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1 Corinthians: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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CONTENTS

- 00:00:00 - 1 Corinthians 1.1-25: Divisions in the Church
- 00:12:03 - 1 Corinthians 1.26—2.16: We Have the Mind of Christ
- 00:23:41 - 1 Corinthians 3: Labour in Christ's Field and Temple
- 00:35:15 - 1 Corinthians 4.1-17: The Apostolic Ministry
- 00:41:54 - 1 Corinthians 4.18—5.13: Sexual Immorality in the Church
- 00:53:36 - 1 Corinthians 6: Flee from Sexual Immorality
- 01:06:40 - 1 Corinthians 7: Let Each Person Lead the Life the Lord Has Assigned to Him
- 01:24:11 - 1 Corinthians 8: Food Offered to Idols
- 01:34:38 - 1 Corinthians 9: Paul Not Exerting His Rights
- 01:43:08 - 1 Corinthians 10: Do Not Follow the Pattern of the Exodus Generation's Idolatry
- 01:58:22 - 1 Corinthians 11: Men and Women in the Church and the Celebration of the Supper
- 02:20:12 - 1 Corinthians 12: Spiritual Gifts in the Body
- 02:32:40 - 1 Corinthians 13: The More Excellent Way of Love
- 02:43:20 - 1 Corinthians 14.1-19: Prophecy and Tongues in the Church
- 02:52:10 - 1 Corinthians 14.20-40: All Things Should Be Done Decently and in Order
- 03:13:30 - 1 Corinthians 15.1-34: The Resurrection of the Dead

03:32:41 - 1 Corinthians 15.35-58: Death is Swallowed Up in Victory

03:46:49 - 1 Corinthians 16: Greetings and Instructions for the Collection

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Transcript

Paul begins his first epistle to the Corinthians, introducing himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will. Paul generally, but not always, introduces himself in his letters as an apostle, the epistles to the Thessalonians being the main exception to the norm. He writes as one called person to a body of called people, and he writes with a co-author, Sosthenes.

Sosthenes may have been a fellow worker we don't read of elsewhere. Sosthenes wasn't an uncommon name. Some have argued that he might have been Paul's amanuensis, as we learn in chapter 16 verse 21 that Paul hadn't written most of the letter in his own writing, presumably having someone else to write it for him.

However, it seems most likely to me that Sosthenes was the same man as the one mentioned in Acts chapter 18 verse 17, the account of Paul's first visit to Corinth. And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. The Corinthians have been set apart by God, called to be holy, part of a wider body of Christians around the world, who call on the name of Jesus, bound together by their common Lord.

Paul's opening benediction, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, is quite characteristic of his work. The life of the church and every Christian is founded upon this grace and peace, so it's entirely appropriate that it would be to this that Paul appeals at the beginning of his epistles. Paul had first visited Corinth in Acts chapter 18.

In verses 1 to 11 of that chapter we read, When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to

them, And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue.

Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing Paul, believed and were baptized. And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.

And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. Paul often begins his letters with thanksgiving. Here he gives thanks for the entire span of the salvation that the Corinthians enjoy, from its first incipents in the work of the gospel arriving among them, to the faithful empowering and sustaining of Christ as they wait for his appearing, to the vindication that they will receive on the great and final day of the Lord.

God has called them into the fellowship of his Son, and he is faithful to confirm them in that fellowship and preserve them to the end. In verse 10, Paul gets right to the point of his letter, appealing to the Corinthians to be in agreement, to avoid division, and to be united in mind and judgment. He has heard from Chloe's people that there are divisions among them.

Chloe was possibly a business person whose servants had brought news to Paul. The Corinthians had become sectarian, with various parties opening up among them, with different members identifying with different teachers and leaders, some with Paul, some with Peter or Cephas, some with Apollos, and some with Christ. And Paul will later argue for a proper way of considering the relationship between different ministers.

However, with a number of prominent and charismatic leaders, it was not surprising that the Corinthians would form parties around their favourite figures in ways that led to division and sectarianism in the congregation. The Church, as will become clear in chapter 12, is characterized by diversity, but a diversity through which unity is achieved through many gifts being exercised in different ways for the common good. The mind that the Church has should not be sectarian either, because the one mind of Christ is that mind mentioned in chapter 2 verse 16.

The different ministers in the Church should be regarded not as competitors, but as collaborators in a grand shared task, each performing different roles in a way that is complementary, not competitive. Paul argues this in chapter 3. Christ is undivided. He unites all true ministers.

Christ isn't the head of a sect of his own alongside the sect of Peter and Paul and Apollos. He is the one to whom all are subject, and the one that all serve. Paul presses this point further.

Paul was not crucified for the Corinthians. Christ's cross, which Paul proclaims, is unique. It's an event that defines all Christians, whoever their more immediate leaders might be.

What Paul is doing here is simply applying the teaching of Christ himself from Matthew chapter 23 verses 8-12. Just as Paul wasn't crucified for the Corinthians, they weren't baptised in his name. Baptism is for Paul an event that has a defining force for the Christian.

It seals them as Christ's people. However, the identity of the minister who performs the baptism is irrelevant. What matters is that it is baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that it is baptism into Christ, into his death and resurrection.

Given the existence of these misunderstandings among the Corinthians, Paul is thankful that he only baptised a few of them. Had he baptised more of them, they might have been tempted to think that their baptism by Paul made them members of a special group of Pauline believers, members of a party associated with Paul. However, Christ had not sent Paul to baptise, but to preach the Gospel.

Paul is an apostle of Christ Jesus, a servant of his Lord, not a man forming his own movement. If he had a ministry focused upon baptism, he might have been a new sort of John the Baptist. The people baptised by John were associated with John and many of them became his disciples.

Paul baptised, but his ministry was not one of baptism. There was no baptism of Paul, as there had been a baptism of John. Rather, Paul was the bearer of a message, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the declaration of the Kingdom and the Lordship of Jesus the Messiah.

Although Paul was a profoundly gifted rhetorician, his skills clearly being on display here and throughout this letter, the point of his preaching was not eloquence, but direct presentation of the cross of Christ, where the real power lies, not in Paul's golden tongue. Had Paul's ministry been one of eloquent wisdom, the danger would have been that Paul's rhetorical gifts would have eclipsed the message he was proclaiming and the master he was serving. It was all about Christ for Paul and anything that Paul did that distracted from that or eclipsed that would have been illegitimate.

However, at the very heart of the Christian Gospel lies the reality of the cross, the stark and brutal execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a tree by the Romans. This stands in the starkest possible contrast to any religion that is preoccupied with competitive social alignment and rhetorical artistry, all of which belong to the manner of this present age. The word of the cross is considered foolishness by all who operate on this age's terms, those who are perishing.

However, to those who are being saved, it is recognised in all of its startling alienness as

the power of God himself. Paul cites Isaiah 29, verse 14 here. Beginning at verse 13, this passage reads, And the Lord said, At that time Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding, and revealed them to little children.

Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. The cross is scandalous, it's offensive, it's foolish to the sensibilities and the expectations of both Jews and Gentiles.

If you were a shrewd marketer of the Christian message, you would probably downplay all of the cross stuff and major on Jesus as a wise teacher instead. If you emphasised Jesus as a great philosopher and religious teacher, the Greeks wouldn't have so much of a problem dealing with the fact that he was killed by the authorities who resisted his wisdom. They had Socrates.

The Jews could deal with a great and powerful prophet who performed mighty signs, yet was martyred by wicked leaders. There were several such figures in their history. However, accenting the cross as he did made Paul's message of the gospel seem nonsensical and offensive to both parties.

There might be ways artfully to weave the shame, humiliation and rejection of the cross into an appealing story of Jesus, but to lead with these things is ridiculous and foolish. Yet God's power and wisdom are in direct conflict with the wisdom of the world, and cannot be recognised by the wise of this age. Of course, the cross isn't ultimately foolish, but it seems as such to those of this age who operate on this world's terms, those whose eyes have been opened by God, where the Jews or Gentiles can see it, but others cannot.

The cross, which seems the moment of greatest impotence, is the moment of God's power overcoming the world. The supposed foolishness of God is beyond the fathoming of human wisdom, and the imagined weakness of God is stronger than all of the strength of men. In speaking in such a manner, Paul undermines the forces animating the struggle for status among the Corinthians.

The cross of Christ nullifies and renders foolish the quest for status and power and wisdom that preoccupies people. It reveals that true wisdom, true honour and true power lies somewhere where people are least likely to look for it. Paul, by stripping away the pretensions of eloquence, of status and human power, wishes the Corinthians to see that the power, the wisdom and the honour always lay in the cross itself.

And in doing this he wants to accomplish a revolution in their values, which would result in a transformation of their behaviour, as they saw that the things that really mattered were not the things that they were preoccupied with, the things that led to the divisions

and the conflicts among them. A question to consider, what are some ways in which we are in danger of drawing attention away from the wisdom, power and glory of God out of shame and embarrassment about the cross, seeking to appeal to typical notions of human wisdom, power and glory in their place? At the end of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul wants the Corinthians to look at themselves and to consider the demographics of their group. They are not, for the most part, wise, powerful, influential and of noble birth.

There are a few exceptions. Erastus, mentioned in Romans 16, verse 23, was the city treasurer, and Gaius, who hosted Paul and the entire church, was presumably a wealthy and influential man. However, for the most part, the Corinthians would be of little account in the eyes of their society, and yet they have been called by God.

The very choice of God revealed as they look around them at their fellow Corinthian Christians should challenge their concern for pursuing social status and honour. This choice was not accidental on God's part, but entirely purposeful. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, and the low and the despised to bring to nothing the things that are.

The result of all of this is that no one can boast in their strength, wisdom or social status. If they have these things, God has, if anything, chosen them despite them, rather than on account of them. There was nothing in us or the Corinthians that merited God's choice.

God's choice was entirely unconditional and gracious, and it is because of God's gracious choice that we are in Christ, in whom we have graciously received a new standing. If the Corinthians wanted to look for a cause in themselves for God's choice of them, they would search in vain. However, having been chosen by God, we are in Christ Jesus.

We now belong to Him, we participate in His status and enjoy His riches. We had no wisdom to commend us. In Christ we have wisdom from God.

We were weak, lacking in social power and influence. In Christ we have the standing of righteousness before God, of right standing before the Father. We were despised.

In Christ we have sanctification. We are set apart as holy people to the Lord. We were nothing.

In Christ we have redemption. We are bought at the costliest of prices, marked out as precious in God's sight. We now have a standing and a status to rejoice in.

But no boast to make in ourselves. The point of all of this is that when we do boast, we must boast in God alone. Paul quotes Jeremiah 9, verses 23-24, which clearly underlies the entirety of his argument here.

Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord. There is a carnival-esque character to the Kingdom of God.

The typical ways of the world are suspended and overturned. Yet while a carnival is merely a temporary suspension or inversion of the social structure, a short relief from its crushing burden or an escape valve for its pent-up energies, the Church testifies to an ultimate order that exceeds the structures of this present age, an order in which no one can boast or exalt himself over others, where the proud of this age are humbled and the poor are exalted. Such a vision is one of the greatest treasures of the Christian Church.

When the theological foundation of this vision of equality is abandoned, its remarkable social vision starts to crumble and it cannot be easily recovered. It doesn't deny the great differences between people or pretend that they don't exist. It doesn't reduce people to sameness.

However, it declares a more ultimate reality that places all such differences in a completely different value system. It levels the ground beneath our feet and makes possible radical transformations in the ways that we imagine and live in society. The Epistle of James also raises some of these issues.

James 1, verses 9-11 And then in James 2, verses 5-7 And then in James 2, verses 7-8 And then in James 2, verses 9-10 And then in James 2, verses 9-11 Christ's strength manifest in weakness is a recurring theme in Paul, most notably in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 9-10. Paul's concern here is that his philosophical acumen or eloquence never obscure or undermine the content of his message, which is about the power of God, which overturns all of the value systems of this age. Paul isn't building a movement behind himself, the great teacher, orator and thinker, but he's bringing people to Christ and his cross.

The contrast between human wisdom and divine wisdom, however, does not mean that divine wisdom is simply defined by its negation of the value structures of human wisdom and power. There is a wisdom appropriate to the Gospel. Paul has already argued that we have a wisdom given to us in Christ.

And here he elaborates, this wisdom has been hidden since before the ages. It isn't a wisdom of this age, nor can it be understood by the rulers of this age. This wisdom was hidden before all ages, but also destined before all ages for our glory.

It is a glorious and a magnificent wisdom, a kingly wisdom, beyond the understanding of the supposedly glorious rulers of this age, who were brought to nothing by it. Had they understood it, they would not have crucified Christ. And Paul brings together some

echoes from Isaiah to underline his point.

Isaiah chapter 64 verse 4 And in Isaiah chapter 52 verse 15 This wisdom is known and given through the Spirit. Without the Spirit there would be no way of knowing it, for it is spiritually perceived. Yet the Spirit knows the things of God and can communicate them to His people.

Through the Spirit we can see that God doesn't just bring to nothing the pretensions of human wisdom, but He outmatches them with a higher wisdom. And it is Paul's task to communicate this wisdom in a manner fitting to its content and its character. The Spirit of God is at odds with the Spirit of this world, which puts its trust and boast in human power and wisdom, all of which have been brought low by God.

This is why Paul is so concerned about the downplaying of the cross, for the trappings of human wisdom, eloquence, influence and standing. The cross is the point where the wisdom of God is most clearly seen over against the wisdom of the world. Yet those who are so concerned with the way that they appear to the rich, the wise, the powerful and the influential of this age will always feel the greatest embarrassment about the cross and seek to avoid that point.

The spiritual person, the person who has received the Spirit of God, is able to discern things that the natural person, the person who lacks the Spirit, cannot. The person who truly operates by the Spirit of God can judge all things, but cannot be judged by others. Paul concludes the chapter by quoting a version of Isaiah chapter 40 verse 13, who has measured the Spirit of the Lord, or what man shows him his counsel.

But he makes a crucial shift in his final statement. We have the mind of Christ. Christ here is substituted for Lord, and the mind that he speaks of is clearly connected to the Spirit.

Mind here, as in Philippians 2, means mindset or way of thinking. In Christ we have a wisdom, a way of thinking, that is given through the Spirit, and which is God's very own. Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 8 describes this.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

By taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. As in Philippians 2, Paul's point here is that the mind of Christ is the mindset seen in Christ going to the cross, and any approach that would downplay the

cross and the way that it overturns the values of the world is not the Christian gospel. A question to consider.

How do you think Paul might have responded to Christians claiming some special spiritual status that exalted them above others, and some gnostic revelation that was exclusive to them? How does his own position not fall prey to this? Paul ended chapter 2 of 1 Corinthians by speaking of the contrast between the natural and the spiritual person, and the way that the spiritual person, the person who has the spirit of God and the mind of God in Christ, has perception that natural persons lack. Indeed, the spiritual person can judge all things while being judged by no one. Yet, beginning in chapter 3, Paul circles back to the problem he had highlighted at the beginning of this section in chapter 1 verses 10-12.

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ.

As long as the Corinthians think and act in such a way, they cannot be addressed as spiritual people. They haven't grasped the mind of Christ and his wisdom, but need to be taught the most basic rudiments of the Christian faith, being given milk rather than solid food. They aren't ready for anything more.

We find a similar statement contrasting the milk of instruction for infants in Christ, and solid food of wisdom for the mature, in Hebrews chapter 5 verses 12-14. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.

For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. The sign that they are of the flesh, that they are operating as natural persons rather than persons of the spirit, is seen in the jealousy and conflict that currently marks the community.

This is precisely the way of the flesh. The flesh creates a certain sort of community, a community of competitive and conflictual status-seeking, in which people bite and devour each other, as Paul discusses in Galatians chapter 5. The flesh is naturally driven by the desire for power, natural wisdom, for status and dominance, and is as such antagonistic to the way of the spirit, which produces fruit of an utterly different character. In Galatians chapter 5 verses 20-21, among the works of the flesh, Paul lists enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions and envy.

And these are the sorts of behaviours and traits that are on display in the Corinthian

church, where peace and brotherly love should be prevailing. The Corinthians seem to have exalted impressions of their own maturity, but Paul punctures and deflates these in this passage. Far from being advanced in the ways of the spirit, they haven't really begun to understand the basics.

The mind of Christ is clearly something that we do not receive suddenly and fully formed. Rather it is something that we must mature and grow in. It is a fruit that must grow within us, as we sow to the spirit rather than to the flesh.

The Corinthians have received the spirit, but they haven't really begun to grasp the mind of Christ, that the people of God should participate in by the spirit. Indeed, they are forming sectarian camps around ministers of Christ like Paul and Apollos, taking the ministry of the undivided Christ himself as an occasion for competitive alignments. Paul wants the Corinthians to be under no illusions about the nature of ministers like him and Apollos.

They are merely servants of their master Jesus Christ, appointed for specific tasks. Apollos was introduced to us in Acts chapter 18 verses 24-28. Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him.

When he arrived, he greatly helped those who through grace had believed. For he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ was Jesus. You can imagine that, with a man as brilliant and learned as Paul, and a man as eloquent and charismatic as Apollos, it was entirely natural for people to form camps around them.

Entirely natural, but not spiritual. Paul and Apollos had different but complementary callings. Paul planted the seed and Apollos watered, but God was the one giving the increase.

Ultimately, God's work underlies everything else. Despite diversity of labour, everything is bound together in the one God. Paul returns to this point in chapter 12 verses 4-6.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same spirit. And there are varieties of service, but the same Lord. And there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in every one.

Ultimately, amidst the diversity of different ministers and gifts, there is one God who is active in everything. Speaking of this diversity of gifts in the church, Paul also emphasises the unity of divine activity in chapter 12 verse 11. All these are empowered by one and the same spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.

And here he is making a similar point in a different way. The man planting and the man watering are unified by a common purpose, and both will be rewarded by their master. They are not each working their own personal field, but they are both labouring on the same field, God's field.

They are collaborating to produce the same fruit, rather than competing against each other. They are fellow workers with God, God is working in and through them. Apollos and Paul are united expressions of God's work in the field of His church.

They have the same source and the same end. And the Corinthians, rather than pitting the ministers of the Lord against each other, should see themselves as benefiting from their collaboration as the field of the Lord. Paul now shifts to a building metaphor.

Once again, diversity of ministries is an important theme here. The ministers of the church come from the same source and serve the same end, but do so in diverse ways. A building built by builders in rivalry with each other would not be a very good building, but nor would a building where everyone was performing exactly the same task.

You need a diversity of different ministries. Paul's task was to lay the foundation as a master builder. No other foundation exists but Christ.

