

SLOW PAUL: THINKING THROUGH 1 CORINTHIANS

Introduction. Paul's first visit to Corinth, a major seaport city in Achaia (southern Greece), can be dated around AD 50-52, a mere twenty years or so after the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He subsequently moved to Ephesus, where he wrote a series of letters, including 1 and 2 Corinthians (c53-55), trying (not completely successfully) to deal with issues which were troubling the church in Corinth. For the sequence of events and writings, see the introduction to *Slow Paul: 2 Corinthians*. While some of these issues are particular to this one church, others (e.g. the dangers of pride in spiritual gifting and knowledge, the supreme value of self-giving love and the meaning and importance of the resurrection) will refresh and challenge any Christian fellowship anywhere.

As to the particular challenge of 1 Corinthians as normative for our church two thousand years later, Gordon Fee's reminder (*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1987, revised ed 2014, p17) is helpful:

Here Paul is doing what he does best, bringing the gospel to bear in the market-place. For him the truth of his gospel is finally tested in its ability to work its way out in the exigencies of everyday life in some very ticklish situations.

'The market-place' (meaning the cultural setting of the first-century church at Corinth) was both very different and quite similar to the cultural atmosphere in which the twenty-first-century church finds itself. Fee again (p20):

The cosmopolitan character of the city and church, the strident individualism that emerges in so many of their behavioural aberrations, the arrogance that attends their understanding of being people of the Spirit, the accommodation of the gospel to the surrounding culture in all too many ways – these and some other features of the Corinthian church are but mirrors held up to the church of today. Likewise the need for discipleship modelled after the 'weakness' of Christ (4:9-13), for love to rule over all (13:1-13), for edification to be the aim of worship (14:1-33), for sexual immorality to be seen for what it is (5:1-13; 6:12-20), for the expectation of marriages to be permanent (7:1-40) – these at least, as perhaps some others, are every bit as relevant to us as to those for whom they were first written.

The only excuse for giving chapter 13 (on Love) the Slow Paul treatment is that it is so familiar (particularly in the King James version) that it may have lost its original impact for us. Otherwise there is no justification for ploughing up such hallowed turf. The case with chapter 15 (on Resurrection) is slightly different: we glibly recite 'I believe in ... the resurrection of the body' in the Apostles Creed without having much awareness of the electrifying character of this theme. I was dimly aware of its importance when struggling through C S Lewis' *Miracles*, but what really opened my eyes to it was a talk by Tom Wright (who despite suffering from acute toothache spoke without notes for 45 minutes – it's on the TISCA website somewhere) and subsequently reading his *Surprised by Hope* (SPCK 2007) which, give or take a few pet diatribes on the subject of 'going to heaven after we die', is the most inspiring book on the subject I have yet come across.

The text of the *New International Version* (2011) is printed at the head of each section, for ease of reference to what Paul actually wrote (in translation). The headings do no more than indicate the subject-matter of each section. Those who wish to study the letter for themselves are referred to the Slow Food studies found elsewhere on the website.

CHAPTERS 1-4: WISDOM HUMAN AND DIVINE

1:1-3 ¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Opening message

[1:1] This letter comes from the apostle Paul. My calling has come directly from the King-in-waiting whose earthly name is Jesus; at the time it was the last thing I wanted, but God had other

ideas. My co-writer is someone you know well, who took a public beating on my behalf and is here in Ephesus with me witnessing to Christ – his name is Sosthenes.

[1:2] I'm writing to the whole church, the gathered people of God in the city and region of Corinth, each one of whom has responded in faith to start a fresh life of personal dedication to their Master (and mine). Yes, you too have heard his voice summoning you from the ways of the world to live singlemindedly for him. You have joined a worldwide membership of folk scattered in cities, towns and villages throughout the Roman Empire, whose distinguishing mark is that every day, and every hour of the day, they are in direct contact with their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ – that's the way they started the life of faith (as I did myself) and that's the way they mean to go on.

[1:3] My opening message may use familiar words, but like the sunshine it's new every moment: may the grace of our Father God, his unconditional love and unlimited support, be yours today, and may you leave all your burdens with him and rest in the assurance of his perfect friendship, because of what his Son Jesus has done for us and is still doing among us.

1:4-9 ⁴I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – ⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Sheer goodness

[1:4] How can I stop thanking God for you? I can't get over his sheer goodness in the way he has dealt first with me and then with you. He sent Jesus to pick me up off that Damascus road and make me his own; [1:5] he's picked you out of the gutters and brothels of Corinth (pardon me, but isn't that the truth with many of you?) to make you spiritual millionaires. Why else has he given you gifts you certainly never had before, like the ability to say words from God that ring true whoever hears them, and the intuition that penetrates to the heart of somebody else's trouble and brings them light and healing?

[1:6] Similarly, wasn't it due to God's merciful generosity that when the message about Christ was first proclaimed in your market-places and synagogues, instead of floating away like gossamer seeds in the wind, it took firm root and flourished in your barren and unpromising soil? [1:7] So here you are now, probably the most gifted and confident church that I've yet come across, no longer fooled by the lies and delusions of the world but steadily looking forward every day to the moment when the veil is torn aside and the returning King is revealed in all his splendour.

