great number of Christians already active there, people who would welcome his visit. The Book of Romans isn't merely a book of theological ideas, it's a book paving the way for a visit, a book appealing to and developing existing connections and anticipating the establishment of a greater future bond between Paul and the church at Rome.

The hospitality of churches to strangers was part of the means by which the Holy Internet was made possible. There are various mentions in the epistles of Paul seeking a place to stay, seeking provisions or praising Christians for their hospitality to others. The degree to which Paul's apostolic teaching was bound up with an intense practice of networking can be seen in his extensive description of his movements and various practical missions in such places as the end of Romans.

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles was not merely a theological notion for Paul, it was something to be worked out through such things as the contributions of the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia to the poor saints in Jerusalem. For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. The Jerusalem collection strengthened the ecclesiastical and theological web of connection between Jewish and Gentile churches.

It enabled Gentile Christians and churches in the wider empire to participate in the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. And the call for the collection with which Paul begins this chapter is a reminder of this dimension of his ministry. We read about this in Galatians chapter 2 verses 7 to 10.

On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles. When James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of

fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised. Only they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Now Paul is meeting with them in the context of bringing a gift from the Christians of Tantioc to the Christians in Jerusalem. This is an expression of the unity between Jews and Gentiles. And this separation of ministries, one to the circumcised, the other to the uncircumcised, is going to be brought together through the expression of love in providing for the saints who need provisions in Jerusalem.

So the gift of the Gentiles is an expression of the theological unity of Jews and Gentiles in the gospel. The gathering of a Gentile gift for the Judean, and especially Jerusalem church, might also be a way of fulfilling end-time prophecy. Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 3. It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills.

And all the nations shall flow to it. And many people shall come and say, Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

Also Isaiah chapter 60 verses 10 to 16. Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their king shall minister to you. For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favour I have had mercy on you.

Your gates shall be opened continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession. For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish. Those nations shall be utterly laid waste.

The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the Cyprus, the plain, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary. And I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet.

They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel. Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall nurse at the breast of kings, and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your Saviour and your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob.

Paul here suggests that the Gentile Corinthians bring the gift to Jerusalem themselves. This would enhance the symbolism. It's Gentiles bringing the gift of the nations to the Jews.

The sending of epistles was also a way in which the form and the content of the apostolic

message and ministry were closely related. Most of the epistles of the New Testament are addressed to Christians in a particular city or to a specific person. Such epistles strengthened and built upon existing connections, ensuring that each church could be nourished by the ministry of others.

They were a form of resistance to sectarian and isolationist tendencies, establishing unity through mutual sharing and ministry in a body. The epistles consistently remind their recipients of their place within a larger body of Christians. The recipients of the epistles are also frequently called to pass on the messages that they have received to others, or to ensure that a wider audience hears them.

The epistles weren't mass-produced, digitally replicated, or accessed online. They were written and transmitted by hand. Paul often makes reference to the individuals that bear his letters, individuals who would fill the recipients in on his news and all that was happening in the city from which they had been sent.

In many instances, the bearers of the epistles, people like Epaphroditus, Dicitus, or Onesimus, Phoebe, and others like that, would have probably performed their contents to the recipients of the letters. It's important that we consider what the effect of this mode of the epistles transmission would be. They were forms of personal communication, not mere abstract doctrine.

When we read most of the New Testament then, we are reading other people's mail, yet the mail was sent to particular recipients with the intent that they should pass it on. The similarities between the mode of transmission here and Paul's accounts of the gifts of the Spirit in chapter 12 is worth reflecting upon. The Spirit has been given to the whole church.

However, the gift of the Spirit is represented in the numerous diverse gifts of the Spirit to individuals. These gifts of the Spirit conscript Christians into God's own giving process. Likewise, receiving an epistle from Paul conscripted you into a giving process.

Paul, who had been given his message by revelation of Christ, gave his letters to particular churches and persons. It was given to them especially, but with the expectation that, through them, it should be given to all. The letter was given not for private ownership, but as the stewardship of a gift to the whole church.

And it wasn't just an abstract piece of theology that they were passing on, but a letter concerning their particular congregation and its issues. The circulation of the epistles called churches to share themselves with the whole body of the church as examples in both positive and negative respects. Perhaps we should imagine a sharp intake of breath in Corinth when they received this particular correspondence from Paul.