And Paul in this letter is in many respects returning to inspect that foundation. His concern to this point has been to ensure that the Corinthians are absolutely clear that Christ is the only foundation upon which to build, and that the cross is the shape of this foundation. Jesus is the Messiah who builds a new tabernacle, and Paul the tentmaker is, like Bezalel, a master builder working upon it.

There is going to come a day of testing, revealing the quality of people's work and the foundation that they have built upon. Each one of the Corinthians is building their part of the building with their lives, and the judgment fire of the day of testing, whether the final great day of the Lord or a great day of testing in the middle of history, is going to prove what their work truly is. We find similar language concerning a day of judgment of the prophets.

Amos 7, verse 4 Malachi 3, verses 2-3 When the fire of testing comes, all work done in the flesh will be burned up. The difference between combustible and enduring work will be revealed, and the true character of what we have done will be shown. It doesn't matter how wise, powerful, influential or successful we appear to the eyes of men, our true character will be revealed on that day.

If we have built with the materials of the flesh, our work, no matter how beautiful it appears on the surface, will be destroyed, as there is nothing enduring to be refined. Such persons may be saved, but only as those snatched from the flames of divine purification. However, those who have built upon the true foundation and with good materials will receive a reward.

As Christians, we are to be the builders of the temple of God, working as those who will face a final inspection and test of our labour. And the building image is sharpened in precisely this way in the following verses. The building is not just a general building, it is the temple for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Here it is the whole church that is the temple of the Holy Spirit, whereas in chapter 6 verse 19 the temple is the body of the individual Christian. The Messiah is the temple builder, and the temple he is building is formed of people, and each one of us is building as part of it. This is imagery that we encounter elsewhere in the Pauline epistles.

In Ephesians chapter 2 verses 19 to 22, So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. This temple is holy, and God is jealous for it.

If anyone destroys or defiles the temple, God will destroy them. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. And Paul drives home the argument of the end of chapter 1 and the beginning of chapter 2 here.

The Corinthians should not delude themselves. True wisdom involves becoming as fools as we seek God's wisdom over that of this age. God outwits the wise of this age in their wisdom, while establishing a greater wisdom of the Spirit as its true alternative.

In all of this, God demonstrates his supremacy and nullifies the boasting of man. Paul quotes two Old Testament verses here. Job chapter 5 verse 13, He catches the wise in their own craftiness, and the schemes of the wily are brought to a quick end.

And Psalm 94 verse 11, When it all comes down to it, all boasting in ourselves or in human things is negated. All things come from God, and all things serve God. If we belong to Christ, all ministers and all forces of creation operate for our well-being under the super-intention of God.

God works in and through them all for his undivided purpose in his Messiah. A question to consider, what can we learn about the final judgment within this passage? In 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul continues the argument of the preceding chapter. For the Corinthians, who have been elevating ministers and missionaries above their proper

station, it is important to establish some sense of proper proportion.

Paul, Apollos, Cephas and others are simply servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. They must be faithful and ultimately are answerable to the judgment of the Lord alone. The court of human opinion is not the court about which Paul is most concerned.

In chapter 2 verse 15, he made a similar point. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. Because they aren't acting for the court of human opinion, the whole game of status-seeking that the Corinthians are so concerned about is abandoned.

Rather, the apostles must seek the approval of the Lord, who is their master, the one to whom they are ultimately answerable. The judgment and the praise of the Lord must be patiently awaited, and until it comes, the ministers of Christ must be trustworthy, recognizing that they must give an account of their service to God. They don't indulge in boasting and the pursuit of status, because this is to seek approval from the wrong source.

It's also characteristic of the flesh, which is pompous, prideful and puffed up, is overly concerned with the praise of a human audience and unmindful of God. Paul has to this point spoken as if he were merely writing about how other people viewed him, Apollos and Cephas and a few others. Yet it becomes apparent that Paul was speaking to broader and deeper problems in the Church by using himself and Apollos as examples.

The real parties causing the problem are modestly veiled by the fact that Paul uses himself and Apollos as the case studies, so that the Corinthians might learn the proper principles by examining their cases. The principle here is that they should not go beyond what is written. In this case I think that Paul means by this strange statement the message of the Gospel.

Going beyond that message would involve adding to the truth of the cross in ways that the Corinthians had clearly been doing, with notions of super-spirituality, status-seeking and human wisdom. And recognizing the scriptural testimony to the truth of the cross as God's wisdom, their competitive struggle for honour and status would be abandoned. The cross is the most basic and foundational truth and they must never leave it behind.

Once the Corinthians have grasped the basics that Paul has been teaching, they should recognize that there is nothing in them, considered in themselves, that sets them apart from or above others. As Paul wrote back in chapter 1 verse 30, Everything that they have in the way of standing has been received as a gift from God, so it is ridiculous to act as if they hadn't received it, as if they naturally possessed it. The next section of this passage drips with irony.

The Corinthians seemingly had extreme notions of conversion, notions of conversion characterized by what some have called over-realized eschatology. They were acting as if they already enjoyed the fullness of the kingdom and the full measure of the spirit, failing to appreciate just how far short they fell and how far off these things were in their full enjoyment. This sort of super-spirituality had little place for the cross.

It was about power, about elevated spiritual status and radical freedom. And Paul will have a lot to say to challenge such a spirituality over the course of this letter. Here, he tackles it by presenting an ironic portrayal of such a spirituality.

He holds it up for some ridicule and contrasts it with the reality that he and the other apostles face on the ground. The Corinthians think of themselves as kings, as those who are rich, as people who reign and who have the fullness of what they want. They are already acting as if they were living in the age to come.

They have seemingly entered into this consummation of the kingdom in the absence of Paul and his companions. The Corinthians seem to imagine themselves as if in some great triumphal procession leading the way at the front. And yet, in that great triumphal procession, where are Paul and the apostles to be found? They are not the kings leading at the front.

They are more like the gladiators at the very rear. They are condemned to struggle to the death in the arena, and their sufferings are like a grand spectacle before the whole cosmos. Isn't it strange that the Corinthians see themselves as wise, strong and honoured, when the apostles' experience is the exact opposite? In the starkest of contrasts, Paul describes the positions of the apostles, and how completely alien to the supposed experience of the Corinthian super-spiritual Christians it is.

Far from experiencing constant victory, from reigning like kings, from enjoying extreme riches, superior wisdom and radical liberty, the experience of the apostles is one of suffering, daily hardship, lack, hunger and thirst, persecution, rejection, ridicule and dishonour. However, in this difficult situation they respond according to the mind of Christ. They respond to cursing with blessing, to persecution with endurance, to slander with kindness.

Just as Christ was cut off by the world at the cross, his faithful followers are regarded as if they were the scum of the earth, refused to be thrown out. The point of all of this is not to shame the Corinthians. However, of all the people that ministered to the Corinthians, few could claim to stand in the position of a father.

Paul, however, can speak to them like a father. He became their father as one who first delivered the gospel to them. They are seen as his dear children.

He has a peculiar interest in and concern for their spiritual well-being, greater than any

of those who are simply like their guardians. As a father figure he has an especial responsibility to give an example and training to them. And for this reason he is sending Timothy to them, whom he describes as his loved son.

Timothy is the appointed son who represents and acts on behalf of his father. He is also a model son. He is the image of his father.

He will remind them of Paul's way of life by his own behaviour. Timothy will provide them with a good model to emulate and a pattern for their own growth. A question to consider, what are some of the forms that the era of the Corinthians discussed in this chapter can take in the contemporary church? Paul is sending on Timothy to the Corinthians as his faithful son to remind them of his ways in Christ.

And Paul ends chapter 4 by warning those in Corinth who are puffed up, as if Paul wasn't coming to visit and test them. However he will visit them soon, if the Lord wills. At that point it will become clear whether the troublemakers in Corinth are more than just pompous talk.

The substance, or as it seems more likely the lack of substance, of the puffed up troublemakers will soon be made manifest. They are full of pompous talk of elevated spirituality. But the kingdom of God isn't about fine yet empty talk.

It's about power, about efficacy, about what is actually carried out. These Corinthian troublemakers are like a product that promises the most dramatic effects and transformations on the packaging, in the most extreme and hyperbolic language. However the packaging isn't the point.

What matters is what effect the product actually has when it's taken. They have a choice at this point. Will Paul have to come with a serious rebuke and judgement to them? Or will they take his warning, deal with the issues and receive a visit from a gentle and loving Paul? Word has gotten around of an especially egregious sin among the Corinthians.

A man is having relations with his father's wife, presumably his stepmother. This is an ongoing situation too. It's not just a past sin.

It's the sort of thing that would be scandalous even among Gentiles. And far from mourning this sin in their midst, the Corinthians remain complacent and arrogant. They're proudly confident in their superior spirituality.

They still see themselves as reigning like kings and being rich, even as this grave wickedness is being practised in their midst. Such an offender must be removed. Paul, while he is physically absent from the Corinthians, is present in the Spirit.

Anthony Thistleton makes a strong case that it is the Holy Spirit, rather than Paul's

human spirit, that is in view here. Paul and the Corinthians share the same one Spirit of God, and by that Holy Spirit Paul is present to them. As present in such a manner, Paul has already pronounced judgement upon the man, and the Corinthians need officially to assemble together as the Church, gathering in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and formally to deliver this offender over to Satan, with Paul participating in their judgement by that one Spirit.

This is to the end that that which is fleshly might be destroyed, and that which is spiritual might be saved. Delivering him to Satan is formal excommunication. It removes the man from the protective realm of the Church, the protected realm of Christ's kingdom.

It declares that such a man belongs outside, is one excluded, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. True excommunication is an application of the keys of the kingdom, and the keys of the kingdom are the powerful word of Christ that is entrusted to the Church. This isn't a blank cheque of authority that's written out to the Church.

Rather it is the task of proclamation of Christ's judgement that is entrusted to the Church as his stewards. This is something that the Church has a duty to perform in instances like this. When flagrant sin is committed, the Church is responsible to proclaim Christ's word of condemnation, not creating a condemnation of its own, but delivering Christ's judgement.

And they need to act, as Paul emphasises here, in the name and the authority of Jesus Christ. What is fleshly clearly refers to the man, but probably not merely to him. It refers to the fleshly character of the Corinthian Church in general.

They need to deal with that as a matter of urgency. Likewise, the salvation of the spirit is not necessarily referring to the man. Although excommunication can have a chastening effect that humbles sinners and brings them to repentance, the sinner may not be the chief person in mind here.

It could refer to the spiritual life of the Church, which would be seriously threatened if the offender was permitted to remain in it. All of this is done in anticipation of the Day of the Lord. The excommunication of the Church is a temporal and anticipatory judgement by which the Church formally and faithfully proclaims Christ's condemnation of the impenitent sinner, in order that the holiness of the Church might be preserved and the sinner brought to repentance.

Paul teaches something similar about anticipatory judgement later in the Epistle, in relation to the supper, in chapter 11 verses 28-32. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgement on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined, so that we may not be condemned along with the world. One of the purposes of Church discipline is to prepare us to stand before Christ at the final judgement.

As we confess our sins, repent and seek absolution, we keep short accounts with God. We ready ourselves in this way for that great day. Every week we present ourselves before the Lord, rehearsing for the final judgement.

An excommunication excludes someone from the assembly, proclaiming their standing before God, or lack of standing, something that is evidenced by their behaviour and their impenitence. Some have seen 2 Corinthians 2 verses 5-11 as referring to the restoration of the sinner mentioned in this passage. Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you.

For such a one this punishment by the majority is enough. So you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, so that we would not be outwitted by Satan, for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Paul wants the Corinthians to be clear. In the Church, no man is an island. The unaddressed sin of one man compromises the entire congregation.

Paul's thinking here is deeply rooted in the Old Testament teaching. When a man like Achan sinned, even secretly, the entire congregation could suffer as a result. When an egregious sin was committed, and the congregation failed to punish it, the whole congregation would face the judgment.

Sin is contagious, and its guilt is something that can lie upon everyone when it is not dealt with. Communities need to deal with sin in their midst with the utmost seriousness. Leviticus 20, verses 2-5 expresses some of this.

In this chapter, Paul uses the example of leaven. This recalls the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Passover. Leaven is something small that, when introduced, can change the character of the whole lump of dough into which it is placed.

The cutting off of the leaven of Egypt represented the cutting off of the old principle of life that Israel had followed in that land. Jesus elsewhere uses leaven to illustrate the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. It's their tradition that's passed on from one generation of scribes and Pharisees to the next.

And each generation has that culture, that way of life, that principle of behavior that they have inherited from those who went before. And this poisonous principle keeps perpetuating itself. That is why the leaven must be cut off.

Now there is a new cutting off that must take place. Christ is our Passover Lamb, and we are part of a new Exodus event. In the Gospels, Christ is spoken of as the Lamb of God in chapter 1, verse 29 of John.

He's the one who takes away the sin of the world. He's the one who was crucified when the Passover Lambs were being sacrificed. Like the Passover Lamb, none of his bones were broken.

Just as the Passover Lamb was part of the deliverance of Egypt, so Christ, our Passover Lamb, is the one by whom we were redeemed from this new Egypt, delivered from the clutches of the Pharaoh of Sin. To participate in this new Passover, and enjoy this new Exodus, however, we must utterly cut off the old patterns of life and start anew. The old leaven is the leaven of malice and evil.

It spreads that principle in our lives and in the lives of our communities, so that it ends up working its way out into everything that we do. This is the leaven of the flesh. Rather than living according to this leaven, we must purge it out and act in sincerity or purity and truth.

This is clearly not Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, as he references another letter here, one in which he instructed them not to associate with sexually immoral persons. Here he makes clear what he meant by that. Not sexually immoral people in the world, but those who purport to belong to the Church.

A task of judgment is committed to the Church, and it is essential that it separates from any who are characterized by such wickedness, to the extent of not even eating with them. Those in the world are left to God's judgment, but the Church must exercise judgment in its own house. Paul concludes with an allusion to a repeated expression in Deuteronomy, used for sins committed that involve complete expulsion or the death penalty.

Purge the evil person from among you. Deuteronomy emphasizes the same principle as Paul does here. By their very presence in the assembly, the evil person corrupts, and their guilt is contagious.

If the congregation does not deal directly with the evil person, they will all suffer as a result. Paul lists six sins in verse 11. Sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, and swindling.

Brian Rosner argues that these correspond with the six passages in Deuteronomy that call for the death penalty, passages that are followed by the same expression as Paul

uses in verse 13. Richard Hayes notes that Paul doesn't say that, just as God told Israel to drive out the evil person, so you should do. Rather, he simply directly applies the Old Testament command on this point to the Church, as a word that is addressed to them every bit as much as Israel.

While these commands are not being fulfilled with the death penalty, the Church's practice of excommunication has a similar force within its life. A question to consider. Within this chapter we see various indications and expressions of the profound union enjoyed by God's people, along with exhortations to protect it from corruption.

What are some of the ways in which the fact of such a union transforms the way that we think about Christian behaviour, and about ethics more generally? In 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul raises the issue of the Corinthian Christians bringing legal cases against other Christians in the congregation. The previous chapter had highlighted the responsibility that the Church had to cast judgment, in the case of the man with his father's wife. In that case, the Church was called to gather together and declare judgment, condemning the man and delivering him over to Satan.

This judgment anticipated the final judgment. At the end of the chapter, Paul declared, It is likely that the parties involved in these legal cases were wealthier and more powerful. They were using the courts against weaker persons in all likelihood, as civil cases were matters for the rich and powerful, and the outcome of such cases would likely have been decided by the wealth of the parties involved.

Paul cross-examines those who are so eager to go to the law courts. Don't they know that the saints will one day judge the world? That they'll even judge angels? And yet, the Corinthians are suggesting by their actions that they are incompetent to adjudicate in everyday cases. Paul might have verses such as Daniel chapter 7 verses 21 to 22 and verse 27 of that chapter in mind when he talks about the judgment that the saints will exercise over the world and over angels.

As I looked, this horn made war with the saints and prevailed over them, until the Ancient of Days came, and judgment was given for the saints of the Most High, and the time came when the saints possessed the kingdom. And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High. His kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom, and all dominion shall serve and obey Him.

Matthew chapter 19 verse 28 gives a similar impression. Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And in Revelation chapter 20 verse 4, Then I saw thrones, and seated on them were those to whom the authority to judge was committed.

Also I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God, and those who had not worshipped the beast or its image, and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. The Corinthians think that they have great wisdom, they think that they reign like kings, and yet for all of this supposed super-spirituality, they act as if unbelievers are better equipped to judge than Christians.

The very fact of such legal conflict between church members is already a sign of catastrophic failure, even apart from the scandal of airing their personal disputes before unbelievers, and in the process tacitly admitting their inadequacy to execute judgement themselves. Paul wants the Corinthians to feel ashamed that such a situation could arise, and he twists the knife of his criticism in verse 5. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers? You who have been talking so much about your wisdom and your reigning like kings, is there truly no one among you who can deal with these cases? The Corinthians seem to have forgotten that they are the people of God. If anything, the Corinthians should prefer to allow themselves be wronged and defrauded than to go to the unrighteous pagans, those who are despised for their injustice, for judgement.

It is much better to be defrauded and wronged than to defraud and wrong. And then also a preoccupation with your rights over other concerns is a sign of the flesh. Paul's point is not that legal cases are always inappropriate.

Rather, the behaviour of the Corinthians is revealing deep problems within their community. It's revealing the hollowness of their boast. And it's also showing that they are not a people who love and care for each other.

They are rather acting as people of the flesh, people who will bite and devour each other, people who are preoccupied with their own rights over the well-being of all. Paul wants the Corinthians to be aware that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God. Bringing predatory legal cases against others and having sexual relations with your father's wife are practices characteristic of this evil age.

And those who practice or give themselves over to such things will end up being condemned with the evil age. Back in verse 11 of the preceding chapter, Paul wrote, But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother, if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler, not even to eat with such a one. He mentions these offences again in this chapter, but he adds to them adulterers and thieves, and two others, which the ESV combines as men who practice homosexuality.

Many of these things are related to the offenders that must be cut off in the book of Deuteronomy and elsewhere. The greedy, the thieves, and the swindlers might relate to the discussion of people going to court against others. That's what they're engaged in,

and these are not the practices of those who will inherit the kingdom of God.

The words grouped together as men who practice homosexuality should probably be distinguished. Other translations use terms like passive homosexual partners practicing homosexuals, or effeminate, nor sodomites, or male prostitutes, sodomites. They seem to form a pair, but there are differences between these two things.

Some have seen it as the active and the passive partner in homosexual relations, but there is probably more going on. The second term appears here in the Greek record for the first time. It is, however, a word that essentially refers to one who lies with a male, as we see the construction of the term.