Attacks and temptations

[1:8] But until that day dawns there are going to be attacks upon the stability of your faith, there will be temptations to divert you from the path of holiness; how are you going to reach your goal and stand reproachless before the tribunal of Christ, where every motive, every attitude and every practice is going to be shown up for what it really was? There again it's all down to his grace: when you stumbled and fell flat on your face, Jesus helped you to your feet again, and he's going to go on doing that as long as life lasts. [1:9] Yes, we have an utterly dependable God; he hasn't been sitting on some distant cloud waiting for us to find our way to him, he's come down to us and spoken to us personally through the gospel. And why has he done this? Not so that we can preen ourselves for our spirituality (we are as fickle as he is faithful) or set up our own little cliques, but in order for us to become members of a single, worldwide, united fellowship

centred on his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus isn't Lord of just part of the church, he is the Lord of the whole of it, and that means you, me and everyone else who acknowledges him.

1:10-17 ¹⁰ *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.* ¹¹ *My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.* ¹² *What I mean is this: one of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'* ¹³ *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised in the name of Paul?* ¹⁴ *I thank God that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius,* ¹⁵ *so no one can say that you were baptised in my name.* ¹⁶ *(Yes, I also baptised the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptised anyone else.)* ¹⁷ *For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

Babel at Corinth

[1:10] Now I'm going to get straight to the point. I'm assuming you are believing Christians and that like me you have put your lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. I should also emphasise that even though this letter starts by saying it's from Paul the apostle, there is a far more important signature underneath it, and that is the name of our Lord Jesus himself. Listen – God has something to say to you.

Corinth has turned into Babel. You're all speaking different languages and shouting so loud that no one can think straight. You've split into little groups, each in its own corner of the ring, all mouthing your own slogans. You're like the man possessed by a whole legion of squabbling demons. Why can't you sit at the feet of Christ as he did, perfectly sane and rational and integrated? I agree that would be a miracle; but that's exactly what's needed in your neck of the woods.

[1:11] You may wonder how I've heard about this. It takes courage to be a whistleblower, but there's no question of anonymous accusations here, it's come from the fellowship group that meets in Chloe's house, and they are willing to put their hands up and be counted, as long as something good comes of it. What they're unhappy about is the constant bickering and in-fighting that goes on in your church.

Supporting your own faction

[1:12] As far as I understand it – tell me if I'm wrong – it's like chariot-racing in the Circus. Everyone has to support their own faction, wave their own coloured flag. The Greens are supposed to represent me, Paul; I find this highly embarrassing and order it to stop immediately. The Reds shout for Apollos, my dear friend and gifted teacher who has done so much to challenge you to find Christ in the Scriptures) (more about him later) – and I can assure you that he is equally indignant about his name being placarded as a band leader. The Blue shirts trumpet 'Cephas', not that the apostle Peter has been anywhere near Corinth, but they've been fed a bowdlerised version of his gospel for the Jews – I can't imagine how he would react if he heard about this. Then of course you have the pure Whites, the 'Christ' faction, 'oh we are the only pure gospel people and all you other lots are compromising in one way or another.' It is all quite disgusting.

Paul the baptiser?

[1:13] Are you really proposing to chop Jesus into little bits and parcel him out among your groups? It's like the soldiers gambling for assorted items of Christ's clothes while he's up there dying for the sins of the whole world. Was it Paul who bore your sins on the cross at Calvary? And when you were baptised, was it the sign of Paul that was traced on your foreheads, was it

my name that was uttered lovingly and reverently as you went under the water? No, of course not! [1:14] Just get hold of this: I totally dissociate myself from the baptisms of any of you, except for my dear Crispus (who as ex-president of the synagogue needed to mark his conversion in as obvious a way as possible) and our wonderful host Gaius to whom we owe so much. [1:15] How on earth then can anyone else claim to have been baptised in Paul's name? I find this utterly incredible. [1:16] Oh yes, of course I did baptise Stephanas and his entire household – what a joyful occasion that was, laying the foundation-stone of the church in the province of Achaea – how dare anyone quote that to support this subsequent mishmash! I really can't remember if I officiated at anyone else's baptism, and anyway these are the exceptions that prove the rule – Paul doesn't regularly do baptisms, and he certainly doesn't countenance all this silly name-calling, and that's an end of it.

Sidelining the cross

[1:17] The point is this. Initiation ceremonies like baptism are very important, don't get me wrong; but someone's got to bring people to the place where they want to be baptised, and that means telling the story of Christ and calling for a response. It's a full time job, this evangelism thing – and it's the job the Lord has given me. Other people are better at conducting the ritual side of things, which in itself is very demanding, what with preparation and organising the ceremony and so on.

The temptation in presenting the gospel is to dress it up in language that is going to impress people, whether that is achieved by using high-sounding philosophical terms, or by analysing the political and economic state of the world, or whatever. By doing that one is saying, in effect, yes Jesus died on the cross for you, but that's only one reason why you ought to put your trust in him. It is the reason! Otherwise you banish the cross from centre stage to the sidelines; and if I thought it belonged on the margins, I wouldn't be doing the Lord's work, I'd be following some other agenda.