Further, in passing on their mail, they would typically be sending servants of their

churches to other churches, forging firmer bonds of relation and affiliation and mutual service and hospitality. Another important feature of the fact that Paul is writing letters is that they are texts directly addressed to persons and churches. We often try to derive abstract theology from Paul's letters, treating them as if they were detached reflections on theological truth from an ivory tower.

Yet Paul is speaking to concrete people in concrete situations, with all of the passion and the urgency that can come with that. We can translate the letters of Paul into abstract theology without even recognising what we are doing. As an example, let's look at the first four verses of Ephesians chapter 1. Asked to describe what Paul is saying here, many of us might say something to the effect that Paul is teaching that God has chosen a certain group of people in Christ before the foundation of the world, in order that they might one day be blessed and sanctified.

But this is to obscure the fact that it is a word with multiple addressees. Paul is not teaching that here. He is communicating Christ's blessing to the Ephesians, and he is praising God, not about some abstract theological truth, but about something that is true of the Ephesians.

God has chosen them before the foundation of the world in Christ. He has blessed them in Christ, with every spiritual blessing. He isn't teaching so much as he is blessing, praising, and exhorting the Ephesians to join him.

His words are not about abstract truths, but actively express the way that the work of God in Christ electrifies and transforms all our relationships. It is a word of address, not a word of abstract theological reflection. We need to learn to hear the scripture in this way more generally.

In this chapter we have glimpses into the sort of world that the early church inhabited. Apostles, their representatives, and other missionaries moving to and fro. Timothy has an especially close relationship to Paul, it appears.

Elsewhere, we find out that he is like Paul's son and representative. Paul mentions Pentecost. Perhaps this suggests that Jewish feasts were still recognized and practiced by many Jews in the early church.

However, he also refers to gathering the collection on the first day of the week. Sunday already seems to have been a day of significance for the early church, perhaps indicating that the shift from Sabbath to Sunday was well underway. Sunday was the day of resurrection, it was the day of new creation, and it also anticipated the final day of the Lord.

Paul concludes by moving to general exhortations. Watchfulness, steadfastness, manliness, strength. Richard Hayes suggests that Paul may be alluding to Psalm 31

verses 23 to 24 at a few points in these final verses.

Love the Lord, all you his saints. The Lord preserves the faithful, but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord.

There is a pronounced sense of expectation here. The virtues emphasized by Paul are those required to withstand trial and to await the coming judgment and deliverance of the Lord. Verse 14 perhaps sums up the driving force of the letter.

Let all that you do be done in love. Just before Paul draws to a conclusion, he encourages the Corinthians to honor Stephanus and his household for their long-standing faith, their faithful service, and their devoted labor. The point here isn't that they have an official position, but that their service itself is deserving of honor, and that the church should look to those who excel in such service for guidance.

This is where the material of faithful leadership is to be found, and these are the sorts of people who should be granted recognition. Note how in the example of Stephanus and his household we find the virtues that would provide a fitting and powerful alternative to the self-serving and self-advancing attitude of the strong in Corinth. Matters like this shouldn't be detached from the theological thrust of the wider correspondence.

If the Corinthians are going to deal with their problems, part of the way in which they will do so is by looking to people like Stephanus and his household for leadership. The letter communicates the greetings of the churches in Asia, and from Aquila and Prisca. Paul is doing work to strengthen the holy internet here.

Aquila and Prisca are Priscilla and Aquila. The ordering of the names is something that some people have placed a lot of emphasis upon elsewhere, but which is probably of little significance. It has more to do with the form of their names.

They are sent greetings, but they are also charged to greet each other with a holy kiss. This is a close and intimate greeting. It expresses close kinship, and clearly quite contrasts with their divisive and self-advancing behavior described in the letter.

If they're going to recognize each other and receive each other in this way, the sort of appalling practice that Paul describes at the Lord's Supper in Corinth will be much harder to sustain. Paul writes the greeting with his own hand, presumably the rest was written by an amanuensis. He ends with a curse upon anyone who has no love for the Lord, and calls for Christ to come, communicating a blessing, and then his love.

A question to consider, looking through this chapter, what are some of the examples of the instructions, exhortations, and other things that Paul teaches here that speak into issues that he has raised previously in the letter?