It presumably is based upon the Old Testament prohibition in Leviticus 18, verse 22. You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.

The first word literally means soft ones, and is often translated effeminate, although the term isn't etymologically related to femininity, as it is in English, although it can be conceptually related, as soft men would often adopt feminine affectations. Because of the association of effeminacy with male prostitution or passive homosexual partners in antiquity, some have translated it those ways, drawing those more specific associations. The association with homosexual practice does seem to be there.

However, it should not be so narrowly defined. The concept here is not merely concerned with sexual behaviour, but also includes what many would term presentation. In Deuteronomy 22, verse 5, we're told, A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's cloak, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.

The concept of softness here probably involves a cluster of related things, sexual deviancy, men acting and dressing like women, a devotion to luxury, ease and pleasure. And these are the sinners in Paul's list that get the most attention, as they excite the most controversy in the current context. However, they are classed alongside sexually immoral persons more generally, alongside drunkards and other sinners whose sins are more economic in character.

Paul's point here, however, is to call the Corinthians to live out the transformation that has occurred in their lives. They used to be all of these things. They used to be defined by such behaviours, traits and practices.

But something changed. He writes, You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. He presumably has their baptism in mind here, when they were washed and their setting apart was sealed to them.

Baptism is also a public declaration of our vindication by God, sealing our justification.

Like the coronation ceremony performed upon someone who has acceded to the throne, baptism is a formal solemnisation of our new status in Christ. We should be able to look back at our baptisms and recall all the realities that have been sealed to us in it, adoption, justification, sanctification, forgiveness of sins, and then grasping hold of these promises and gifts by faith, live confidently in terms of them.

That seems to be what Paul intends here. By recalling the Corinthians to the fact of their baptism, he will now call them to live out its meaning faithfully. The Corinthians seem to have used slogans to describe their spirituality, and Paul takes these up and responds to them, All things are lawful or permitted for me.

They think that they reign like kings, they are the wise, they have freedom to act as they please. Paul responds to their slogans in verses 12-14. So the Corinthian slogan, All things are lawful or permitted for me.

Paul's response, But not all things are helpful. The Corinthian slogan, All things are lawful or permitted for me, but I will not be dominated by anything. And then the Corinthian slogan, Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food, and God will destroy both one and the other.

And then Paul's response, The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body, and God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power. You should see the symmetry between those statements. Food is meant for the stomach, and the stomach for food.

The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. And then, God will destroy both one and the other. And God raised the Lord, and will also raise us up by his power.

The Corinthians believe that everything is permitted them, but not everything is helpful and edify. They champion unfettered liberty, but such liberty can take liberties with us and end up binding us to its service. As they are elevated spiritual persons, they think it doesn't matter what they do with their bodies.

Yet the body is not marginalised by Christian spirituality. The body will not be finally destroyed, but it belongs to the Lord, and it will be raised up, just as Christ's body was raised. The Corinthians seem to use this slogan about food to justify their sexual promiscuity and other forms of sexual immorality.

If the body is just going to be destroyed, it doesn't really matter that much what you do or don't do with your body. They could continue sleeping with prostitutes, because the body ultimately does not matter. Our bodies, however, Paul argues, are in an intimate union with Christ.

They are his members, his limbs and his organs. He talks about this sort of thing in

Romans, in chapter 6, verse 13. In the context of that chapter, he's talking about baptism.

In baptism, our bodies are presented to God. They're marked out as his, and they're marked out for resurrection. In chapter 12, verse 1 of Romans, Spiritual worship involves the presentation of bodies.

Our bodies belong to Christ and should not be joined to prostitutes. Paul quotes Genesis, chapter 2, verse 24, about the man and the woman becoming one flesh. Irrespective of the intent of the parties involved, a union occurs.

Paul makes the statement, flee from sexual immorality, and the Corinthians' implicit response is, Every sin a person commits is outside the body. It doesn't really impact upon me. And then Paul responds by arguing that the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.

He's defiling the church of God. He's dishonouring his body. He's taking what belongs to Christ and giving it to an unholy person.

The church, as Paul has argued in chapter 3, verses 16-17, is God's temple. God will destroy him, for God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. The individual, however, is also the temple, with the spirit dwelling in them.

We must treat our bodies accordingly. They are temples of the Holy Spirit. Our bodies are not our own to act with however we please.

We were bought with the price of Christ's sacrificed body, and we must glorify God in our bodies for that reason. A question to consider. How does the foundation of Christian sexual ethics, as described by Paul, contrast with the foundation of modern sexual ethics? In chapter 7 of 1 Corinthians, Paul seems to be responding to some specific questions from the Corinthians.

The claim of the opening verse, It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman, is not Paul's own claim. Rather, it seems to be a quotation from the Corinthians' letter to Paul. Throughout this chapter, and at various other points in the letter, we have to guess at the position of the Corinthians, or the positions that they were inquiring about, through a sort of shadow reading of the text, inferring from Paul's arguments what the arguments of his opponents or interlocutors were.

In a situation with so much sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband. Paul is writing into the Corinthian context, where they are sitting rather easy to gross sexual sin in their midst. Paul is not arguing, however, that marriage is merely for the sake of avoiding sexual immorality, rather that a situation like that in Corinth is one where marriage makes even more sense.

If we read between the lines of Paul's argument, it might seem that his opponents have a sort of spirituality that both denies the body, and ends up indulging the body. In their super-spirituality, they think themselves above the body, and so things associated with the bodily passions, such as sexual relations, might need to be avoided. However, if sexual relations are engaged in, it's no big deal.

It's just a matter of the body. While it would be more desirable to give oneself to asceticism, if you cannot do that, it merely inconveniences your spirituality. It doesn't imperil it.

We might think of Paul's teaching in Colossians chapter 2, verses 20-23 here. If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations, do not handle, do not taste, do not touch, referring to things that all perish as they are used, according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom, in promoting self-made religion and asceticism, and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh. A religion that is supposedly above the body and seeks to deny its appetites, but which also, in its downplaying of the importance of the body, doesn't take the sins of the body very seriously, is wide open to all sorts of problems and abuses.

The alternative to this is a society of marital faithfulness over against a society of widespread sexual immorality. The Corinthians, like many in the early church and in that society, seem to have had strange views about sex and how it relates to supposed spiritual persons. Sex can be seen as something bodily, to be denigrated.

Paul's point is not that marriage is something lesser, a mere concession to the flesh. However, his concern is to avoid sexual immorality and to advocate for faithful and sexually active monogamy or celibacy as the licit alternatives. And there's an element of realism in Paul's counsel here.

People have often claimed an elevated spiritual character exempts them from the temptations and dangers surrounding sexual behaviour and relations. Again and again we discover that it doesn't, and that responsible limits and practices guard us from temptation, and are necessary and wise. We should not, like the Corinthians, think that we reign like kings and are above the temptations of Satan.

Rather, we should be humble and wise to his ways, guarding and arming ourselves against his stratagems. Both spouses in a marriage should give the other their conjugal rights. One of the problems at current might be a sort of asceticism, in which couples are denying each other sexual relations, and as a result of such denial, improper sexual relations are occurring.

Paul argues that neither the husband nor the wife have authority over their own bodies. This is not a claim that the spouses' bodies are entirely the possession of the other, but

that neither has exclusive rights over their own bodies, but has a duty lovingly to render their bodies to the other, and should not deprive the other for lengthy periods of time, save by mutual agreement. Paul is saying this as a concession, not a command.

He isn't instructing married couples to refrain from sexual intimacy for periods of time. He's merely presenting this as an option. Paul himself is celibate, and if you asked his personal preference, it would be that all were like him.

However, what really matters is God's action, not Paul's personal perspective, and God has given different people different situations and different callings. Paul speaks to the unmarried and the widows. He tells them that it's good for them to remain single.

The point isn't that it is the only good thing to do, but rather that the urgency of marriage or remarriage need not be felt. If a man's wife has died, for instance, there's no necessity that he remarry again. There's no urgency to that.

Paul himself is single and is contentedly remaining in that state. It is likely that Paul himself was a widower, or perhaps his wife left him when he became a Christian. When such a thing happens, we need not desire to change everything about our position.

We can remain in our current position. The point is not that the single must remain single, but rather that it is not necessary for them to enter into the state of marriage. The New Testament treats the unmarried state as one that Christians can purposefully pursue, and one that in certain instances is even preferable, as the unmarried person can devote themselves more fully to the service of the Kingdom of God.

One of the things that this does is to disrupt the cultural script of marriage as a matter of course, the expectation that everyone should get married. Marriage ceases to be something that we just do because it is what everyone is expected to do, and it becomes something that we need to think about as a particular Christian vocation, a vocation among other vocations. Viewing marriage primarily as one possible mode of Christian discipleship, rather than as the presumed script that everyone must follow, is really important.

If marriage is just the necessary following of a cultural script, we lose the ability to see Christian marriage as a form of vocation, and a similar sense about the various vocations that exist for the unmarried is lost. There are too many people who think that since they are unmarried, they have somehow forfeited God's plan for their lives, that God's purpose for everyone is to happily pair them off with another partner. Yet Paul wants the readers of this letter to understand that, with regard to God's calling, there is no urgency to leave the unmarried state.

However, if the unmarried cannot control their passions, they should marry, rather than have those passions burning in more dangerous ways. Paul then turns to speak to

married couples. Divorce or separation must be avoided if at all possible.

Where divorce does occur, the person should seek to remain single, or should seek reconciliation with their alienated spouse, and Paul bases this on the commandment of the Lord. He is likely referring to Jesus' teaching on the subject in the book of Matthew or Mark. Jesus himself has spoken directly to that issue, and Paul relays Jesus' teaching to the Corinthians.

He goes on to deal with further categories of persons, for instance Christians with unbelieving partners. In those situations they should not seek divorce when the partner consents to remain. Now, you can imagine after the preceding chapter there is a question that arises here.

Wouldn't having a relationship with an unbelieving spouse pollute the body of Christ, along the lines discussed in chapter 6? No, Paul argues, the unbelieving partner is sanctified by their continued willing union with the Christian spouse, and the same is true of their children, who have been separated from the pagan world by their association with their Christian parent. In such a marriage, a Christian wife or husband may exert a considerable influence upon their unbelieving spouse. When reading this chapter, it is really important to recognise the way that, in the words of Anthony Thistleton, Paul is very sensitive to matters of circumstance and situation and the contingent issues of people's lives.

There is a very careful interplay between pastoral and ethical concerns in Paul's teaching. Most of the teaching in this chapter does not come as absolute commandment, but in form of wise counsel, in the form of preferred courses of action in different situations, and other things like that. Even when things go wrong, or people do not act as they should do, the grace of God remains for them still, and can be known in their circumstances, even the most difficult.

Paul's teaching about calling here, and different situations, helps us to realise that God's grace can take root in our lives wherever we find ourselves. Paul draws back from the specific case of marriage at this point to explore the broader principle. People should live in the life that God has placed them in, and not always seek for alternative situations.

We all find ourselves in constrained situations, but our freedom to obey God is not compromised or undermined by this. And he's challenging a sort of over-realised eschatology, which would present escape from certain conditions as necessary for the realisation of our spirituality. The slave, for instance, cannot be a Christian in the condition of slavery, he must become free.

For such an approach, the person who's married to the unbelieving spouse would be imprisoned by that fact, and denied the possibility to live a proper Christian life. But yet Paul teaches quite otherwise. The reality of God's call can come to us in whatever

situation we find ourselves, even ones that are far from ideal.

And this saves us from having to fret about the situations and the conditions we find ourselves in, without denying the power of the Gospel to transform the actual lives that we are living. He gives the example of circumcision and uncircumcision. The condition is not the point.

What matters is living faithfully, keeping the commandments of God. He then turns to slave and free. He deals with a situation not clear in the ESV's translation, where there is a future possibility of freedom.

In such a situation, use your current condition of slavery for Christ. Don't allow your hope or yearning for a more ideal future situation to deprive you of the possibility of serving God where you are right now. That doesn't mean that you shouldn't take the opportunity if it arises.

But do not allow your service of God to become contingent upon the possibility of that eventuality occurring. The calling to faithfulness comes to us in our current situations and circumstances, where we are right now. There is a vast difference, of course, between slave and free in the present age.

However, viewed from the perspective of the age to come, which has been inaugurated in Christ, the master is no longer over the slave and the slave is no longer under the master. And the slave is called to live in terms of that fact right now, to stand in a different relationship to his continuing condition of service. This doesn't mean that there are not discriminations to be made.

We have been bought by Christ, so we do not enslave ourselves to men. If we can, at all costs, we avoid giving ourselves into the condition of slavery, and we should seek to abolish slavery where we can. The enslaved person has been bought by Christ and is his freed person, and free people should not enslave themselves to men.

Paul now speaks to those who are not yet married. And in his teaching here, it's important to recognise the difference between what Anthony Thistleton has called a theology of eschatological imminence and a chronology of eschatological imminence. While the latter operates in terms of a conviction that the absolute end of the cosmos is only months or years away, the former necessitates no such belief.

Rather, the theology of eschatological imminence that we encounter in the New Testament arises chiefly from the combination of the apocalyptic judgment of the cross and the inauguration of the new creation in the resurrection. The new life of the age to come has already been inaugurated, it's already starting to take effect. Life after these events is characterised by a radical relativisation of the current world order, an intensified sense of its penultimacy.

From now on, all human history occurs beneath the shadow of God's eschatological kingdom, which is already at work in our midst. Our understanding of the true character of the nearness of the end things should not be allowed to be compromised by our modern reduction of all time to clock time. Others have drawn a distinction between what has been called participant logic and observer logic, and these are two different perspectives from which we may speak of the end of the world.

In the case of observer logic, the end of the world would refer to the final end of the material and the intersubjective cosmos. But in the case of participant logic, the end of the world can refer to the catastrophic collapse of the established state of a particular society or a person's historical existence. The destruction of Jerusalem and her temple in AD 70 would have represented just such an event for many early Jewish Christians.

In declaring in verse 29 that the appointed time has been shortened, Paul may refer to the way in which the cross and resurrection has brought the end things near to us in history. We now exist in a sort of providential window of opportunity. This has been graciously held open by God for us, and this should heighten our sense of present urgency, our sense of the theological imminence of the eschaton, and of the penultimacy of the existing social and political order, and the fact that it is passing away that can be elevated by specific historical threats or instabilities.

These things can wean us off our investment in the world. Some commentators have suggested that the Corinthians that Paul addressed within this letter were facing just such a situation, maybe something provoked by famine or severe persecution, and in such a period of social ferment, the proximity of the end things is acutely felt. We feel the shadow of eternity looming over the crumbling social order.

That doesn't mean that the actual last day has arrived, but we do find ourselves caught in its gravity. In this context, Paul's concern seems to be less with preparing the Corinthians for the end of all things than with sparing them from the greater pressures and worries that would afflict those whose embeddedness in the collapsing order was exacerbated by marriage or by their many possessions. It is within this context that Paul advances an ethic for life in the shadow of the last things.

As the external structures of this world are slipping away, we must learn to occupy the world as those who are not preoccupied with it. We engage with the world, but we do not tie ourselves to it. We may or may not feel the slipping away of the external structures of our present world as keenly as Paul's original addressees might have, but their transience and penultimacy remains a fact of considerable importance.

To some degree or other, all of us are invested in the current order of our world, in its political structures, in its economic and social institutions. Unfortunately, not only do we occupy these existing structures, we are all too often preoccupied with them, dulled to any sense of their impermanence in the face of God's inaugurated and coming kingdom.

While the collapse of these structures may not be as near at hand as the destruction of Jerusalem was for the first Christians, it is no less certain.

The present form of our national and international politics, for instance, is passing away. Like the nations and empires before them, our prevailing political powers and certainties will one day pass away, perhaps altogether beyond memory. Paul never argues for a complete detachment and disengagement from the world.

We still are those who deal with the world, we buy and sell, we mourn and rejoice, but our participation in these activities is now tempered by Paul's radical as-though. No longer are these activities permitted to be the preoccupations that they once were, to be the defining features or the determinative realities of our existence. Rather, we now undertake these activities as people who belong to the eschatological kingdom of Christ that is coming to dawn in the world.

Our existence is determined by the reality of Christ's kingdom, not the passing structures of this age. We have been unplugged from the immediacy of our social reality, and we now engage with it as those who are no longer bound to it and identified by it. Paul's concern in all of this is to free the Corinthians from undue anxiety.

While it is perfectly possible to serve the Lord in varied circumstances, it is difficult when we find ourselves pulled in different directions. Paul isn't commanding the Corinthians or suggesting that single people are better than married people. Rather, he is revealing the inherent challenges of some callings, and how certain callings may afford us certain freedoms over others.

The woman whose husband dies is free to remarry another Christian. While it is possible to be faithful in a relationship with a non-Christian spouse, it is not appropriate to enter into such a state as a Christian. A question to consider, what are some Christian practices that help us to sustain the attitudes to our circumstances and vocations that Paul identifies here? 1 Corinthians chapter 8 turns to a new issue, food associated with pagan deities or idol meat.

There are various ways in which food could be entangled with pagan deities. Sometimes it would be meat in the marketplace that would have come from pagan sacrifices. Meat could also be eaten in cultic meals, or in meals otherwise associated with pagan temples and their gods.

In some such cases, there might be the sense of eating in the presence of the deity, and wealthy Corinthians would likely have been invited to meals in dining places associated with temples. This was an issue in the early church, we see it in Acts chapter 15, verses 19-20 and 28-29. Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood.

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements, that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.

And then in Revelation chapter 2, verse 20, But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality, and to eat food sacrificed to idols. All of us possess knowledge, seems to be a statement of the Corinthians, and Paul here provisionally presents this viewpoint as if he agreed with it for his rhetorical purposes, before going on to subvert it. We should likely also read knowledge here as if in scare quotes, as Paul's following statements seem to support.

The Corinthians' supposed knowledge probably had a lot to do with their supposed super-spirituality. They likely believed that they can eat food associated with pagan deities with no problem whatsoever, believing that the pagan deities are not real, and that it is just meat. They might even be purposefully eating pagan meat to make the point, to display their knowledge.

Yet such knowledge merely puffs people up, it makes them feel self-important and superior. Love, however, builds up. It has substance and genuineness to it.

Love, in contrast to such knowledge, is concerned for the effects of our actions upon others, upon weaker brethren. The Corinthians' knowledge is selfish, individualistic and self-important, but love seeks the good of the community. And those who think that they have achieved this sort of knowledge haven't yet come to know as they ought to know.