1:18-25 ¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' ²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

The centrality of the cross

[1:18] Let me stay with this train of thought for a while and explain why I think preaching the cross is so important. It is central to God's strategy. His one, all-consuming passion is to gather a saved people. We all start unsaved, as I myself did, and if you have no idea of the true situation you naturally conclude that the Passion story is crazy – it simply doesn't make rational sense for God's Chosen One to end up spreadeagled against two pieces of Roman timber. But as soon as your eyes start being opened (as mine were) to the dire state our sin has landed us in, you begin to see that God in Christ has mounted the supreme rescue operation, because he's broken the power of sin at the heart of things.

Limitations of human understanding

[1:19] We find the prophet Isaiah all those years ago contrasting the folly and shortsightedness of human understanding to the wonderful wisdom of God. He pictures the mind of God as a scroll

which no one can read, not even the prophets or the seers who are supposed to be the wise guides for the people. Everyone carries out the traditional religious ceremonies but at best it's an exercise in hypocrisy, because their motives are hollow and self-seeking. So God pronounces his verdict on this hopeless charade: 'The learned wisdom of all these people will go up like a puff of smoke; all their vaunted knowledge and insight is going straight on the rubbish-heap.' And if you read on, he makes the astonishing statement that the people who will really hear and understand the truth are the stone deaf; the people who will see God's light are ignorant and God-forsaken souls wrapped in deepest darkness. That's you and me!

The most powerful philosophy ever discovered

[1:20] So where does this leave the philosophers, scholars, lecturers and talking heads whose names are placarded at every street corner and whose works are lovingly catalogued in libraries and encyclopedias? Go to the heavenly archives, and you'll find them filed under 'Piffle'. [1:21] By what criteria? None of them bring lost humanity into touch with the living God. In fact this was God's master plan all along. He made it impossible for anybody to fathom by sheer unaided reason what the One True God is really like and what he is up to in his world. These thinkers can work out the atomic structure of the universe, but they can't save a single soul. So this crazy God-person sends along complete clowns and idiots like you and me to tell whoever will listen, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you won't go down the rubbish chute.'

[1:22] Oh, they won't be happy, these self-styled intellectual giants! Rabbi A and Torah Scholar B will quote you (skilfully selected) Targums and Mishnahs to prove that Jesus can't possibly be the Messiah because he didn't produce the celestial fireworks expected of the Coming One. Meanwhile the Neoplatonists and Epicureans spin webs of dialectic to trap you in circular arguments and self-contradictory propositions. [1:23] We simply talk about a Messiah who gave his own life to save the world; and this has your Moses experts muttering 'Blasphemy!' and your rationalist opinion-formers shouting 'Hogwash!' [1:24] And all the time the whisper of God's call comes insistently through the din to men and women from religious and pagan backgrounds alike, telling them that Jesus can meet their deepest needs and that following him leads to life and truth.

[1:25] You see, my friends, what the world thinks is the utter incredibility of a God who gets himself mixed up in human affairs and ends up hanging limply from a gibbet, is really the solution to every human dilemma, and the most powerful philosophy ever discovered.

1:26-31 ²⁶ *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.* ²⁷ *But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.* ²⁸ *God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are,* ²⁹ *so that no one may boast before him.* ³⁰ *It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* ³¹ *Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'*

Human credentials count for nothing with God

[1:26] 'But, Paul, aren't you misjudging what kind of church we are here at Corinth? We aren't a bunch of eggheads discussing the latest fashions in philosophy, nor do we walk the corridors of political or economic power, nor are we upper-class toffs talking with posh accents and having family trees stretching back hundreds of years. There may be a few exceptions, and of course we welcome them as fellow-Christians – but all this talk about Jewish scholars and Greek intellectuals frankly has us scratching our heads. What are you on about?'

[1:27-28] That is precisely my point! Human credentials count for nothing with God. He isn't remotely impressed by scholarly wisdom or positions of power or privileged status. His one concern is with the people he has picked out to be with him for eternity, whom he has chosen to share his Son's heavenly glory. If in the estimation of society they are rejected as illiterate, or uninfluential, or the lowest of the low, then shame on society. If God decides that total losers should inherit his kingdom, then they aren't losers any longer. That's the kind of God he is. He's the Creator God who calls things into being that (by human reckoning) couldn't possibly ever exist, because, believe it or not, the present order of existence is going to disappear completely and it's going to be replaced by what God has decided is going to be permanent.

Something to boast about

[1:29] All forms of human pride and achievement are going to collapse in the presence of this God of ours. That's what he has warned us is going to happen, and happen it will. [1:30-31] Turn with me to that scorching passage in Jeremiah where the Lord himself is speaking: 'Do you want something to boast about? What is it that makes a person walk tall and confident? Is it being awarded a doctorate in philosophy or theology? Is it having a physique like Hercules? Is it possessing a bank balance that could buy out a small nation? All these gifts come from me, and they're very minor ones at that. I'll tell you the best gift of all, which will reduce you to such humility that you can go on about it all day without a trace of arrogance, and that is to know me. Yes, acknowledging me as your Lord, because I accept no-hopers, I pass sentence on unrepentant pride and I put things right on this troubled earth. That's where my heart is and everything else is irrelevant.'

How does this apply to you? Because you've put your faith in Christ and become full members of God's family, you have all the knowledge and understanding you need; Jesus is your source of wisdom, and not only wisdom but down-to-earth goodness, single-minded holiness and (when you let him down, as you surely will) unfailing forgiveness and restoration – leading one day, one day soon, to freedom from the very presence of all evil and wrongdoing. Worth boasting about? Shout it from the rooftops!

2:1-5 ¹And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

Straight talk from God's word

[2:1] I don't know what you expected when I first turned up in your midst five years ago. Maybe you thought, 'This is Saul of Tarsus, university educated, personally tutored by the great Gamaliel – let's look forward to some intellectual fireworks and a brilliant display of oratory.' And all you got was straight talk from God's own word. What a disappointment! Or was it? [2:2] I had to make a conscious decision about what kind of message I was bringing to Corinth. And I asked myself, 'What do I actually know for certain? All my studies in philosophy and theology have conspired to teach me that there isn't really anything called "truth" out there, it's all relative, it's all a matter of what people think from their different angles, it's all shifting sand under our feet.' And then I thought, 'There is one thing I have reached rock-solid certainty about, and that is the fact that Jesus the Son of God walked this earth and died on a cross, and it's my job to tell people why.'

[2:3] You might think this would have solved all my problems and I could stand up in synagogues, lecture-halls and market-places as bold as brass. Not a bit of it. I was a physical and psychological wreck. I was trembling from head to foot whenever I faced even the smallest audience. Maybe you never noticed it, but it's true. [2:4] However well I prepared for a talk and marshalled all my arguments, as soon as I got up to speak everything went out of the window like a puff of smoke, and God took over. Instead of Paul blowing your minds with his encyclopedic scriptural knowledge and unanswerable logic, it was the Spirit going straight to people's hearts and telling them what they needed to know at the control centre of their lives. There I was stammering and stuttering like a stage-struck actor, and there was God blowing like a tornado through people's attitudes and assumptions and tearing their shallow complacency into little shreds.

[2:5] That's why there is such a strong believing church at Corinth: not because Paul or anyone else argued you into their version of the faith, but because the Creator Spirit of God was dealing directly with you, stirring you to the very depths, healing wounds no doctor could ever reach, applying to each and every one the utter relief of Jesus crucified and risen for you.

2:6-10a ⁶ *We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing.* ⁷ *No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began.* ⁸ *None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.* ⁹ *However, as it is written: 'What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived' – the things God has prepared for those who love him –* ¹⁰ *these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.*

Leaving God out

[2:6] 'So, Paul, are you basically saying that when we become Christians we should leave our brains at the door, stop asking questions and blindly accept what we're told?' No way! God isn't in the business of producing programmed automata, he wants wise, mature, grown-up saints; and all my follow-up instruction is aimed at producing people who can stand on their own feet spiritually and think things out for themselves. My point is this: the way the unbelieving world proceeds is to leave God out of the equation, and this applies to people in power just as much as it does to the man or woman in the street. Their agenda is purely temporal and provisional, and it doesn't begin to deal in eternal realities. [2:7] We who teach God's word are conscious of being entrusted with the incredible privilege of interpreting the very mind of the Only Wise God. The truths of the kingdom, devastatingly simple as they are, don't lie on the surface. They lie buried in deep storehouses created before time began, waiting for the moment when Christ arrives to take the children of God by the hand and lead us wonderingly into the glories of his love. [2:8] I tell you this: if Pilate or Caiaphas or any of the Jewish or Roman hierarchy had had any inkling of who it was standing there in front of them, they wouldn't have acted as they did. The King's full glory had to be veiled, of course; but when he tried to open Pilate's eyes to the truth, all he got was a public execution of horrifying brutality. That's how the world operates: 'Anyone who thinks there's a God and a heaven needs removing out of harm's way.'

Foretaste

[2:9] It's all there, of course, in the prophets. Take the final chapters of Isaiah where he unfolds God's plan of salvation: the Lord is going to come down himself and reveal himself to his people, and lead them into a new existence entirely. They will have no inkling of how he is going to do this; no prophet, philosopher, guru or visionary can supply any clue as to what he plans; it

simply hasn't occurred to any human being what denouement is going to take place. But anyone who simply can't have enough of God, who hangs in there knowing that one day he will make everything right— why, for them the thought of heaven is as natural as breathing. [2:10] Yes, it's a mystery, a quite extraordinary mystery – but it's a matter of faith-experience that we often get a foretaste of what is coming, a tiny lifting of the veil before the great awakening – and this is all thanks to the Holy Spirit.

2:10b-16 ^{10b}*The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.* ¹¹*For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.* ¹²*What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.* ¹³*This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.* ¹⁴*The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.* ¹⁵*The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments,* ¹⁶*for, 'Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ.*

Scanning God's depths

[2:10b] The Spirit can explore the deepest mysteries. It's as though you were to travel in a boat to the middle of the ocean with the most powerful searchlight ever invented, and try to illuminate the seabed itself; the beam wouldn't get farther than a few dozen feet into the darkness below, leaving miles and miles of ocean in impenetrable obscurity. But the Spirit can scan the very depths of God's own mind. [2:11] Or take the amazing phenomenon of self-consciousness: how do we know what we are thinking and feeling, when no one else has any idea? It seems that humans have the unique capacity of self-awareness, enabling us to reflect on our individual experience and make sense of our most private and hidden thoughts.