True knowledge is achieved in the way of love. The Corinthians might regard their triumphalistic knowledge as a spiritual gift, but Paul contrasts it with a coming to know that is characterised by growth in love, which is a more humble and a humbling process. Anthony Thistleton suggests that we should follow some manuscripts which exclude the reference to God in verse 3, and that would read, The alternative, the more common reading, again privileges love, as something directed to God, and as something that is related to the priority of God's act of knowing, rather than our own.

Similar expressions of the priority of God's knowing over ours can be found in places like 1 Corinthians 13, verse 12, For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. And then in Galatians 4, verse 9, But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.

Our knowledge of God, then, proceeds from, and responds to, his prior loving knowledge of us. Not only does Christianity have a way of wisdom, a way that's associated with Christ and the mindset of the cross, it also has a way of knowing, a way of knowing that's

characterised by love. True knowledge is arrived at through the act of love, and a so-called knowledge that is not loving will not produce any sort of true knowing.

Paul goes on to affirm, at least in principle, the Corinthians' knowledge that an idol has no real existence, and that there is no God but one. He shares these convictions, but he goes on to show how they play out differently, in his thinking, than they do in the Corinthians. For, even if, for the sake of argument, there are many gods in heaven and earth, just as there are many for which the status of gods or lords are claimed, for the Christian there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ.

And there is an underlying question here. Are the gods of the idols real, or only imagined? And Paul's point might seem to align with the sort of statements that we find in Isaiah, where idols and their makers are ridiculed as powerless, to save, and vain, as if they were nothing. However, elsewhere in scripture one might get the impression that there really are false gods at work in the world.

Paul returns to this issue in chapter 10, verses 19-21, where his position becomes clearer. What do I imply, then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagan sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. The false gods are vain, and they are not what they claim to be, and God has proven his actual power over their empty boasts.

However, this does not mean that powerful demonic forces aren't at work in the world. The weak brothers might ascribe far too much power to these demonic forces, and these false gods, and the strong far too little. The strong rightly recognise their vanity and their emptiness, but the weak recognise their power.

Both are only seeing part of the picture, though, and Paul wants to emphasise both aspects. In verse 6, Paul quotes and elaborates the fundamental claim of the Jewish faith, the Shema. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

However, Paul has taken this statement and has inserted Christ into this fundamental confession. The term God relates to the Father, and the term Lord to Jesus Christ, but they are held together in indivisible unity. There's one God, but the identity of this one God includes both Christ and the Father.

The Father and Jesus Christ are, however, distinguished by the prepositions applied to them. All things are from, and for the Father, and all things are through Christ. This helps us to understand the Trinity in part, how the triune persons can be one and their actions inseparable.

It is not that the triune persons divide the work out between them, like a division of

labour. Rather, every single act of God is done by all of God, Father, Son and Spirit. Every act of God is from the Father, every act of God is through the Son, every act of God is in the Spirit.

Each of the divine persons is the author of every work of God in its entirety, and the one undivided God is active in every single one of the divine works. We're seeing a very sophisticated theology emerging here. For Paul's argument, the fact that all things are from the Father and through Christ challenges the idea that there is any such thing, or could be any such thing, as an alternative deity with autonomous power to exert in the world.

Whatever the false gods might be, whatever the idols that people worship, they are of an utterly different order of reality than the one true God. The one true God is the creator and sustainer of all things, and they are merely dependent creatures. The problem for many of the weak, who presumably had lower social standing, was that they had former associations with idols, they see idol food as offer to a real false deity.

They may want to go along with the strong, who presumably had higher social standing, that's part of what the strength means, and a sense of knowledge. They might have invited them to come along to some of these feasts, but they are compromised in their self-awareness, and as they go against their consciences, they end up being wounded in their faith and going astray. Paul makes clear that neither eating nor refraining from eating advantages someone before God.

Exerting a supposed right to eat food is not going to make you better off before God, nor is abstaining. He warns against the strong's supposed right to choose, and the way in which that supposed liberty could actually cause the weak to stumble. It might be that the strong wanted to encourage the weak into exerting supposed knowledge in eating food sacrificed to idols.

However, the weak would end up eating the food while feeling the cultic force of what was taking place. They would feel confused and be wounded in their conscience as a result, feeling that they were actually showing some sort of homage to the false deities. It is one thing to believe that the food of the marketplace isn't defiled by virtue of weak or supposed associations with idols.

It is another to aggressively assert one's knowledge in a manner unmindful of and unloving towards brothers and sisters who could be wounded by it. And this wounding of conscience, together with the confusion that could be caused, would actually lead to weaker brothers' faith even being shipwrecked in some way. While the strong might be seeking to build the weak into the same confidence that they enjoyed, the effect was actually destructive.

And what's worse, Christ died for the weaker brother, whose spiritual well-being the

strong have treated with such carelessness. The result is that they are sinning against Christ. Paul's approach, then, is against the proud individualism that would ride roughshod over others' weak consciences for the sake of their higher knowledge.

He would rather not exert freedoms that he genuinely possessed for the sake of the well-being of the weaker brother. Love is prioritised over proud knowledge. A question to consider.

What are some of the broader implications of the fact that the way of true knowledge is through love? Starting 1 Corinthians 9, we seem to be engaging in a strange digression from Paul's argument. Paul seems to be moving into a completely unrelated subject. One moment he's talking about idol food, the next he's talking about his rights as an apostle.

Perhaps, however, we don't notice this shift. We may be so used to breaking Paul up into verses and chapters that we don't think about the larger flow of his arguments. But it does matter at points like this.

Paul has not left his point behind. He's approaching it indirectly through his own experience. And the point of this chapter is to raise a secondary issue, the question of his rights and support as an apostle, and then using that to address a primary issue.

The issue of idol food is still very much the issue here. It's the point. And it will remain the issue right through the whole of chapter 10.

The main point of this chapter is not to defend Paul, but to exhort the Corinthians to learn from Paul's practice in regard to financial support, and to bring that to bear upon their relation to the issue of idol food. The previous chapter had ended with a striking claim. Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

And one can imagine people reacting against this claim. Our reaction is against this claim. Why should our rights be held hostage by other people in such a manner? The natural response, then, is to insist upon our freedom, our right to eat what we want, and not to compromise that for anyone else, our rights are our rights.

Paul lists at this point a number of his credentials as an apostle. He's seen the risen Christ, he's founded the Corinthian church, and the Corinthians should be the first to recognise his apostolic claim, since they are the direct beneficiaries of his ministry. Paul, of all people, as an apostle, should be free.

And he makes a deft rhetorical move here. Does he not have the right to eat and drink as a free apostle? This relates what he's saying to the argument of chapter 8, but also relates to the question that he raises in this chapter about his support in his ministry. He has to make his living, he has to eat and drink, and he needs the money to do so.

Behind Paul's use of rights language here is verse 9 of the preceding chapter. But take care this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. The issue in the preceding chapter was the Corinthians' rights, and now Paul talks about his own rights, and how he has exercised those rights in his dealings with them.

The other apostles are supported in a way that enables them to take wives with them. Paul is unmarried and has to work for his own support, like Barnabas. He presents a series of analogies that show the strangeness of this situation.

It's like the soldier fighting on his own expense, or the vineyard planter who can't taste the fruit of his vineyard, or the shepherd that cannot enjoy the milk of the flock. Beyond these analogies, the law itself presents the principle of not muzzling the ox as it treads out the grain. And Paul makes clear here that this is a symbolic commandment.

In Deuteronomy chapter 25 it's related to the right of the man performing the lever at marriage to enjoy the use of his dead brother's property while he is raising up seed for him. It's also connected with those working in the temple, and maybe we should see some connection here. Those working in the temple were working on a site that had been built upon the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

And the priests, of course, were symbolically connected with oxen in the sacrifices. They were the oxen working on the threshing floor, and they were entitled to eat of the sacrifices that were offered there. As they prepared the grain of God's people for the Lord, they were entitled to enjoy the fruits of their labour.

And it would seem that this same logic would apply to Paul. In his ministry he has the right to enjoy the benefits of his work. He should be able to be funded or supported by his labours as a missionary.

However, in dealing with the Corinthians, Paul did not exert this. In other cases he did take funding, but not with them. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verses 7-9, And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need.

So I refrained, and will refrain, from burdening you in any way. Teachers like Paul could be supported in a number of different ways. They could charge fees.

Certain philosophers would go around and charge fees for their speeches. Others would be supported by a wealthy patron, which had problems because they would be beholden to that person, and possibly end up being compromised in their ability to tell the truth. A third type of philosopher went around begging, supporting themselves by pestering the general population for funds.

There was, however, a fourth option, and Paul took this one when dealing with the Corinthians. This was to support oneself. In Acts chapter 18 verses 1-3 we read, Paul's

point in taking this approach is not to place a burden on the Corinthians.

And this passage isn't placing pressure on the Corinthians to offer such support. He's not blaming them at this point. He's not saying that they need to mend their ways and start to give him money.

Indeed, Paul goes on to make the most startling of claims. He said he would rather die than be deprived of his boast. What is his boast? It's his stewardship of the Gospel.

He is not a mercenary. He's a man with a God-given vocation. And in declaring the Gospel free of charge, as a servant of Christ, he displays the Gospel in his actions.

Christ himself didn't exert his prerogatives, but he laid them aside to go to the cross. Paul has become a servant to all in order to win as many as possible. He's not in it for himself.

He's not in it to make a profit. He's in it as a servant. He becomes like the Jews to win the Jews.

He becomes like those under the law to win those under the law. He becomes like those outside of the law to win them, and like the weak to win them. He becomes like the Jews.

That's a strange thing to say, because Paul himself is a Jew. However, he has ceased to be what he once was. He is no longer defined by his old way of life.

And so when he relates to the Jews as a Jew, he is stepping back into an old form of life that he is no longer defined by. He no longer sees himself primarily as someone of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews. He is now a man in Christ.

It is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him. He becomes like those under the law. He's no longer under the law in the sense that he once was, but if it makes it easier to win people for Christ who are under the law, he will act as one under the law.

He also becomes like those outside of the law, while clarifying that he is still under the law of Christ. This is a new law he lives in terms of, the law set by Christ's own pattern and example. Finally, he becomes like the weak, and in this he presents an example to the strong in Corinth.

He wants to protect the weak. He wants to win them for the gospel. And this is in great contrast to those who are prepared to destroy them for the sake of their knowledge, a knowledge that puffs up and does not build up.

And all of this is for the sake of the gospel. Paul is a steward of the gospel, and he wants to be faithful in his stewardship. He concludes by exhorting the Corinthians to see themselves like athletes.

Athletes control and limit themselves in order to win a prize. And the Christians should be the same. The strong should be like athletes.

They follow Paul's example. They discipline themselves for the sake of the goal that really matters. It's the growth of the kingdom, and being faithful to the stewardship of the gospel that's committed to us.

And if that requires that we do not exert our rights, then we do not exert our rights. A question to consider, how does Paul's teaching in this chapter challenge our notions of freedom and rights? Although it is easy to miss when we read the chapters as detached units, 1 Corinthians chapter 10 continues the argument that has been going on since chapter 8 of Corinthians. This is all Paul's discussion of eating food sacrificed to idols.

And that might surprise us when we read these verses ahead, but yet as we look back it should make more sense. It is in the background of the beginning of the chapter and will come back to the foreground by the end. Paul has just been talking about his own example, his example in earning his own keep rather than placing a burden upon the Corinthians as he was entitled to do.

Now it seems Paul's argument takes a sharp turn and goes into seemingly unrelated territory. He talks about the experience of Israel in the wilderness. He begins by talking about all our fathers.

The story of Israel is the story of the church. He's writing this to Gentiles in Corinth, not just to Jews. As the people of Christ, we are the children of Abraham.

We're also, perhaps more surprisingly, people who stand in the same line of history as those who failed in the wilderness, as the unfaithful ones who perished and were judged. All of our fathers were under the cloud. All of them passed through the sea.

The cloud was God's visible presence with them, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The sea was the Red Sea through which they passed and were delivered from the Egyptians. They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

Baptism into Moses is a strange way of talking about the Red Sea, yet Paul seems to be using this in a rather strong sense. What could he mean by baptism into Moses? If we look at the beginning of the story of Exodus, Moses himself is drawn out of the water. He's named for being drawn out of the water.

He's drawn out from among the reeds, and Israel is later drawn out from the Reed Sea. His deliverance is connected with his birth narrative, and Israel is brought out of the sea as part of its event of birth, as the firstborn of the Lord. What happens first to Moses happens to his people.

In the crossing of the Red Sea, the people are brought into Moses' experience, the

experience that Moses had before them. Moses had previously gone to Mount Sinai, experienced and met with the Lord there, and then he's going to lead the flock of the people to the mountain, and then he's going to meet with the Lord there again. They're going to enter into his experience.

In the same way, when we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ. His story becomes our story. We are baptized into his baptism in the Jordan, declared to be God's beloved sons and daughters, set apart for mission.

We are baptized into the baptism of his death. We are buried with him in order that we might be raised with him in the future. His spirit baptizes the church at Pentecost, so that as we are baptized with his spirit, we can share in the blessings of his ascension.

In the crossing of the Red Sea, Israel also came under the leadership of Moses in a new way. At the end of chapter 14 of Exodus, we're told that they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. That was the consequence of the experience of the Red Sea.

And Moses here is implicitly functioning as a Christ figure, as a type of Christ to come. They were baptized into Moses. They also ate the same spiritual food, referring to the manna.

In speaking of spiritual food, Paul might have in mind things such as Psalm 78, verses 23 to 25. They also drank the same spiritual drink. Here he's referring to the water from the rock, mentioned in Exodus chapter 17 and Numbers chapter 20.

And the rock that followed them, he says, was Christ. Now this is a very strange claim to make. In this passage, Paul might be alluding to intertestamental traditions of reading the story of the Exodus, and joining some of the dots, and filling in some of the gaps.

Yet, when we look at the original text, there are legitimate connections to make. The Lord is described as the Rock. In the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32, this language occurs on several occasions.

Verse 4. Verse 15. Verse 18. Verses 30 to 31.

In the original account of striking the Rock, the Lord is associated with the Rock in a very powerful way. In Exodus chapter 17, verses 5 to 7. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Massa and Meribah, because of the quarrelling of the people of Israel, and because they tested the Lord by saying, Is the Lord among us or not? Putting these things together, it is not inappropriate to speak of the Rock that followed them.

In Numbers chapter 20, there is again the Rock that is struck, albeit now in a different location. Rather than thinking of a literal Rock that's moving around, we should think about the Lord as symbolically associated with the Rock, communicating himself to his

people at various specific rocks that all represent him as the one Rock. What is the point of all of this section? Paul is telling the story of Israel in a way that shows clear connections between their story and the story of the church at Corinth.

The children of Israel had a baptism, the baptism of the crossing of the Red Sea. They had the presence of the Spirit in the cloud that accompanied and led them. And they had the supper in the spiritual food that they ate of the manna, and the spiritual drink of the Rock.

Paul is showing deep correspondences between events across history here, and he's making a strong claim. He's not merely drawing parallels in form between an Old Testament fleshly deliverance and a New Testament spiritual deliverance. He's making a far stronger claim than that.

He's arguing that the Old Testament deliverance was a spiritual deliverance. The problem, however, was that the people were fleshly. If the Corinthians think of themselves as spiritual people, they should learn a lesson or two from the Israelites, who had all these spiritual blessings and yet made nothing of them.

Now, from enumerating the spiritual blessings received by the Israelites, Paul turns to speak of the ways in which they failed. They sinned with the golden calf. The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

They sinned with Baal of Peor, and a very great number of them died. There were fiery serpents, and they put Christ to the test. This is perhaps one of the more arresting claims made here.

They weren't just testing the Lord, they were testing Christ himself. The Corinthians might think themselves spiritually above the Israelites, but yet the Old Testament Israelites had Christ in their midst too. Christ was the angel that led them on the way.

Paul also refers to the grumbling of the people. This could refer to a number of different events, such as the terrible litany of events of grumbling that we have in Numbers 11 and following. Many of those who grumbled were destroyed by the destroyer.

The destroyer is referred to in Exodus 12, verse 23, as the one who slew the firstborn of Israel in the Passover. And all of this is an example for us. The connections between the two stories, the fact that Christ was with them, the Spirit was with them, they had all these spiritual blessings, sets them up as examples that we can learn from, in this case as cautionary examples.

There is a similarity between the Corinthians situation and that of the wilderness generation. They are both awaiting salvation. In the New Covenant, Christ has brought his people out, but he has not yet brought them in.

Christ has inaugurated the last days, but the Corinthians must faithfully follow him into the promised land of the age to come. And they must beware of being presumptuous or overconfident. Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

The Corinthians are acting as if they reign like kings already, as if they had already attained all these blessings, as if they had already arrived at their destination. But they are compromising in exactly the same areas as the Israelites in the wilderness. They are compromising with sexual immorality, they are desiring evil, they are testing Christ by their disobedience, they are grumbling and engaging in dissension, and they are compromising with idolatry.

God can test his people, but when he does, he provides ways of escape and doesn't overwhelm them. Being tested by God does not pose the same sorts of dangers as testing God does. When God tests us, he does not test us to destroy us, but to prove us, to bring us into a greater maturity and into a fuller possession of his good gifts.

Having retold the story of Israel in the wilderness in this way, Paul brings his argument back to its primary point in verses 14-22. He presents three different types of meal in parallel. The Lord's Supper, Jewish sacrificial meals, and pagan sacrificial meals.

And all of these meals are about forging bonds of participation. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ. It's a means by which we are made one with him and with each other in his body.

The celebration of the sacrificial meals of Israel was a way of participating in the sacrifice of the altar, and enjoying fellowship with God. Paul, while he does not believe that the idols are anything, the idols aren't real gods, there is only one true God, and all other so-called gods are either imaginary or created beings. However, even though the idols aren't real gods, this doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all.

Rather, the pagans are sacrificing to demons. They are participating in the table of the devil himself. Here Paul is alluding once again to the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32.

Here to verses 16 and 17. This clinches Paul's point. In referring to this, the story of Israel that he has just retold makes a lot more sense.

Israel had all these spiritual blessings, but they entered into participation with false gods and suffered as a result. And the proud Corinthians, who despite all their boasts, have a lot more in common with the children of Israel than they might suppose, are in very great danger of doing the same thing. He concludes this section by asking, The God who judged Israel for the very same thing? Seen in this light, the supposed strength of the Corinthians is ridiculous.

Why does Paul argue as he does? Why does he present this argument, which seems to

be the clincher at this point, rather than leading with it in chapter 8? Partly because idol food could be encountered in a number of different contexts. Idol food could be encountered in the meat market, where you might eat food that had previously been part of a pagan ritual. Idol food could also be encountered in an actual pagan celebration, or in a meal dedicated to some idol.