That's a small illustration of the way God's Spirit knows and interprets the mind of God. No one else has any inkling of what is going through the mind of the Most High – unless the Spirit chooses to reveal it. [2:12] And that's the point I'm trying to make. If we take the searchlight of worldly wisdom and shine it into the depths of God, we may see a few feet below the surface, but that's all. But if God's own Spirit is given to us and lives within us, why, we can peer down into the ocean of God's bountiful heart and see how it teems with life, colour, warmth – treasures of his love in which we are freely invited to partake. I'm not saying we have total knowledge of the divine mind, only that what he shares with us is enough and more than enough to satisfy our needs.

Infallibly inspired?

[2:13] 'So what you're claiming, Paul, is that you and other teachers of apostolic doctrine are infallibly inspired to tell us God's own truth!' Put that way, it sounds breathtakingly arrogant, and I realise that. But how else is God going to reveal his truths to his people? Is he simply going to leave us to take courses of instruction from university professors with letters after their name, bearing in mind what I said about human intelligence being unable to penetrate eternal profundities? What if I've got a pea-sized brain which can't understand a word these lecturers are saying? But suppose the word of God comes to you direct from the Spirit of God himself, even though it's mediated through inadequate human language and imagery; suppose that when ordinary speakers and writers like Apollos or Peter or even myself use one part of Scripture to illuminate another, it's really the author interpreting his own work? The best example of all, of course, is the Lord Jesus who employed homely parables and familiar comparisons to open our

minds to the secrets of the kingdom. How else can the human mind gain access to the Divine mind, unless Spirit calls to spirit and spirit (small 's') responds to Spirit?

Receptivity to the Spirit

[2:14] It's this receptivity that's so crucial. The Lord spoke in parables because, as he said, 'What they hear goes in through their ears but never penetrates their understanding'. Someone who operates with merely human logic will never be able to see the point of what the Spirit is trying to tell them, because they think it's absurd and they block it out, like a person putting their hands over their ears when told their house is on fire. The gospel is written in faith-language and it can only be understood by faith-hearing. [2:15] When someone is receptive to the Spirit, they find they are able to understand everything God is saying to them, even if it's still nonsense to the person sitting next to them. Isaiah asks, 'Who is there among mortals who can penetrate to the depths of God's intentions, who knows his mind so well that they can actually offer him advice?' [2:16] Well, we know there is one such mortal, and his name is Jesus Christ – though even Jesus admitted he didn't know the date set for his own return. But here's the amazing thing: anyone who has received the Holy Spirit into their lives and has opened their ears to what he is saying, is in the same position as Mary sitting at the feet of Jesus. Deep is answering to deep – and all Martha can say is, 'Tell her to set the table!' What I'm trying to say is this: now that Christ has come, and now that we have been given the Spirit of Christ as our inner interpreter, even the simplest and humblest of us can have access to the plans and thinking of God himself. What a privilege! What a responsibility!

3:1-4 ¹ *Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly – mere infants in Christ.* ² *I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.* ³ *You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans?* ⁴ *For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?*

Desperately immature

[3:1] We're all family, all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus. When I first arrived among you, of course, I had to give you teaching appropriate to your mindset at the time. You were full of all kinds of ideas derived from human sources, from the thought-systems of this world, so I couldn't assume you would understand any more than the basics of the gospel. But eighteen months later I was still on chapter one! [3:2] When a new-born child arrives in the family, you don't give them a diet of rich food and drink – you rear them on a simple ration of mother's milk, until they're ready for solids. But you don't expect them to be clamouring for baby food several years later when they're teenagers or young adults! [3:3] You, my dear Corinthian Christians, are still stunted in your spiritual growth. Your attitudes are desperately immature; and I'll tell you why. All this in-fighting, this ego-boosting, this petty name-calling and putting each other down – it's just like children fighting in the playground or squabbling over a game of conkers. Your mindset is earthbound and unworthy of the King in whose footsteps you have been called to follow. In fact you're walking in the ruts carved by centuries of secular assumptions: if there's a God at all we can't see or know him, man is the measure of all things, my party is right and yours is wrong. [3:4] This is clearly demonstrated by your current slogans: 'I'm a Pauline junkie,' 'Apollos walks on water,' and so on. This is not even civilised behaviour – it's like primitive tribes exchanging raiding parties. Will you ever grow up? When will you start thinking spiritually, like the new people you are supposed to be?

3:5-9 ⁵ *What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe – as the Lord has assigned to each his task.* ⁶ *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making*

*it grow.*⁷ *So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*⁸ *The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labour.*⁹ *For we are fellow workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.*

Rivals and competitors?

[3:5] I suppose you realise that it isn't in the name of Apollos, it isn't in the name of Paul, that you've put your trust in order to be saved? We aren't your Saviour and your Master – it's the Lord Jesus Christ. If we played any part in your conversion, it was because the Lord assigned us different tasks as his servants. [3:6-7] You are like a palace garden planted for the delight of the King, where he can walk in the cool of the day. There's a whole army of gardeners working on the estate, some putting plants in, some watering them, other pruning here or manuring there. Maybe I was the one who sowed the seeds of your faith, in the sense that you heard the gospel first from me, but so what? That doesn't mean I'm anything special. Maybe Apollos was given the task of nurturing the young plants and making sure that new converts got just the right Bible food, but again, why should that make him somehow godlike? The only godlike person around is God himself, the Creator of the universe who makes everything grow, whose word brings forth new life, and by whose power alone a single seed can become a mature stalk of wheat.