It seems as though the so-called strong Corinthians were involved in both practices, and Paul speaks in different ways to these different situations. In verses 23 until the first verse of chapter 11, Paul brings his argument into land. He returns to the Corinthians' statement, All things are lawful, that slogan which we previously saw in the second half of chapter 6, and he moves now from an emphasis upon our own rights to one of helping and building up our neighbour.

All things may be lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things may be lawful, but not all things build up. And he presents a principle by which we can enjoy freedom.

Eat anything in the meat market, without asking questions. As the psalm declares, the earth and everything in it belong to the Lord. While purposefully participating in pagan meals is wrong, the idol is nothing.

The food offered to the idol is still a blessing from the Lord's hand. As Paul argues elsewhere, nothing is unclean in itself. Abstracted from the end of idol worship, the food of the marketplace is good.

And there's a break with kosher laws here as well. Eating marketplace food and eating with Gentiles, these were not things that the Jews would have done. Paul, however, now makes clear that there are occasions when, although we might otherwise be at liberty to eat, we must refrain from eating for the sake of another person's conscience, presumably that of a weaker Christian.

Rather than acting in a way that would lead the weaker Christian into sinning against his or her conscience, his or her moral confidence, the stronger Christian should refrain. They should give up their rights for that time, just as Christ gave up his rights and prerogatives for us. Paul is not denying that the strong have freedom to eat idol meat in these settings, but he is arguing that there is a principle that is more important than that of freedom.

They must refrain when the greater concern of the weaker brother's spiritual well-being comes into view. The emphasis in 1 Corinthians is on the responsibilities of the strong, who seem to have been the more assertive party in Corinth. In Romans 14-15, both the weak and the strong are given responsibilities towards each other.

The weak should not judge the strong in their exercise of their freedom. Paul's earlier treatment of the all things are lawful statement in chapter 6 ended with the positive

injunction to glorify God in your body. And here he concludes with the duty to do all to the glory of God.

The principle is not all things are lawful, but do all to the glory of God. And this will be achieved by taking constant consideration for others and their well-being, prioritizing their salvation and their up-building over your own freedom. A question to consider, how might Paul's use of the example of Israel in this chapter be instructive for us in our reading of the Old Testament? 1 Corinthians chapter 11 begins with a verse tying up the preceding argument about eating idle food.

The Corinthians should imitate Paul, who, as he discussed in chapter 9, did not exert the rights that he had, accommodated to others for the sake of the gospel. And in this, Paul is imitating Christ. He has taken on the mindset of Christ that belongs to us in the spirit, the mindset discussed in chapter 2. And this verse is orphaned from the argument to which it belongs by the chapter break, but it does alert us to the fact that chapter 11 belongs in a letter where the themes of the previous chapters are still very much in play.

This is a dense and a difficult chapter, and there are a few principles that we could bear in mind throughout that might help us. First, when Paul moves on to new matters, the themes of the letter are still continuing. It is crucial that we retain Paul's earlier discussion of the strong and the weak in mind when we move into this and the chapters that follow, for instance.

Those principles remain extremely important, and Paul now relates those principles to the practice of worship. N.T. Wright has compared reading Paul to riding a bicycle. If you go too slowly, you will fall off.

You need to follow the movement of the argument through the letter. The more that you follow the movement of the argument through an entire letter, the easier specific text will be to interpret. Second, this chapter is about men and women.

It is not just about women. It is often spoken about as women and head coverings. But yet it begins by treating men.

It emphasises the need for gender differentiation for both sexes. Third, Paul is bringing a number of interrelated themes of reference to play, not just one. He is concerned about the order of creation.

He is also concerned about the customs of society and not acting in a way that flies in the face of these. He is also concerned about the order of the gospel and the age to come that is inaugurated in it. These are different and they shouldn't be collapsed into each other.

They are always interrelated and playing off each other though. Fourth, key elements of his argument are derived from reflection upon the creation narrative of Genesis. We

should read this text alongside that one, going back to Genesis 1 and 2 and seeing where he is getting this from.

Fifth, when dealing with such difficult texts, especially texts that play such an important part in current debates, the temptation is to detach and to atomise. However, we need to recognise the way that such texts connect with other scriptures and are part of larger arguments and build our cases accordingly. Many people look to scripture for proof texts to act like pillars holding up systems, and others treat these texts as pillars to be chipped away at bit by bit.

But we should see scripture's supporting of our theologies as functioning more like a great root system. The entire weight of the tree does not rest upon a single root, but it is widely distributed among the many different roots that bear the weight together. Sixth, it is very easy to explain away difficult texts, to give interpretations that empty them of any unwelcome force.

But you end up wondering why the writer would ever have written such confusing, unclear and seemingly unsettling words in the first place. It is much harder to give a compelling positive explanation of the train of thought of the writer that led them to write the exact words that you are reading, especially if those words seem, on their surface, to oppose or threaten your position. Seventh, knowledge of the cultural context will be decisive or at least very helpful for certain questions, but scripture itself will generally prove to be the place where you will find the most revelation.

Finally, Paul often plays with words and levels of meaning, and we should be alert for this. We shouldn't presume that he is always using the same word in the same sense. Often he will be playing meanings off against each other.

From verse 2 of this chapter onwards, Paul is addressing public or gathered worship and the instructions that he has given them concerning it. He approves of their behaviour, but there are some problems. The first seem to relate to the disruption of appropriate distinctions between the sexes in worship.

He writes, Some have seen it to mean authority, rule and leadership. Others have seen it to refer to a source. The head, in this sense, is that from which the rest derives.

I have been persuaded by a number of writers, Andrew Perryman, Gregory Dawes, Anthony Thistleton, that in the metaphorical uses of the term under consideration, head does not mean one in authority over, or source, but rather, in Perryman's words, refers to the dimension of visibility, prominence, eminence, social superiority. Of course, in many instances where we do see this term used, authority over may be contextually connoted, but this is not what the term itself actually means. The shift in translation or interpretation of this term may suggest further changes in our understanding of the relationships being discussed in this verse.

When head is interpreted as one in authority over, it typically functions as a polarising term. It sets one party over against the other. In verse 3 then, one party exercises authority over the other.

Christ over the man, the man over the woman, and then God over Christ. For instance then, the statement, the head of every man is Christ, would mean that Christ hierarchically exercises authority over every man. However, if you slightly shift the meaning of head, as I described, suddenly, rather than placing Christ over against every man, Christ may be set forth as the pre-eminent among us.

He's the firstborn of many brethren. He's the firstborn from the dead. He's the one man who works on our behalf.

He's the one who represents us in human flesh in the heavenly places. He's the one in whose name and power we act. There is still undoubtedly an authority involved here, but the change is a very significant one.

Head becomes a term describing an empowering union, not just a hierarchical relation. The temptation to read 1 Corinthians 11.3 in terms of a chain of hierarchies as well is also a real one. But this temptation is challenged by the ordering of the text itself, which disrupts any such chain by listing the pairings out of the expected sequence.

In verse 3, Paul is probably not merely referring to wives' relationships to their husbands, but broader relations between women and men. Gender relations more generally are at issue here, not just between married partners. What might it mean to call man the head of the woman? Well, we could start off by thinking about what it means to call Christ the head of the church.

In Ephesians 1, verses 20-23 we read, He raised Christ from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. The character of Christ's headship in these verses doesn't primarily seem to be authority over.

Rather, it's the fact that Christ has authority and rule in the world, and He exercises that authority as the preeminent one of the church, the one who stands on our behalf, the one who represents us, the one who is the firstborn of many brethren, the one who is the bridegroom of the bride. Rather than Christ's headship functioning in a sort of binary face-to-face relationship, where He is over the church as His partner, Christ's authority is primarily exercised out into the world for the sake of the church. This directionality is very important, and we see the same thing in the story of Genesis.

The man is created first, given a mission and a calling within the world, and then the

woman is created after him to be a counterpart to help him. The man, however, is the one who will lead the way out into the world. He's Adam, who stands for Adamic humanity.

He's the one who represents humanity. He's the one who's primarily commissioned with the calling to go out into the world. He leads the way in that.

He's the one who's equipped with the greater strength. In all these ways and more, He is the one who's created as the head. Note that He's not told to be the head.

He just is the head. When Paul's talking about this, he's just talking about a fact of reality. In human societies the world over and across time, it is men who tend to be preeminent, and God created things that way.

Paul is here, then, describing a fundamental natural asymmetry between the sexes. He turns to men first, talking about praying or prophesying with their heads uncovered. What sort of prophecy is in view? Not necessarily ecstatic or spontaneous speech.

It could be a sort of exhortation or encouragement or some other thing like that. We should note the way that the word head is already functioning now in different but interrelated senses. One's treatment of one's physical head, whether covered or not, has implications for one's relationship with the one who's foremost in relationship to you.

It is not entirely clear whether Paul is here talking about a head being covered or a head having long hair. Whichever it is, though, the way that people dress or wear their hair is meaningful and communicative. It can vary from culture to culture.

But those differences between cultures aren't merely arbitrary. No two societies distinguish between men and women in exactly the same way. But every single society distinguishes between men and women.

Also, although there are many different ways of distinguishing between men and women, if you were put into any random society and the men and women were mixed up, it would not take you long to realise that something odd was afoot. The way that cultures distinguish between men and women is not arbitrary. If Paul has long hair in mind here, he's probably referring to effeminate customs in men, the way that men can dress or act in a way that breaks down the distinction between men and women.

A created distinction that is good and appropriate. Such opposing or erasing of gender differentiation is shameful. It's contrary to nature.

And no more so than in the context of the worship of God. This wouldn't be the same thing as the long hair of the Nazirite. It's quite possible that Paul himself was under a Nazirite vow when he visited Corinth.

We see this in Acts chapter 18 verse 18. Just as we can tell the difference between a Scotsman wearing a kilt and a woman wearing a dress, the hearers of this letter could easily tell the difference between someone with a Nazirite vow and someone breaking down gender distinctions. Whether it's someone who's wearing something over his head, or someone who has covered his head with long hair, he shames his head.

And this is his own head, his physical head. He's bringing dishonour upon himself. But also his metaphorical head, the fact that Christ is his head.

He's bringing shame upon Christ. Dressing in such a way draws inappropriate attention. And in worship, attention must be focused upon the Lord.

Paul now turns from men's head covering to women's. For women, loosed hair signals sexual availability. It would distract from Christ and would also dishonour herself and her man.

The way that women wore their hair and dressed reflected upon the men who were related to them. Wearing a veil or a head covering signalled modesty and respectability. And any sort of erasing of the differences between men and women was shaming and dishonouring.

Paul holds two things alongside each other as equally wrong. Women drawing attention to themselves in worship by their dress, and women being stripped of the glory of their hair and being treated as if sexless. Some have discussed the way that lesbians would have worn their hair within the ancient world, in a way designed to convey androgyny.

All of this is about the importance of social signals. One can imagine the Corinthians rejoicing in their newfound freedom, dressing in a way that was scandalous. The background for this may have been women enjoying more of a speaking and worshipping role within the church than the roles that they enjoyed within their previous communities.

And now perhaps they feel liberated to drop customs they were once bound by. However, Paul teaches in this context that those things must be retained in a proper way. Gender difference is very important.

It's part of the goodness of creation and it must be signalled within worship from both men and women. An emphasis upon freedom that does not take consideration for the other is not Christian freedom. Christian freedom is very concerned to bring glory to the other, to honour the other, and not to bring dishonour as this sort of practice seems to have done.

Paul draws attention to the differences between men and women in the creation. Man is the image and the glory of God. Image language is applied particularly to the man.

In scripture, image language is not applied to men and women in exactly the same way. Rather, the man is the image of God in a special and particular way. He represents God's rule and authority.

The male symbolises the dominion of God within the world in a more powerful and immediate sense than that of women. The man also represents humanity as a whole, as Adam can represent the entire human race. However, the woman is the glory of the man.

She is the one in whom the human creation reaches its height. She is the pinnacle and the end of the human creation, the capstone. Her glory is what animates the man to action, and she is the one who takes the work of the man and brings it to its proper completion.

What Paul is describing here is not any sort of straightforward hierarchy, but an asymmetric relationship between man and woman in which the two are bound up in a mutual and reciprocal relationship. The man was not made from the woman, but the woman from the man. Again, he goes back to creation and looks at the pattern there.

The man was not created for woman, but woman created for the man. There is once again a priority here. That priority does not mean superiority over.

Rather, there's an order and a pattern. The man establishes, but the woman completes. We can see one way of thinking about the glory of women in 1 Ezra 4, verses 14-17.

Gentlemen, is not the king great? And are not men many? And is not wine strong? Who is it, then, that rules them, or has the mastery over them? Is it not women? Women give birth to the king, and to every people that rules over sea and land. From women they came, and women brought up the very men who plant the vineyards from which comes wine. Women make men's clothes, they bring men glory.

Men cannot exist without women. Paul goes on to make points like these. His point is not to argue for a hierarchy, but to argue for an asymmetry that must be honoured, and must be honoured in the customs that are appropriate to our time and place.

Recognising this, it is dangerous if women's glory becomes an object of attention in worship. He says that this is because of the angels. Perhaps he has in mind the fact that they are heavenly witnesses to our worship.

But I suspect there is more to consider here. When we read of the angels, they are invariably described as male. They are, as it were, a band of brothers.

They represent the image of God in certain respects, His authority and His rule. What makes humanity stand apart is not so much men as women. Redeemed humanity is described as the son, but more importantly, as the bride.

Angels can be like sons of God, but they could never be the bride. The glory of humanity as a whole is seen in the fact that we are male and female, and that glory is most especially found in the woman. This might help us to begin to consider why the angels are spectators upon worship, and the comportment of women in relationship to them is so important.

Paul now proceeds to show the mutuality and reciprocity of men and women in the Gospel. The woman is not independent of the man, nor the man of the woman. The man may be the head and come first, but every man is born of a woman.

Woman is from man, but man is of woman. There is an asymmetry here, but one that binds us together. Neither party is exalted finally over the other, but is rather bound together in mutually implicative relationships.

What Paul is teaching here should not be difficult to understand. We should have an instinct for it. These are things that we should know from nature, and Paul speaks to the Corinthians as those who should already know these things.

He's not teaching them something new. They should have an instinct for this stuff, by nature. A man who dresses or tries to wear his hair like a woman is bringing dishonour to himself, while a woman's hair is her glory.

He finally closes down the conversation by making clear that if people are going to cause a fuss about this, they will find that there is no custom for such gender neutralisation in the life of the other churches. Paul now turns to deal with another issue, the Corinthians' practice of the Lord's Supper, which is woefully deficient. He has already described the divisions within the Corinthian congregation in chapter 1, the different parties and dissensions that were between them, and now he describes the way that that is playing out within their celebration of communion.

Rather than being brought together, some parties are eating ahead of others, and leaving others with nothing to eat. Rich and poor are being divided. This is another division between the strong and the weak within the congregation of Corinth.

The very meal that should be the time when people express their unity in Christ, is a time when some people are going hungry, while others are getting drunk. People are eating their meal without regard for the other, and all of this expresses very clearly what was the problem in the life of Corinth. People who were strong, insisting on their own rights, and pushing themselves ahead of others, rather than taking regard for each other, and seeking to be built up together with their neighbours, as one body in Christ.

The result is that they despise the Church of God, and they humiliate those who are poor and weak among them. While all of this helps to reveal who are faithful and who are not, it's certainly not a proper celebration of the Lord's Supper. Indeed, in Paul's eyes, it's no

celebration of the Supper at all.

In response to this situation, Paul recounts the tradition of the Lord's Supper, as it was delivered to him. He emphasises the background of the cross. The Lord's Supper was established on the evening of the Last Supper.

The Supper isn't any old meal. It's the meal that proclaims the death of Christ, until he comes. It's the covenant meal.

It's the meal in which the blood of the new covenant is sealed to us. It's the meal in which we are joined together as one body, as we share in the same bread and cup. It should be becoming clear to the Corinthians by this point, that they have celebrated in a totally unworthy fashion.

The Supper was to be celebrated in remembrance of Christ, or perhaps better, as Christ's memorial. We think about remembrance as a very subjective thing, but this is a more public and objective thing. It's to memorialise the Lord's death, to publicly proclaim it.

It's memorialised in part before God, calling God to act on the basis of the sacrifice of his Son. Every time we celebrate it, we're calling God to see and act. It's an enacted prayer.

And this is done until he comes. In the Supper we're caught between the event of the past, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and the coming of Christ in the future. And between those two events, we celebrate this meal as this regular, weekly memorial of what he has done.

Like a great stone dropped into the lake of history, Christ's death ripples out throughout the ages. Each week we are hit anew with one of the ripples of Christ's death, and driven further toward the expected shore of the age to come. The Last Supper was instituted in a context of peril.

It was on the night when Jesus was betrayed, and it was a night when the disciples will be tested and sifted. In a similar manner, the Corinthians need to celebrate in a mindful way, recognising both the light and the shadow, the promise and the danger. They must eat and drink in a way that discerns the body.

What does Paul mean by discerning the body here? Not, I believe, recognising the body of Christ in the bread, but rather recognising the body of Christ in their brothers and sisters around them. It is communion. It's communion with Christ and each other.

Christ and each other. Christ in each other. The point here is not deep introspection.

It's recognising your neighbour, and not eating before them, not ignoring them, not trying to put yourself ahead of them, but recognising the unity of the body in Christ. When this does not take place, judgement is to be expected, and that seems to have

been what happened in Corinth. There were even people dying as a result of their unworthy participation in the supper.

Yet the Lord was judging them, not to destroy them, but to bring them to repentance, so that they might be saved at the last. In the supper, we participate in the cup of blessing, but if taken in an unworthy fashion, it becomes a cup of curse. Here we should recognise the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 in the background.

God comes to inspect his bride for faithfulness each week. The assumption is that the bride will be faithful and be blessed, but if she is not faithful, she brings curse upon herself. The supper that serves as a memorial calls God to act towards us.

Ideally, this should be for blessing, but if we are acting in a way that dishonours God and dishonours each other, it will be for judgement and curse. A question to consider, how does Paul's teaching about the weak and the strong earlier in the letter help us to understand what is taking place in Corinth here, and how the root problems underlying this could be addressed? 1 Corinthians chapter 12 leads into the final section of Paul's treatment of worship in Corinth, a section that runs until the end of chapter 14. We must remember again that the themes of the letter to this point are still in play here.

In this chapter, Paul is again dealing with a situation where some members of the church are overriding or despising others. In this and the following chapter, he is laying the theological foundations that he will build upon in chapter 14, when he moves to tackle specific issues more directly. He will be developing themes of the relationship between the strong and the weak throughout also.

The Corinthians had likely raised the issue of spiritual gifts in their letter to Paul. The word that is used in verse 1, however, means spiritual things or spiritual persons. It is not inappropriately related to the teaching on spiritual gifts that follows, however the change in term may be significant.

Paul may be shifting from the Corinthians emphasis to one that foregrounds the gracious gift character of spiritual things and manifestations. He starts off by talking about their formal state in paganism, when they were pagans, or literally, when they were Gentiles. They are no longer Gentiles, they are sons of Abraham in Christ, and during that time they were carried away by mute idols.

Theirs was a religion built not around a speaking God, but around speechless idols. Pagan spirituality is based around ecstatic events, trances, other forms of altered consciousness, mass psychology and emotional manipulation. However, a religion based around a speaking God is not characterized by the same irrationality.

Christian faith is built around the word of the cross. We should bear in mind the Corinthians distorted sense of what counts as spiritual. They might see the spiritual

manifestations as marks of their own superiority and achievement, rather than seeing them as what they actually are.

And Paul deflates some of their understanding of what counts as spiritual here. Everyone who unfeignedly declares Christ to be Lord has received the spirit, whether or not they have the more dramatic outward manifestations of him. On the other hand, no one speaking in the spirit of God will speak against Christ.

The most fundamental test of spiritual speech and behaviour is how it conforms to the Lordship of Christ. The true test of true spirituality is not elevated experiences, but faithful confession of Christ and his Lordship. In verses 4-6, Paul presents a Trinitarian pattern.

The triunity of the one God unites the Church in its diversity. The triune persons are related to the life of the Church in their united action, but in different ways. The spirit is particularly connected with the gifts, the spiritual gifts.

The Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ, is connected with the varied forms of service. And God the Father is the one by whom all activities are rendered effective. Elsewhere, Paul speaks of the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit in ways that distinguish between them in the prepositions that are used of their work.

From the Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. Paul doesn't express an explicit doctrine of the Trinity in his epistles, but the presence of a doctrine just beneath the surface can be seen in places like this. In these verses, Paul presents spiritual things as expressions of the one God in his activity of forming his Church.

The terms he uses may have challenged some of the Corinthians' preconceptions. The Spirit gives gifts. It's not about forms of spiritual attainment, forms of personal attainment by which one individual may be elevated over others.

Participation in the Lord's ministry is seen in service, not in mastery and superiority and dominance over others. And all the activities in the Church, in their varied and diverse character, are all empowered by the one God, not by our own power. The Spirit is given to each for the sake of all.

This is not a religion of individual superiority, but of mutual service. There is a great variety of gifts, but unity in the one Spirit. The list of the gifts of the Spirit that we have in verses 8-10 is not the only list that we have in Scripture.

We find a similar list in places like Romans chapter 12 verses 4-8. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.

If prophecy, in proportion to our faith. If service, in our serving. The one who teaches, in his teaching.

The one who exhorts, in his exhortation. The one who contributes, in generosity. The one who leads, with zeal.

The one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. The gifts in Corinthians are the more demonstrative and so-called miraculous or supernatural gifts, perhaps because these were the gifts that were most attractive to people with the sort of hangovers from pagan spirituality from which the Corinthians suffered. They are looking for spiritual pyrotechnics, whereas Christian faith foregrounds the Word.

However, whether the gifts in question are flashy and extraordinary, or seemingly more ordinary and unassuming, all true gifts are empowered by the one Spirit. Paul moves from the unity of the Spirit to the unity of Christ's body, formed by the Spirit. He speaks of the Church as Christ.

Christ is undivided, head and body are one. Christ is the head, the preeminent one, the bridegroom of the bride. But he is united with his body.

Christ describes what some have called the totus Christus, the whole of Christ, head and body. Christ is undivided. The Church was baptised into one body by the Spirit given at Pentecost, overcoming differences of social status between slave and free, and differences between Jew and Gentile.

We are all bound together as one, rather than being individuals competing with each other for status. If a body functioned in a way that pitted each member against each other, it would fail to function, it would break down. And here Paul describes the way that the Church is formed in a way of mutual dependence and interaction.

The unity of the Church rests upon the event of Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit. But it is also sealed in every individual baptism. Each person who is baptised participates in the one gift of the Spirit that was given to the Church at Pentecost.

We are all made partakers in the one undivided Spirit. And the body is formed of diverse, yet interdependent members. No part can do without the others, even though there may be real differences in the prominence, the strength and the seeming honour of different parts.

A part of a body isn't what it is apart from the rest of the body. It is only as it renders its service to the rest of the body, and is connected with the rest of the body, that it enters into its own true character. If you were to cut off your hand, it would cease to function as a hand.

It could not be a hand apart from the rest of the body to which it is connected. Same

with the eye, the nose, the mouth, the foot, or any other part of the body. Just as the members of a physical body are mutually dependent, so it is with the members of the body of Christ.

And Paul deals with the principle of gift here. God gives these gifts to people, not as private possessions. We are permitted to participate in God's giving process.

God gave the Spirit to the Church at Pentecost, a single gift of the Spirit. And in the spiritual gifts, that one gift of the Spirit is represented through the manifold gifts of the different parts of the body. And in this, God enables us to become participants in the building up of the Church in that one gift of the Spirit.

God has given gifts to me, so that through me he may give those gifts to others. God has given gifts to you, so that through you he might build up others as well. These gifts then are not a matter of private superiority, of setting one person over against another and above another.

Rather they are gifts for the sake of all, so that all might be built up as God has given through individuals to the whole. They are also gracious ways in which God has made us participants in his giving process. So just as God has given to his Church, God has given to each one of us ways that we can minister the life of the Spirit to those around us.

No member can look down on other members of the body, because we are all dependent upon one another. No member can absolutize its own function and leave the rest of the body behind. We shouldn't try to become each other or envy others for their gifts.

Rather we should try and exercise our own gifts in our own station for the sake of the common good. Just as in chapter 7 Paul challenged the mindset of people who thought or seemed to think that they needed to escape their current status in life, their current vocation, their current situation or position in order to become true spiritual people and to participate in the grace of God and the ministry of his Spirit. So here he wants people to recognize their participation in the work of the Spirit in the situation in which they find themselves.

In the Corinthian Church where the so-called strong were exalting themselves over the weak, Paul teaches that the supposed weaker members of the body are in fact indispensable. Even those members of the Church that seem less strong, less honorable and less exalted, perhaps those members that you would never see at the front, they are to be treated with the greater honor. The presentable members of the Church, perhaps the people we naturally push to the front, thinking perhaps that they are more eloquent, more gifted, more powerful, more influential, they are not necessarily the best parts of the Church.

They are not to be presumed to be the greatest parts of the body. We cover up the

sexual organs, perhaps thinking them less honorable. However in our covering up of them we bestow greater honor upon them than the parts of the body that are prominently on display.

This should perhaps further inform our understanding of things such as the covering of the women in the preceding chapter. From a human perspective some might think that the covering up of the women with the head covering is because they are less honorable or less glorious. However for Paul the logic seems to be that because they are more glorious a greater degree of modesty is required.

From a human perspective we might focus upon those people who are most prominent and think that they are the most important. And by challenging that entire mindset Paul calls us to reconsider the way that we relate to different people and ministries within the life of the Church. Those who might be more prominent and visible must never delude themselves into thinking that their greater prominence makes them more important.

Understood properly the body should be characterized by mutual care, with each sharing in what has been given to all, and all sharing in what has been given to each. More generally this is a vision of a good society in which great diversity is bound together in mutual dependence and honor. No member is ignored, left behind or dishonored.

Paul concludes this section by making the object of his illustration explicit. We are the body of Christ collectively and we are members of it individually. We should note the general movement from the focus on the spirit and the gifts, to a focus on Christ and the order of the body and its ministries, to a focus on God the Father and the activities that he has appointed.

This follows the pattern of verses 4-6. Paul has already described the different roles that people can play in building up the Church as a building or working on the field of the Lord in chapter 3. God has appointed ministries in the Church in an ordered way. There are gifts to which we should particularly aspire.

However all of this is governed by the principle that he will elaborate in the next chapter, the principle of love. A question to consider, how can Paul's description of how the Church should be here inform our thinking about society more generally? 1 Corinthians chapter 13 is one of the most familiar texts in all of Paul and yet for this very reason one of the most misunderstood. It is a text that is often read as an encomium to romantic love at weddings.

But as usual it belongs firmly in its context. It is in the middle of an argument. This chapter is part of the argument about spiritual gifts and its purpose is to put the practice of the spiritual gifts in the appropriate place.

Love isn't so much an alternative to the spiritual gifts as the way in which all such gifts

must be exercised. Paul has previously spoken about the importance and primacy of the way of love in 1 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 1. Now concerning food offered to idols, we know that all of us possess knowledge. This knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

So Paul talking about the importance of love at this point is not a new theme in his letter. This chapter identifies the precise antidote to the Corinthians inappropriate spirituality. It is an integral part of Paul's larger argument but is also a praise of love, an expression of its superlative character.

Love is that which must govern everything, all expressions of the Christian life and practice. By describing and praising love, Paul exposes the problems of the Corinthians and he offers an alternative model for them to pursue. It begins with the absolute necessity of love in the first three verses, then describes the glories of love in verses 4-7, its characteristics and traits, and in verses 8-13 it contrasts the spiritual gifts and their provisional character to the enduring nature of love.

This love, of course, then, is not romantic sentimentality or love as such, but it is a love that follows the pattern of Christ's own love. Love, Paul argues, is indispensable. Even the most elevated and remarkable spiritual gifts and practices, practiced apart from love, are worse than empty.

Without love, being able to speak by the spirit not just in human tongues but also, supposedly, in angelic tongues, will be of no greater value than the sort of instruments that one finds in pagan worship, noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. The Corinthians prided themselves on their spiritual knowledge, yet that too is worthless apart from love. Love, as Paul has argued in chapter 8, is how we know things truly.

Supposing we had faith sufficient to remove mountains, here Paul alludes to Matthew 17, verse 20, for truly I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you. Even if they have that sort of faith, in the absence of love they are nothing. Let us suppose that they sell all their worldly goods and give them to the poor.

That too gains them nothing without love. At this point in the text there is debate over whether we should read, deliver up my body to be burned, or deliver up my body in order that I may boast. It may be a reference to martyrdom, perhaps giving oneself into slavery for Christ.

Yet even the most extreme self-sacrifice is worthless apart from love. Paul now moves to describe love's defining traits, clearly contrasting with the behaviour of the Corinthians to this point. Love is patient.

Patience is absolutely essential when dealing with others. Without patience little can be accomplished. Patience is taking time with people.

Patience is giving time to people. Patience is making time for people. Patience is choosing your time with people.

This is the behaviour of love. Love is kind. It's generous, benevolent, noble.

It's an active alternative to anger and resentment. It breaks their cycles. It interrupts them and starts something new.

Love does not envy. It's not caught up in the status-seeking and the quest to pursue advantage over others that was so characteristic of the Corinthians. It does not boast.

You could think of the Corinthians' slogans and their claims for themselves that they rule like kings. Theirs was a form of spirituality that boasted in status and over others. Love is not arrogant.

It does not seek or inflate its own importance as the Corinthians did, their brand of knowledge puffed up in pride. But love is of a very different character. Love is not rude.

It's mindful of the manner in which it treats others. It's concerned for appropriate social order and propriety. We might think of the rudeness of the Corinthians and their behaviour at the table of the Lord.

Their dishonouring, neglect and despising of each other. We might also think about Paul's teaching about head coverings. People who want to express their own authority and their own freedom could act in a way that dishonoured their head, that dishonoured themselves and also dishonoured others.

Love is courteous. It honours decorum and politeness. We'll see this even more in the chapter that follows.

Love does not insist on its own way. Love does not revolve around its own interests. It's prepared to surrender its rights for others.

Love becomes all things to all men. Love is prepared to make sacrifices for the weaker brother. Love is prepared to abstain from exercising rights that might wound others.

Love is not irritable or resentful. It's not easily provoked to anger or bitterness. Its lack of preoccupation with its own rights allows it to suffer wrong without reacting out of grievance, wounded pride, vengefulness or entitlement.

Such love would not be given to the litigious behaviour that the Corinthians were given to in chapter 6. Love doesn't keep score. How often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Love isn't preoccupied with such questions. Love does not tally up those petty grudges in its mental register, the ways that in our status-seeking we try and put ourselves ahead of others or reckon their debt to us.

Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing. It grieves at the sin of the man in a relationship with his father's wife. We can so often delight in other people's failings and sins.

We see our enemy fall into sin and we rejoice. It enables us to feel superior and self-righteous. We gossip about other people's sins, sharing them as if they were a matter of entertainment.

Love however wishes what is good, in our own lives, in the lives of our enemies. Love rejoices in the truth. It's not about self-interest.

It's about something that stands over against us, the truth itself. Love desires and rejoices in integrity. Truth never tidily aligns with our personal interests.

But love wants to know the truth. It isn't defensive before the truth. It lets its own interests be compromised for the sake of something greater, the truth itself.

Love bears all things. Love is that which never ceases to support. It keeps holding up relationships with others, even under the greatest burden and pressure.

Love believes all things. It believes through all things. It never surrenders faith.

Not in human goodness, but in God. It perseveres with people, even when it might seem that they are beyond recovery. Love hopes all things.

It never despairs of people or situations. Love endures all things. It never gives up on or abandons people.

Love is permanent in a way that the spiritual gifts are not. They are transitory. The fact that Paul is speaking into the Corinthian context is very clear here.

Prophecies, tongues and knowledge are temporary and partial. When the fullness of revelation comes, spiritual gifts will pass away. These sign gifts are primarily for the purpose of attesting the truth of the gospel as it's first preached.

As time goes on, they become less prominent. The Corinthians who think that they already reign and have little sense of the not yet of the gospel struggle to perceive the temporary character of the spiritual gifts. The time will come when those gifts will fade or pass away.

When they pass away, they will be replaced by something greater. Paul seems to allude to Numbers chapter 12 verses 6-8, the contrast between the faint and limited revelation that Aaron and Miriam and others had and that enjoyed by Moses. And he said, But hear my words, if there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream, not so with my servant Moses.

He is faithful in all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in

riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses? Love is unique in the fact that it endures into the age to come.

Faith, hope and love are the Christian virtues. They are listed on several occasions in Paul. And he explores their interrelationship in a number of different ways.

For instance, in Romans chapter 5 verses 1-5, Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace by which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.

And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. Galatians chapter 5 verses 5-6 For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.

The spiritual gifts may be the scaffolding, but love is the mortar of the building of the church. The gifts and the manifestations will one day be removed, but what will be left is the love by which the building is established. A question to consider.

Chapter 12 ends with the words, and I will show you a still more excellent way. This looks forward to the argument of chapter 13. How can the argument of chapter 13 be tied closely into the argument of chapter 12? In what respect does it represent a more excellent way than something in chapter 12? 1 Corinthians chapter 14 continues the discussion of behaviour in gathered worship that has been going on since chapter 11 verse 2, and the discussion of spiritual gifts that has been going on since chapter 12 verse 1. Paul is dealing with a chaotic worship situation in the city of Corinth.

There's competitive demonstration of spiritual gifts, there's unintelligible speech, there's people speaking over each other, there's all sorts of disorder going on. And part of it seems to arise from a seeming overvaluation of the gift of tongues. Elsewhere the gift of tongues is presented as a phenomenon that occurs when the spirit rests upon people.

In Acts chapter 2 verse 1 to 4, when the day of Pentecost arrived they were all together in one place, and suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting, and divided tongues as a fire appeared to them, and rested on each one of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Acts chapter 10 verses 44 to 46. While Peter was still saying these things, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word, and the believers from among the circumcised who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the

Gentiles, for they were hearing them speaking in tongues and extolling God.

Acts chapter 19 verse 6. And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying. In Numbers chapter 11 verses 24 to 25, we have the description of spontaneous prophecy occurring when the Spirit comes upon the elders. So Moses went out and told the people the words of the Lord, and he gathered seventy men of the elders of the people and placed them around the tent.

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him, and put it on the seventy elders, and as soon as the Spirit rested on them, they prophesied, but they did not continue doing it. In 1 Samuel chapter 10 verse 10, speaking of Saul, When they came to Gibeah, behold, a group of prophets met him, and the Spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them. In these descriptions of the gifts of tongues and prophecy, they seem to have a more ecstatic character to them.

They are dramatic signs associated with the descent of the Spirit upon a personal group. Unsurprisingly, given the spirituality that was practiced by the Corinthians, these sorts of dramatic gifts would be very attractive to them. Chapter 13 was not a digression from Paul's argument, and the first verse of this chapter applies the force of it to the spiritual gifts.

Love must be the touchstone of all practice in this area. Chapters 12 to 14 are all a single undivided argument. Chapter 12 concerns diverse spiritual gifts that are given for the sake of edification, building up, and for unity.

They are expressive of the one spirit that we all share in. They are not merely for those with more dramatic gifts. Chapter 13 speaks of the indispensability of love, the moderating character of love, and the enduring nature of love.

Once the centrality of love is appreciated, the spiritual gifts will be practiced in a far more edifying and appropriate manner. Paul does not dismiss the spiritual gifts. They are to pursue spiritual speech, but especially prophecy, for the reasons that he goes on to discuss.

When we read about the verbal content of tongue-speaking in places like Acts 2, we're told that it was praise of God. But the description of tongue-speaking in 1 Corinthians has led most commentators to argue that they are not the intelligible languages that we see in Acts 2. This is not an unreasonable interpretation. Rather, it seems that what Paul is describing in Corinth is a sort of ecstatic speech.

It's not necessarily a language. In the Old Testament, for instance, there are a number of different ways of speaking of prophecy. When we're told that the elders prophesied, we

shouldn't presume that they were delivering the sort of prophecy that we find in the Book of Isaiah.

Likewise, when Saul prophesied, it seemed to have been a more ecstatic experience, much as we see variety in the way that prophecy functions in the Old Testament and different levels of prophetic speech and phenomena. So, tongue-speaking in the New Testament seems to have involved, in some cases, actual languages, and in other cases, just ecstatic speech. The person who engages in such ecstatic speech speaks mysteries in the spirit.

By mysteries here, I think Paul is referring to unintelligible things. Nobody understands what is said. He says that the one who speaks in tongues builds up himself.

Does that mean it's self-edification? Or rather, is he saying that the person who's speaking in tongues in this way in the congregation is merely bolstering their own self-importance? I think it might be the latter. Public tongue-speaking has become such a matter of status-seeking and demonstration of individual spiritual power that Paul has to challenge it quite forcefully at some points. This wouldn't be the first time in Scripture that something that was given by God for the building up of his people and their benefit came to be used for damaging or even idolatrous purposes.