[3:8] So please, please, don't even begin to think that we're somehow rivals or competitors, each secretly labouring away to secure the allegiance of the seedlings we're planting or tending or whatever. We're all engaged in the same enterprise, working under the direction of the same wonderful Master, and each of us will receive the level of pay that's appropriate to the task we're given and the energy we've devoted to it. [3:9] It's all too easy to make the mistake of putting people at the centre and God somewhere on the edge. It's not people we're working for, it's the Lord (and we're not just working for him, he's working alongside us and getting his hands dirty just like any gardener). And you Corinthians are his estate, his harvest-field – or, not to flog a metaphor to death, you're the noble building whose sole owner is God and in which he has chosen to live for his own pleasure.

3:10-15 ¹⁰ *By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care.* ¹¹ *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.* ¹² *If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,* ¹³ *their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work.* ¹⁴ *If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.* ¹⁵ *If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved – even though only as one escaping through the flames.*

Is your church fireproof?

[3:10] Buildings need architects and builders, obviously. I was once actively engaged in levelling any emerging Christian structures to the ground. Then I met the Foundation Stone himself and everything changed. He could have reduced me to rubble, which is what I deserved – but instead (such is his extraordinary forbearance) he appointed me to the post of head architect, and gave me gifts proportionate to the task. There's grace for you! So, with a skill and wisdom not my own, I set about designing ground-plans, sinking deep foundations and so on. Then it was the turn of others to add the superstructure and bring the building towards completion.

Now each craftsman is responsible for the quality and durability of their work. [3:11] I'm not talking about the actual foundations – I may have given the impression that they were designed by me, but of course God laid them from eternity in the person of his Son, Jesus the coming King. He is the ground-plan of everyone's life, so let no one try to revise the original design – it's

simply not possible. [3:12] What we're talking about is the quality of the materials used by each builder, the enduring worth of the work done in the name of Christ. The point is, every structure is going to be tested. There will be storms, earthquakes, floods. This applies to your local church: the enemy will throw everything he's got at it. If it's made of good, valuable materials (like gold, silver, and fine stones like marble – I've been meditating on the building of Solomon's temple and I've been thinking how the city of God is going to be even more splendid than this!) then it will last for ever. We're not talking about literal buildings, of course, it's saints in the making, whose lives are going to be tested and tried, if necessary by fire.

The sad thing is if inferior materials and shoddy workmanship are the order of the day, and if the walls consist of bits of timber rammed together anyhow and the gaps stuffed with bits of hay and straw, then as soon as someone knocks over an oil-lamp the whole thing will go up in smoke.

[3:13] Is your local church fellowship fireproof? You may think you can get away with it, particularly in the bits no one sees, but on the great Day of Inspection everything's going to be seen for what it really is. All our work as servants of Christ will be subjected to the ultimate fire-test, because anything that's superficial or made of imitation material will go on the bonfire.

[3:14] If your preaching and teaching of the Word, and your work with human souls, have been laid down in prayer, faith, tears and sacrifice, then you will receive the Master's reward of 'Well done, good and faithful servant' and all the people you've helped to maturity will queue up to shake your hand. [3:15] But what will happen to the Christian worker who thought he could get away with superficial Bible study, borrowed sermons and perfunctory pastoral visits, when he sees his so-called ministry reduced to a few sticks of charred wood? Even though (by the grace of the Lord) his own soul may be saved, he will go through agonies of shame as all he thought he'd achieved shrivels to nothing.

3:16-17 ¹⁶ *Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives among you?*

¹⁷ *If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.*

Made of the right materials?

[3:16] 'Paul, we find all this absolutely terrifying! Aren't you being carried away by your own powerful rhetoric? How can you justify all this talk of fire and destruction at the hands of a loving Father-God?' Look – this is no time for sentimentality. I'm not in the business of impressing people with empty rhetoric. I may be using vivid pictorial language, but it's all in the service of sober truth. Don't underestimate the holiness of God. The sacred and eternal building he intends to live in is his Church, and that Church consists of you, together with your fellow-believers throughout the world. Why else has he come to live in your midst through his Holy Spirit? The Spirit isn't there in your front room to put his feet up and relax; he's there to prepare the house for the coming of the King in person. [3:17] Can't you see that any opponent who (as I did myself) systematically tries to demolish God's living-space risks getting demolished themselves – as I would have been if I had continued my efforts at persecution. Once more I repeat: God is at work putting together an incredible palace for his dwelling-place for time and eternity; your lives are the building blocks of that palace; so we need to make sure you're made of the right materials.

3:18-20 ¹⁸ *Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become 'fools' so that you may become wise.* ¹⁹ *For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness';* ²⁰ *and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.'*

You have been warned!