The bronze serpent that the Lord had given to Israel in the wilderness had to be removed by Hezekiah in the book of 2 Kings, chapter 18, as Israel had started to treat it like an idol. In contrast to their tongue-speaking, prophecy is intelligible speech that builds others up. Anthony Thistleton persuasively argues that rather than the interpretation of tongues being spoken up here, what is meant is the tongue-speaker's own capacity to put their speech into intelligible words.

So what we see on the Day of Pentecost, for instance, is a more elevated form of the gift, the exciting of the tongue of the speaker by the Spirit that enables them to speak intelligibly in another language. However, when tongue-speaking isn't an intelligible language, it's of little benefit, it's not communicating anything. Paul gives a number of examples of the failure or breakdown of communication.

Musical instruments that do not give distinct notes are like tongues that aren't speaking a language. They leave us unable to recognise what is being played. Likewise, instruments that are designed to give a military signal must do so clearly.

These illustrations suggest that we are not dealing with regular languages here. There are also problems when a meaningful yet foreign language is spoken. Where we do not have the understanding of the language, the experience of hearing a foreign tongue being spoken can simply make us feel like a foreigner to the speaker.

Far from bringing people into greater unity, it divides people. It has a babelic effect. The

Corinthians must learn from this.

The most important thing is to build others up. They are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, but this should be for the end of building up others in the Church, not for puffing themselves up. The tongue-speaker, then, needs to pray that he will be able to put his communication into intelligible words.

The Corinthians probably thought that they were speaking in angelic languages. Paul doesn't deny that their speech is a manifestation of the Spirit, but he does greatly downplay the gift. Such ecstatic speech can be a way of the Spirit addressing itself to God, but it isn't a language.

Tongues speaking in private prayer can be an expression of the person's spirit to God, much as the babblings and the gurglings of a baby might be an expression of their appreciation for or their need for their parent. But the ideal is to speak to God in intelligible words, so that your understanding is also involved, so that both you and others can say Amen. The true work of the Spirit is not like that of pagan religion, which privileges ecstatic phenomena of spiritually elevated individuals.

Rather, the Spirit is about intelligible and reasonable communication for the purpose of edification. The irrational ecstasies of pagan religion do not have a proper place within the life of the Church. Paul points out that he is more gifted in tongues than any of the Corinthians.

He's not saying he speaks in tongues more than any of them, as some translations put it, but he's stressing that he has this gift in great measure. However, intelligible communication must take priority in the gathered assembly, and Paul would prefer speaking five intelligible words with his mind than many thousands in unintelligible speech. A question to consider, how might Paul's emphasis upon intelligible communication over ecstatic utterances or dramatic phenomena and the like in gathered worship help us in thinking about our worship and its proper forms? In the second half of 1 Corinthians chapter 14, Paul continues his discussion of appropriate speech in the meetings of the Church.

In the earlier part of the chapter, he emphasised the intelligibility of speech. Why? Because speech ought to serve the purpose of edification of the entire Church. It's important to see the ways that Paul establishes a lively traffic between deep theological principles and practical situations.

So rather than immediately tackling the question of tongues speaking head-on, he first discusses the unity of the Church in the one Spirit and the manner in which the manifestations of the Spirit in their variegated forms are gifts of the Spirit for the sake of building others up, not marks of personal spirituality for puffing ourselves up. He then explores the governing principle of love, its absolute necessity, its superlative character

and its enduring nature, and only then does he move into speaking about tongues. When he makes this move, it is these deeper principles that remain operative throughout. Speech in the Church must build up, it must be governed by love, so spiritual speech must be exercised for the sake of others.

Consequently, it must be intelligible speech. It must also be mindful of others in a way that produces orderliness, not the jostling for status that had characterised the Corinthians' speech to this point. To understand Paul, it is really important to recognise the principles that are working themselves out in his instructions, and the instructions that are developing his principles.

The interplay between these two levels is productive of insight, not least because developing familiarity with this interplay will equip us to apply Pauline principles in our own situations. Paul's way of reasoning is not accidental. He doesn't give bare commands, but presents rich and subtle arguments.

He speaks to his readers as those who need to internalise a mature way of thinking in Christ, rather than just as children to be dictated to. Paul is teaching us not just what to think as Christians, but how to think as Christians. And Paul is concerned not just with what the Corinthians do, but with how and why they do it.

Throughout this epistle, he is speaking to communicate a mindset, with its motivations, values, priorities, desires and loves, not just an external behavioural code. He begins this second half of the chapter with a charge to be mature in our thinking. He has already rebuked the Corinthians for the childishness of their thinking earlier, in chapter 3 verses 1-4.

and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? Like Christ, who put a child in the midst of his disciples as an example of the kingdom, Paul sees ways in which we should emulate children or infants. Infants are not invested in the same status conflicts that we can be as adults. Infants and children are humble, they're untrained in evil.

In other respects, however, we must pursue maturity. Throughout this chapter, for instance, he is stressing that the Christian faith is not one of irrational, ecstatic spirituality, but rather one of communication, the intelligible word, and sound minds. Ours is a faith in which our minds are called to be holy and lovingly engaged.

Paul at this point loosely quotes from Isaiah chapter 28, concerning the speaking of tongues, and he re-tailors the reference to highlight its relevance. Isaiah chapter 28, verses 7-13 reads, For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little. For by people of strange lips, and with a foreign tongue, the Lord will speak to this people, to whom he has said, this is rest, give rest to the weary, and this is repose.

Yet they would not hear, and the word of the Lord will be to them, precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little, that they may go and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. As usual, when we're hearing a New Testament allusion, or a citation of an Old Testament text, we should consider the context of the text that's being referenced. And here in Isaiah, the prophet is addressing priests and prophets.

They're given over to decadent revelries, and dulled to the word of the Lord. They dismiss Isaiah's message as childish and simple. So the Lord will send Assyrians to them, with their harsh foreign tongue, in judgment upon their insensibility to his word.

Paul shows how Isaiah's prophecy can speak into the situation at Corinth. Tongue-speaking for Paul serves as a sign of judgment upon unbelieving people, particularly unbelieving Jews. When it's practiced in worship, without being put into words, it puts believing Christians in the position of those who are being judged.

Think back to the story of the Day of Pentecost. In Acts 2, verse 12, there is the statement of people who are looking by, saying that they are filled with new wine. Tongue-speaking is a reversal of Babel, as many have observed, but it's also a repeating of Babel.

While some are surprised by understanding, others are struck with confusion and a failure to recognize. You can maybe think back to the story of 1 Samuel, chapter 1, where Eli fails to appreciate that Hannah is praying, and thinks that she is drunk. That again is a judgment upon his failure to perceive, and a sign of the reversal that will take place in the future.

Tongue-speaking, then, can be a sign of God's judgment upon those who do not believe. And such speech is a negative sign, judgment upon unbelievers. And it isn't going to bring anyone to the understanding of faith.

The unbelievers witnessing such tongue-speaking will think that they are mad. While the supposedly spiritual Corinthians thought that ecstatic tongue-speaking demonstrated that God was with them in a special way, this wouldn't be what unbelievers would see. Prophecy, by contrast, is intelligible speech, and it has a very different effect.

They are sober words, inspired by the Spirit. They speak directly to the situation of a specific church and its members. It has a force of witness to the truth of God's dwelling among His people.

Before such speech, the unbeliever recognizes the exposure of his heart to God, and is convicted of his sin and made aware of God's glory. God is truly among a people when God's word is present among them, when God's Spirit speaks directly into their situation. In the Corinthian church, there seems to have been something of a free-for-all in their

assemblies.

Much as in their celebration of the supper, everyone was seemingly jostling to get ahead of others, each wanting to capture as much of the limelight as they could for their spiritual showboating. The result was a chaotic situation, where everyone was competing with everyone else. Far from building others up, the pelopus had become puffing themselves up.

And Paul advocates constraint, order, and politeness in speech against the rude chaos that prevailed in the Corinthian church. The measure of the exercise of gifts must be the building up of the community, not our own personal elevation. The criterion of building up is something to which Paul repeatedly returns in this chapter, in verses 3, 5, 12, 26.

If people are going to speak in tongues, then, they need to do so in an orderly manner, in a manner appropriate to a dignified, respectable, polite, and well-regulated assembly, an assembly where people are giving thought to each other. No more than three should do it. They should take turns, and their tongue-speaking should take the form of intelligible words.

However, if a person cannot put their tongue-speaking into intelligible words, they should hold their peace. The ESV and other translations, by suggesting that there is a separate person, an interpreter, and a separate act, the act of interpretation, likely mistake the meaning of these verses, which rather speak to the person's putting into words the tongue-speaking that they have. Paul expresses his instructions concerning prophetic speech in far more encouraging terms, in a manner that contrasts with his teaching concerning tongues.

While, at most, three people should speak in tongues, Paul doesn't speak of prophecy in the same reserved terms. Prophets seem to have played an especially important role in the life of the early church. We need to consider the way that the Spirit works in the life of the church.

The Spirit gives his gifts for the building up of the church, and the gifts that are needed can change from time to time. For instance, in the story of the Exodus, the gift of embroidery is given to Bezalel and others, and the point of that is to build up and establish the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is built, there is no longer the same need for that gift as there was when it was first being constructed.

Likewise, there are various signs that we have in Scripture, and ways in which God acts miraculously or in a hypernatural way to provide for his people, and these things are generally temporary, for a particular period in time where these things are needed. The manna in the wilderness was for a particular period. When they entered into the land and ate of the fruit of the land, the manna was cut off.

And prophecy seems to have served in a similar sort of way. Prophecy is especially important in a pioneer situation, where there are not robust established teaching ministries and doctrine, where there are a lot of young Christians, and where there is not the body of the New Testament revelation established. We shouldn't dismiss prophetic gifts today, but we shouldn't be surprised if they are not prominent features of the life of the church, and that where they are more prominent, there may be significant limitations for which they are compensating.

Prophecies, in Paul's understanding, must be tested. And Paul seems to speak of a situation where prophets delivered their prophecies, which were then weighed by the leaders of the assembly, who were to discern whether it was true prophecy that spoke to the situation of the church, that was consistent with the truth of the gospel, and that came from God. In a church like Corinth, we can well imagine that much supposed prophecy was likely just self-serving and self-deceived, fancies by which people desiring greater influence claim charismatic powers, by which they could assume greater prominence within the life of the congregation.

True spiritual speech is not chaotic and confused, but orderly and peaceful. The spirit creates order, peace and harmony. The spirit encourages love and regard for others, so we do not push ourselves ahead of them, but wait for others.

The point of this entire exercise, then, is not spiritual showboating, but the learning and encouragement of the church. And for this, prophets need to be modest and self-effacing. The point is not to get the attention of others, but to minister to them.

The concluding verses of this chapter have excited much debate and controversy. They are offensive to some modern sensibilities, and many suggestions have been presented for how to deal with them. There are also questions about how to reconcile this passage with things that we read elsewhere.

So, for instance, women engaging in prophetic speech in the assembly seems to be regarded by Paul as appropriate in chapter 11. And then many have argued that there is the fact that there is no clear teaching in the Old Testament requiring the sort of silence that Paul speaks of here. Then there's the question of the challenge of relating this text to Paul's treatment of equality between men and women in the Gospel more generally.

Some, like Philip Payne, have suggested that these words are non-Pauline interpolations, they're verses not authored by Paul, which have been wrongfully inserted into the text at this point, and have come down to us, but don't really belong in the text of 1 Corinthians. The strength of these arguments seems to rest, in large part, upon the conviction that these verses are inconsistent with Pauline theology in general. If people did not believe that there was inconsistency, it would be unlikely that this argument would be presented.

Others have argued that Paul is quoting and refuting a Corinthian argument, as he quotes and refutes Corinthian slogans earlier in this letter. Lucy Pepeat is one of the most prominent recent advocates of this position. However, there are several problems with this sort of reading.

Paul's refutations elsewhere do not involve such lengthy quotations of arguments. If Paul is refuting Corinthian arguments here, they take a very different form from earlier refutations, and expressions such as, In all the churches of the saints, also raises some difficult questions for many advocates of this position, as it might be making a statement of general church practice, not merely advancing an argument about what should be done. There are also a number of strands that connect these verses with those preceding them.

There's the concern for speaking, silence and order, which is the concern of the preceding verses. As in chapter 11, there are also concerns about honour and shame, propriety, the proper relationship and differentiation, and the good order between the sexes in the assembly. Beyond this, these verses don't seem to stand alone in the Pauline epistles.

Specific directions for women's speech, which seem to teach comparable restrictions, can be found in 1 Timothy 2, verses 8-15. I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarrelling. Likewise also that women should adorn themselves in respectable apparel, with modesty and self-control, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly attire, but with what is proper for women who profess godliness, with good works.

Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man, rather she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve, and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived, and became a transgressor.

Yet she will be saved through childbearing, if they continue in faith and love and holiness with self-control. There are many attempts to avoid the force of biblical teaching on the subject of the difference between the sexes, and the differing responsibilities and expectations of men and women. These can often depend upon atomising the biblical witness, and treating each text in abstraction from the broader biblical witness.

However, the biblical witness is deeply interrelated. Paul's teaching, for instance, makes reference back to the pattern of creation, and the order established in the Old Covenant assembly. The biblical witness is like a root system, which bears the weight of a whole tree in a highly distributed way, rather than focusing it all upon detached texts, each of which must stand alone.

Putting it differently, avoiding the force of the scriptural teaching is less like dodging

successive rocks falling down a mountainside, and more like trying to dodge an avalanche. The collective and the cumulative force of the witness matters. Likewise, we must be aware of explaining away texts in a way that neuters them, yet fails to explain why supposedly perplexing and unclear texts were inspired in the first place.

On the other hand, there are many who treat such texts in a narrow and legalistic manner, and fail to relate them to the core principles that are operating in Paul's theology. If we read these verses in a way that makes it appear that Paul has forgotten or abandoned the governing themes of his theology, and his immediate argument at this point, something has gone seriously awry. Whatever Paul is saying must fit with his broader themes, his concerns for love, unity and building up of others.

A reading that suggests that Paul is simply advancing men over women would be utterly out of keeping with the tenor of his theology more generally, and the nature of his argument in these chapters. Paul's concern is probably best understood as one of holding that women keep their ordered place, not one of submission as such. Many have seen Paul's teaching here as arising out of Genesis 3, verse 16, and the judgment upon the woman at that point.

But again, I think that is mistaken. Many have argued that Paul's concern is with a very contextual problem, with the disorderly speech of women in the Corinthian assembly, something that was very peculiar to that particular congregation. The women's section of the church is supposedly disruptively speaking during the assembly, unsettling proceedings.

Yet Paul does not narrowly focus upon disruptive speech, but upon women's speech more generally. Likewise, he appeals to Old Testament precedent and principle, and to the universal practice of the church. Similar things can be said about 1 Timothy chapter 2, where there is another reference to the general practice of the church, a presentation of general principle, and then the articulation of a creation pattern as that upon which the principle rests.

General church practice seems to weigh strongly in his argument too. In their disorderly practice, the Corinthians are setting themselves against the practice of the churches more generally. They are proudly setting themselves up, as if God's word originated from them and was only given to them.

They think themselves to reign like kings, and so they set up their own rules. As women's speaking is presented as entirely appropriate when done in an orderly way in chapter 11, we seem to need to clarify the sort of speech that he is proscribing here. It seems most likely that the speech in question is that in view in the previous verses.

It's the speech of testing and weighing the words of the prophets. If they want to question, they should do so in the appropriate domestic setting, not in the public

assembly. Apart from anything else, a woman cross-examining a male prophet in such a public setting would bring dishonour and would be seen as unbecoming in this society.

The categories of politeness, dignity, decorum, honour, good custom and things like that do have some weight in Paul's thinking. Where does Paul get this principle from? It seems to me he gets it primarily from Genesis, where the man is created as the guardian of the garden before the woman. He's the one who's charged with upholding and teaching the law.

And from the Old Testament more generally, where the governing assembly was male. The appointed guardians of the church are male also. They're appointed not for their own spiritual self-importance and self-aggrandisement, but in order to provide strong overseeing of the congregation.

And here we must remember Paul's principles. Search-guarding, if it's to be appropriate, must be characterised by humble service, rather than by self-important lording over others. It must not rest upon a unilateral hierarchy of some parties over others, in this case men over women.

Rather it must be governed by the duty of the strong to regard and protect the weak. It must be governed by the expectation that the more prominent members of the body accord special honour to those who are less prominent, and the responsibility of each member of the body to recognise their need for the others. Finally, it must clearly operate in terms of the asymmetric mutuality that 1 Corinthians 11 upholds between men and women.

If men are the heads and the guardians of the church, they will only perform their role adequately if they are guided by the awareness that the glory of the church rests primarily in its bridal character, most prominently represented in the women, whose modesty in their presentation and speech in the gathered assembly awaits the eschatological unveiling of glory in which the faithful male guardians of the church will clearly be revealed to be self-effacing servants of a glory that is revealed most dazzlingly in the bride and her radiant daughters. A question to consider. In what ways can a culture of politeness, decorum and good manners draw from Paul's teaching in this chapter? In what ways might Paul's concerns diverge from the concerns more typical of such a culture? In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul moves to a new issue, the resurrection.

This is the last of the major issues that he tackles in the letter. He doesn't seem to be responding to questions that the Corinthians have written to him about here, as in the case of the earlier matters. Rather, this is likely something that has been reported to him by particular persons in the church.

He has previously mentioned such reports concerning the sectarianism in the church, the man who is having sexual relations with his father's wife, and their appalling behaviour

at the supper. It may be easy to read this chapter as a self-contained treatise on the resurrection, detached from what has gone before. We might think that it's of a different kind from the earlier issues.

It's an issue more of faulty belief than practice. It isn't about sexual conduct or behaviour in worship or community relations, so Paul needs to shift into a doctrinal gear here. The truth of the resurrection is absolutely integral to Christian faith, and Paul clearly needs to address this question at the end of his letter.

However, if we examine this chapter more closely, we should see that it isn't just a doctrinal appendix to the letter, but it draws out a fundamental issue that underlies so many of the others. It connects very organically with the rest of the letter, and is a very fitting conclusion to the whole thing. The letter began by emphasising the message of the cross, and it ends with stressing the truth of the resurrection.

It addresses the Corinthians' failure to appreciate the logic of gift at the heart of the gospel. This is a gospel about the God who gives life to the dead. This is a gospel about dying to the world and its values in the cross, and being made alive to God in an act of transformative grace.