[3:18] Let's get back to the point I was making. I don't want anyone to be under any illusions about the polar opposition between God's wisdom and worldly wisdom. Here is a direct challenge to any of your teachers or leaders who thinks he can build God's church by promoting mind-bending philosophies, angelic encounters or self-help systems of personal discipline; are you prepared to jettison all these for the simple sense of following the truth as it is revealed in Christ? It might make you a laughing-stock in the eyes of your cultured friends, but you will graduate with honours in the school of the Only Wise God. [3:19] Follow merely human ideas, and you will score a resounding zero grade in your divine examinations. It's there in the book of Job when even the comforters acknowledge (to their own discomfort, eventually) that the ways of God can't be fathomed and that the people who think they've got it sorted will fall into the traps they've set up for others. [3:20] Or, if you missed that one, you must know the Psalm where the God-disregarders crow that if there's a God, he doesn't seem to take a blind bit of notice of anything we think or do – and they get the scathing reply that the Creator and Teacher of mankind knows perfectly well what works and what doesn't thank you very much – and what doesn't work includes all human plans for self-advancement and self-fulfilment that leave God out. You have been warned!

3:21-23 ²¹ So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^[k] or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, ²³ and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Something to shout about

[3:21] Let me sum up what I've been trying to say. The bottom line is, don't hero-worship mere human beings. Nobody however gifted a speaker or thinker has any monopoly of God's truth. The gospel alone has power to save. What is this good news? Take a deep breath and listen. Even the humblest and poorest believer in Christ is going to inherit absolutely everything. [3:22] Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or any charismatic personality you care to name are all at your disposal. We are just a tiny part of the parcel of gifts that God has already started to shower upon you. What else has he got in store for you? A mere matter of the whole universe! You may think things like life and death are going to crush you, but in fact they are under your feet and can't harm you. You may feel under acute pressure just now, with worse to come, but compared to the glory that's coming you have absolutely nothing to dread.

Yes, it's all waiting for you! [3:23] Not because you've earned it, not because you have achieved anything to boast about, but simply because you belong to Christ. He is committed to bringing you safely through, and the guarantee that he will certainly do so is that his Father, the God he trusted and in whom he was not disappointed, carried him through to the other side of death and gave him the highest place of all. That's something worth shouting about!

4:1-5 ¹ This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Faithfulness is all

[4:1] On a purely human level, then, our status is the perfectly ordinary one of servants in the household of Christ. We apostles and teachers are like officials whose job is to safeguard the Master's heirlooms. [4:2] The ultimate qualification required for the job is soundness and reliability. We need to be found still at our post when everyone else has gone off duty. So-called 'success' is completely irrelevant – what's required is faithfulness. [4:3] I couldn't frankly care less what you or anyone else thinks of me, because human judgement is at best ephemeral and at worst notoriously fickle. You can be strutting the celebrity catwalk one week and be rotting in jail the next. As a rule, I don't even analyse my own performance or try to assess the results of my preaching. [4:4] This may sound odd or even complacent, I know; but I try to keep my motives as transparent as possible and to operate with complete integrity. Even then I avoid congratulating myself on a flawless record, because I am all too aware that sincerity isn't enough - one can be sincerely wrong, as I was myself once upon a time. My single point of reference is my Master and Lord: am I being faithful to him, am I carrying out his instructions? His is the final verdict, and that's that.

Waiting for the Lord's approval

[4:5] Yes, the great Day is coming, in fact it's just around the corner, when all human assessments, condemnations or congratulations, will evaporate under the steady gaze of the Lord Jesus himself. We don't know the exact date of his return, but we do know what will happen when he does. Everything will come out into the open. All our lies and subterfuges; all those stealthy operations under the cloak of darkness; all the secrets we thought were for ever buried in the depths of obscurity; all our double motives and baseline agendas which may have slipped under even our own notice – he knows them all, and he will expose them for what they really were. Until that Day, no merely human praise or criticism is worth a moment's consideration. It is the Lord's approval we are waiting for. Every one of Christ's servants will receive rewards appropriate not only to the value of their service, but also to the sheer grace and generosity of their Master. Failures overlooked, small contributions multiplied, lives saved by words you never thought you spoke – what a celebration that's going to be!

4:6-7⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.⁷ For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

Speaking for God

[4:6] Now, dear fellow-members of God's family, I'm not just indulging in theological speculation when I say all this – it's meant to apply directly to the way you think about Apollos and me and the rest, whom you see as rivals but whose role is really just to be resourcers of your spiritual progress. How do we resource you? Why, by putting you in touch with the resurrection power of God's sacred word! There's a golden rule here which I've often tried to emphasise: 'Sit under Scripture!' Don't sit in judgment over what you find written in God's word; use critical tools where appropriate but keep the context, meaning and application crystal clear. After all, you are delivering God's oracles into human lives. Impressive quoting of authorities, comparison of scholarly viewpoints, all that kind of thing, turn teachers into conceited windbags who can only judge the value of what they say by the number of golden opinions they receive from their brainwashed followers. Yes, some people are better biblical expositors than others, but the main aim is to hear God speaking to us through his word and that makes comparison of personalities irrelevant. [4:7] Whenever I'm preparing to speak, I look in the mirror and ask myself three questions: (1) Who is ultimately going to be assessing the value of what you say, your hearers or

God? (2) Do any of your insights, illustrations, turns of phrase etc originate from you, or are you simply passing on what you've been given by God or maybe received from others wiser than you? (3) If nothing you say is radically original, does it make sense to preen yourself on your unique ability and outstanding presentation? In short, I'm speaking for God, I'm speaking what God has given me to say, and I'm speaking the way God has equipped me to say it, and all other considerations are worthless or even harmful.