The fact that a number of the Corinthians' problems seem to derive from their failure to value the physical body as they ought, suggests that this chapter isn't just an appendix. There's something about this chapter that addresses core issues underlying the whole of the letter. In chapter 6, verses 13-20 we read, Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For as it is written, the two will become one flesh, but he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.

Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.

So glorify God in your body. The resurrection of the body would seem crassly physical to many of the Corinthians in their super-spirituality. They are elevated above the realm of the body, and the physical resurrection undermines this.

And if they're elevated above the realm of the body, the sort of moral requirements that can be laid upon the body can be relaxed also. The belief in the resurrection of the dead, while present in apocalyptic Judaism, would have been quite unpalatable to obeying former pagans. A further issue for the Corinthians was their over-realized eschatology.

They believed that they already reigned like kings, and had attained to the heights of

spirituality. Paul, in talking about the resurrection of the dead, focuses on something that we must look forward to. We have not already attained it.

We are looking forward to and awaiting it. Richard Hayes notes that Paul ends both of the major sections of the chapter by referring to the importance of the righteous behaviour and labour of the Corinthians. It is the expectation of the resurrection of the body in the future that gives weight to our activities in the body right now.

And in this first part of his argument in this chapter, up to verse 34, Paul's concern is to show that belief in the resurrection is essential to the gospel. The first eleven verses articulate the fundamental gospel message, the apostolic witness and the tradition that he passed on to them when he first preached the gospel to them. This is the message of their salvation itself, and at its core lies the crucifixion of Christ according to the scriptures, his burial, his resurrection on the third day according to the scriptures, and his appearance to the apostles and witnesses.

This message is an essential apostolic tradition. It is the most important thing of all. It is core to the body of teaching that the apostles, as the foundation of the church, were commissioned to communicate.

Paul received this himself, and he passes it on to them. And Paul enumerates and identifies a number of witnesses to the resurrection. The large number of the witnesses, the independent witness accounts, the multiple appearances, the known identities and character of the witnesses, the fact that most of the witnesses were still alive at the time of Paul's writing, and the realistic possibility of investigating and corroborating his claims, all give great weight to the testimony of the resurrection.

This wasn't something that happened in a corner, with only a few unreliable or inaccessible witnesses. While the resurrection is an event that dramatically alters the character of all human history, it is a historical event that occurred in time and space. It was also a physical event.

There was a body in a tomb, and then there was no body there. Beyond the eyewitnesses, there is also the fact that both the event of Christ's death and the event of his resurrection occurred according to the scriptures. The prophetic testimony of the scriptures is a further confirmatory witness.

The witness of the scriptures makes clear that the death and resurrection of Christ are not just powerful miracles proving God's power, nor are they just anomalous events. Rather, in these events, the story that the entirety of scripture tells reaches its climax. And here we should probably recognize the fuller way in which the apostles following Christ read the Old Testament.

They saw genuine promises of resurrection in places where we, with our dulled reading,

might not see them. So places in the Psalms, for instance. You will not let your Holy One see corruption.

Things like the stories of scripture. The story of Joseph, Daniel in the lion's den, Jonah in the belly of the big fish, prophecies in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and elsewhere. All of these scriptural witnesses could be marshaled to show that the events of the death and resurrection of Christ did not just happen by accident.

They were events that fulfilled God's promises and purposes that had gone on since the foundation of the world. Paul himself is a witness of the resurrection. He is an appointed apostle.

He is not merely testifying to some tradition that he received second hand. We might ask what exactly the Corinthians were denying. Were they denying that there was some sort of post-mortal existence? At points, that may be possible.

Were they claiming that the resurrection had already occurred, but was some inner and spiritual event? In scripture we do read of such persons. Then they might be thinking that the resurrection was not a bodily event, but the Christian faith is merely about the deliverance of the soul. Most likely there's some variety and mixture of these positions at play in the Corinthian church.

It seems to me, however, that the key issues surrounded the question not of post-mortal existence as such, but bodily resurrection. Of course, if there were no bodily resurrection, the fact of Christ's own bodily resurrection, so central to the apostolic gospel message, becomes a problem. If Christ is not bodily raised, the gospel message and the salvation that rests upon it swiftly unravel.

The apostles turn out to be unreliable witnesses. Indeed, the sheer weight of the unreliable testimony that they would be bearing would throw everything else that they said into doubt. Not only would their preaching be in vain, though, so would the Corinthians' faith.

The salvation that they proclaimed would be proven empty. The Corinthians would be still in their sins. Christians who had died would have entirely perished, and Christians would be a pitiable group of people, enslaved to an empty hope.

Yet, of course, none of these things are in fact the case. Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, the first sheaf that guarantees the greater harvest.

The resurrection isn't just an event that sets Christ apart. It's the opening of the womb of the tomb. There is a direct connection between Christ's resurrection and our own.

Christ's resurrection has significance for all humanity in Him. Adam's death brought

death to humanity, but Christ's resurrection is the source of life for all who belong to Him, the new humanity formed as His body by the Spirit. We should note that our resurrection is a participation in Christ's resurrection, rather than a situation where we and Christ are just participating in a common event.

Paul writes in Philippians 3, verses 8-11, For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. This all happens in an appropriate order. Christ, the firstborn of the dead, the one who opens the womb of the grave, is raised first.

Then at the end, when Christ returns, the rest of us are raised with Him. This will lead to the final defeat of death. Christ has been raised to God's right hand and He will reign there until all enemies have been subdued.

Paul alludes to Psalm 110, verse 1 here, one of the most popular Old Testament verses in the New Testament. It's a verse speaking of the Messiah's exalted authority. The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.

This may possibly also be a reference to Psalm 8, verses 3-8. When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of Man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings, and crowned him with glory and honour. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands.

You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea. Psalm 8 is used to refer to Christ's exalted authority as the second man and the last Adam in the book of Hebrews. The truth of Christ's ascension is also brought forward by Paul then against the denial of bodily resurrection here.

If the dead are not raised, then Christ's victory is incomplete. The final boss, death itself, is left unvanquished. Many have seen a sort of subordinationism in Paul's remarks about the Father's relationship to the Son here.

However, it is important to bear in mind that this reveals triune relations in terms of the creator-creature framework. The passage also refers not to the eternal relation between Father and Son, but to the culminating moment in the great drama of redemption, the moment when the submission of the Son arrives at its perfect completion. The submission of the Son in these verses is not a reference to the eternal and broken relation between Father and Son in the Godhead, but to the climax of the work of the

incarnate Son, when his mission arrives at its final telos.

This is the reality of his authoritative obedience being fully and utterly realised, and the complete divine authority he has effected is exhaustively related back to the Father as its source. A closer look at this passage reveals the mutually defining relationship between Father and Son. All divine authority in the world is put into effect through the Son, and without him no divine authority is effected.

All things are put under him. Indeed, the Son's bringing about of the divine authority is the precondition for the Father's being all in all. On the other hand, it is the Father who exhaustively authorises the Son.

The Father places all things under his Son. The Son renders all things up to the Father. It is important to read this in terms of earlier teaching in the book, in places like 8, 5-6, which speaks of the oneness of God, Father, Son and Spirit.

For though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. Both the authority of Father and Son are comprehensive, the only distinction between them being prepositional. It is from the Father and for the Father.

It is through the Son. There is another expression of the unity of God in chapter 12, verses 4-6. Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.

One Spirit, one Lord, one God. And the result of this is the completion of the pattern, and God being all in all, as all things are placed under Christ's feet and he renders them all up to the Father. Paul changes tack in verse 29, trying to show that if the resurrection is denied, the practices of the Church and Christians lose their meaningfulness and credibility.

Indeed, they become a sort of foolishness. The first example he gives here is one that has caused all sorts of speculation. It's the example of baptism for the dead.

The meaning of this expression, and whatever the practice to which it refers is, has produced endless debate and speculation. Is it deathbed baptism? Is it the washing of dead bodies? Is it ritual or ceremonial washing after touching a corpse, according to the Jewish law? Perhaps it is baptism with reference to departed martyrs or faithful Christians. Perhaps it's response to their martyrdoms or in some association with them.

Maybe it was some kind of vicarious or proxy baptism. Perhaps living people were being baptized on behalf of people who had already died. Or perhaps it refers to people being

baptized out of the desire to be reunited with those they had known and loved and who had died before them.

Such a motive for baptism would require a very strong belief in the resurrection of the dead. Anthony Thistleton argues for this view, and I think this is probably the most persuasive of the options out there. Most of the other options entail some sort of straining of the language that Paul actually uses here.

It's important to consider the connection between baptism and Christ's sufferings in the flesh. We see this in Luke 12, verse 50. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.

Our connection to Christ in baptism is focused upon the body. It's focused upon the reality of the resurrection also. In Romans chapter 6, verses 3-14 we read, We must certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

We know that our old self was crucified with him, in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now, if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died, he died to sin once for all.

But the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law, but under grace. In baptism, then, our bodies are marked with a seal of resurrection.

In baptism, the Church confesses its confidence in the resurrection of the dead, Christ's resurrection in the past, and our anticipation of our participation in his resurrection in the future. It matters that baptism is performed upon our physical bodies. Some people will get baptised with this reality particularly foregrounded.

They have lost loved ones, and throw themselves upon Christ, the victor over the grave, so that they too may be delivered from the clutches of death by his grace, and be united in his resurrection, and the general resurrection, with those whom they have lost, who testified to his power over the tomb. This, I believe, is the most compelling way to understand Paul's reference to baptism for the dead. Beyond this, Paul refers to the fact that he is constantly putting his life on the line for the gospel.

He is facing fierce and vicious opposition, something that he can metaphorically refer to as wild beasts. These are people seeking his life. And it's completely foolish to do this if, in fact, there is no resurrection.

If it were the case that there were no resurrection, the best thing to do would be to enjoy life in the flesh now as much as possible. Faithfulness in the present rests upon our confident hope of the raising of our bodies to new life, and the behaviour of some of the Corinthians was driven by their failure to consider future hope, and the way in which our bodies will be raised, and they have meaning in the present as a result of that fact, because they have a destiny, and a future in which they have a part. Paul's discussion of the resurrection here now gets at the very heart of some of the problems in Corinth.

A question to consider. How could we elaborate and fill out Paul's teaching that Christ's resurrection is not merely the resurrection of one individual, but the inauguration of the resurrection, the general resurrection of the dead that is awaited by God's people? It seems to be that at the heart of the Corinthians' objections, there was incredulity about the possibility of a resurrection body, and here in the second half of 1 Corinthians chapter 15, Paul turns to address this point. Perhaps for the Corinthians, such a belief in the resurrection of the body would be seen as a primitive superstition for people who hadn't yet arrived at the recognition of the lower character of corporeality.

Paul addresses the seemingly underlying question of the form in which the dead would be raised, disposing with some bad misunderstandings at the outset. The resurrection is not a mere resuscitation of dead corpses in their existing form. Such resuscitation can be seen in gospel narratives such as that of Jairus' daughter or the raising of Lazarus.

Jesus' resurrection, however, is something quite different. It entails a radical transformation. The body that was sown was the body that was raised, but it was that body having undergone a remarkable transformation.

Paul gives the analogy of a seed that is sown. The seed is quite different from the plant that grows from it. Jesus himself seems to speak of his own death and resurrection in terms of such an analogy in John chapter 12 verse 24.

The body that emerges from the sown seed is ultimately a gift of God. Paul then proceeds to list a number of different forms of physicality in the current heavens and earth, describing variegated creatures and earthly and heavenly bodies in this existing creation. These forms of physicality markedly differ in their standing and glory.

Paul is trying to expand the imaginative frameworks that the Corinthians are operating within here. Thinking in terms of the variety of forms given by God in the existing creation might make it more possible for the Corinthians to consider the possibility of a yet more glorious form in the new creation. In contrasting the great and the varying glories of the heavenly bodies with the lesser glories of earthly bodies, Paul may be

giving us an analogy that anticipates the distinction he will draw between the earthly body and the heavenly body later in his argument.

He may also have in mind Daniel chapter 12 verses 2 to 3, which employs this very analogy. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars for ever and ever.

The point isn't that the righteous literally become stars. Rather the point is that they will have an enduring glory like that of the stars. Returning to the seed analogy, which serves to underline the importance of transformation, Paul contrasts the character of the body before and after the resurrection.

It's perishable beforehand, it's imperishable afterwards. It's sown in dishonour beforehand, it's raised in glory. It's natural beforehand, it's spiritual afterwards.

These distinctions describe different aspects of the change that will occur. There will be a changing relationship to the powers of death and decay. There will be a changing status as the raised body will be glorious.

There will be changing capacities as bodies of weakness will be raised as bodies of power. There will be a changing manner of existence as a natural or soulish body of this creation will be raised as a body animated by the spirit of God. In speaking of a spiritual body in contrast to a natural or soulish body, Paul isn't speaking of an immaterial or a non-corporeal existence.

Rather he is referring to a new, higher, more glorious and more powerful mode of corporeality. The mechanics of the change aren't Paul's concern. The fact of it and the ultimate cause of it is what matters.

These are bodies given by God. And if God has created a body suitable for the current natural order animated by our souls, it is entirely reasonable to believe that there is a body suited to the coming renewed world of the spirit animated by the spirit himself. Paul proceeds to contrast the first Adam and the last Adam.

The first Adam, Paul writes, became a living soul, quoting Genesis chapter 2. A man doomed with his descendants to death and decay. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. The first Adam was characterised by an impotence that was subject to death.

The last Adam, by sharp contrast, has the power to communicate life, a life of a much higher order. He is a life-giving spirit, as it is the spirit of Christ that communicates the resurrection life to his people. Adam and Christ are juxtaposed in order to highlight how sharp the contrast between them is.

Christ's character as the last Adam and the life-giving spirit makes clear again that Christ himself is the one who communicates resurrection life and the resurrection body to us. He is the head and the source of a new humanity. Philippians chapter 3 verses 20 to 21 read, There is an order to this.

The natural soulish body of Adam comes first, and then the glorious spiritual body of Christ. Paul's discussion here suggests, I believe, that the advent of Christ was always intended from the beginning. Humanity begun in Adam was always intended to be consummated in Christ.

We were created in the image of God so that one day we might be raised to our full stature as humanity, in union with the one who is the image of God. As things happened within God's will, Christ's coming was into the conditions of a fallen humanity and a world subject to the reign of death. But the intent of the resurrection exceeds mere deliverance from sin.

Rather, the resurrection is about raising humanity up to the glory for which we were always intended. The first man was formed of the dust and was bound to the dust, returning to it in death as a result of his sin. The second man is not bound to the dust as the first man was, but is from heaven, reigning in that higher realm.

Why does Paul say first Adam and last Adam, but first man and second man? Possibly because there were many Adam-like figures, Noah, Abraham and David among them, but only two human persons who stand as the head and prototype of an entire humanity. The people who belong to Adam and Christ bear their respective images. In Genesis 5, verse 3, we're told that Adam had a son in his own likeness, after his image, Seth.

In Romans 8, verse 29, Paul informs the heroes of the letter that Christians were predestined to be conformed to the image of the Son. The reference to bearing the image of Christ should not be restricted to the future. Paul believes that this transformation is already underway for the people of God and that it should be pursued.

2 Corinthians 3, verse 18, And we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. Like the old image, this new image is not merely or even primarily an individual reality.

Paul writes in Colossians 3, verses 9-11, Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free, but Christ is all, and in all. As those who are a new humanity in Christ, we are called to be transformed into his likeness.

Paul's teaching here has a strong underlying moral force, as we see in Ephesians 4, verses 20-24. But this is not the way you learned Christ, assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus, to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness. Paul now speaks of the transformation that will occur.

Flesh and blood and perishable bodies cannot inherit the imperishable kingdom of God, so something must happen. This something is the resurrection. Whether or not we die or fall asleep, as Paul puts it, we will all undergo an instantaneous yet radical change.

Our raised bodies will be continuous with our current bodies, but they will also be gloriously and permanently changed. This will occur at the last blowing of the trumpet. The trumpet blast is associated with such things as the year of Jubilee, with the theophanic appearance of God at Sinai, and with the Day of the Lord in the Prophets.

Earlier in this chapter, Paul spoke of Christ's ascension and the expectation that all enemies would be put under his feet, the last of those enemies being death itself. Now, at the end of the chapter, and the end of the teaching of the main body of the epistle, he returns to this point. The raising of our bodies from the grave will mark the final and complete victory of Christ over death.

He quotes Isaiah chapter 25, of which verses 6-8 read as follows. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations.

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. Isaiah's vision of the Lord's victory over death and an eschatological feast for all peoples will find its fulfillment in the final resurrection.

This is of course something taken up in the book of Revelation in chapter 21, verses 1-4. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. The second part of Paul's statement quotes Hosea chapter 13 verse 14, which in the ESV reads, I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol, I shall redeem them from death. O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your sting? The ESV here is closer to the Septuagint reading, however the verse in question is part of a judgment oracle, which makes it more likely that we are to read the verse like the NRSV does.

Shall I ransom them from the power of Sheol? Shall I redeem them from death? O death, where are your plagues? O Sheol, where is your destruction? Compassion is hidden from my eyes. If this is the case, Paul may be purposefully alluding to the passage to reverse its force. In the very words once used to summon the power of death to destroy and judge, its ultimate defeat is now proclaimed.

In the very expressions by which the maw of death was once opened up to swallow a disobedient people, its defanging and head-crushing is announced. The victory over death was dealt with by dealing with its sting, sin, the power of which was the law. This is something that Paul explores in Romans and Galatians especially.

Christ, by dying for our sins, robbed death of its sting and gives us the victory over it, as Hebrews 2, verse 9 and 14-15 put it. But we see Him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone. Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death He might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

The chapter and the body of the whole letter ends with the great but perhaps surprising statement, Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. The fact of the resurrection is the ground and the encouragement for all faithful living in the world. Because of the resurrection our labor is not in vain.

Because of the resurrection what we do in and with our bodies matters. Because of the resurrection we can abound in our sowing of seeds, confident that we await a great final harvest. Because of the resurrection we know that everything that is truly done in Christ will endure.

A question to consider. Looking back through the body of the letter, why might this be such a fitting place to end it? 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. 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 2, verses 7-10. Now Paul is meeting with them in the context of bringing a gift from the Christians at Antioch 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 and 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 2-3. Also Isaiah chapter 60, verses 10-16.

And Isaiah chapter 2, verses 10-16. 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, Dikakis or Enesimus, 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 recognizing what we are doing. As an example, let's look at the first four verses of Ephesians chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. 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 recognised and practised 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 23-24 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 emphasised 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 honour Stephanus and his household for their long-standing faith, their faithful service, and their devoted labour. The point here isn't that they have an official position, but that their service itself is deserving of honour, 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 behaviour described in the letter. If they are going to recognise 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?