4:8-13 ⁸ *Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign – and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!* ⁹ *For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings.* ¹⁰ *We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured!* ¹¹ *To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless.* ¹² *We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it;* ¹³ *when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world – right up to this moment.*

Royal prerogatives and divine responsibilities

[4:8] My lords, ladies and gentlemen of Corinth, there you are sitting at your banquet of spiritual blessings, and you're stuffed so full you hardly have room for more. It's almost as if the kingdom celebrations have already started and you've received your crowns of glory! Yes, of course - if only we could all be sitting down together at the King's feast wearing our coronets and celebrating our final victory in Christ. We'll be there one day – but we haven't arrived yet. You need to forget your royal prerogatives and wake up to your divine responsibilities, so that all of us here at Ephesus, Sosthenes and Timothy and I and everyone else, could be working with you to establish Christ's authority over the real enemies of his church. But it sometimes seems as if we're fighting a losing battle.

[4:9] 'Hey, Paul, you're a leading Christian, you're a successful church-builder, the kingdom advances wherever you go. Why this note of pessimism?' Do you really know what it's like being a 'leading Christian'? Ever seen a triumphal procession, with the victorious general receiving the adulations of the crowd and distributing largesse from the wagon-loads of booty in his train? Who are those poor wretches shambling along right at the back, destined to meet an ignominious end in the amphitheatre? Why, it's those so-called apostles of Christ! They're the laughing-stock of the universe. Every grandstand they go past, full of earthly and heavenly spectators, rocks with jeers and boos and catcalls. I should know – I've been there, experienced that, and I'm sure we haven't seen the half of it yet.

What's happening to us

[4:10] You lot at Corinth are having a cushy time compared to us. We're considered complete idiots because we go on about Christ Jesus the whole time, whereas people take your views seriously and are prepared to enter into intelligent debate with you as Christians. How come? Why such a difference? Again, you're a strong, well-knit fellowship with plenty of clout in the city; while we're a tiny band which is often fragmented and has very little influence locally. The same goes in terms of respectability: you're regarded as good citizens who serve the community, while people spread juicy scandals about us and everyone reckons we're scoundrels.

[4:11] 'Well, Paul, you really are going over the top! We hear there are plenty of good things going on in Ephesus. You must be speaking about the bad old days before you came to Corinth.' Let me bring you up to date about what's happening to us right now. Granted, the Lord is doing extraordinary things and all glory to him. But our own circumstances are extreme. We go for

days without food or drink; our clothes are falling off our bodies because we haven't enough money to buy new ones; we get jostled and slapped in the crowd as we walk along the street; we get thrown out of our lodgings at little or no notice; [4:12] even just to exist for the next week we take work wherever we can get it, and sordid manual work at that – why, last week I was cleaning out the public latrines in the forum.

So how do we retaliate? Well, we don't, because the Lord Jesus told us not to. But it's hard. People loose off at us and call us names, so we respond by trying to say nice things about them. People make life very difficult for us not only verbally but also physically, and there's no point in going to the police about it, so we simply put up with it. [4:13] You wouldn't believe some of the slander we get day in, day out! We ask our detractors politely to refrain, but that hasn't the slightest effect. Ministers of Christ? We're more like the wretched slaves who have to sweep up after sacrifices and carry armloads of rotting bones to the public dump. I mentioned the public toilets just now – while I was dealing with some of the less than fragrant leftovers, I couldn't help thinking, 'This is what we smell like to the world, and the quicker they can dispose of us the better.' And it won't be any better by the time you're reading this letter.

4:14-17 ¹⁴ *I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.* ¹⁵ *Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.* ¹⁶ *Therefore I urge you to imitate me.* ¹⁷ *For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.*

I'm your Dad

[4:14] You may think I'm writing all this to make you feel bad. Actually, it's to shock you into waking up to your danger. You're having it so good, could it be that you're compromising the gospel? I feel like a doting parent who sees his children playing near a raging torrent and not able to hear his urgent shouts. [4:15] These trusty servants who are supposed to be looking after your growth in Christ, all these hundreds of skilled teachers – they're fine, I suppose, but (to continue the family metaphor) I'm your Dad, I've loved you from the time of your conception and birth, those days when I brought you the life-message of Christ Jesus and saw you popping out of the womb like new-born infants. I'm not claiming personally to have generated you, of course – God was doing it through his word and Spirit, as I reminded you a few pages back. [4:16] But I reckon I have first claim on your allegiance, so I appeal to you: return to those early weeks and months when you joined me in following my Lord and Master, and, like schoolchildren copying the outlines of handwriting drawn by their teacher, you listened carefully to what I was saying and shaped your new-found faith on the example I was trying to set before you.

[4:17] But I realise that your memory of my first visit may be growing rusty, which is why I'm going to follow up this letter by sending Timothy over to see you. In a real sense he's your elder brother, because he became a Christian through my ministry and has since worked with me and has shown great faithfulness in the Lord's service, so you can imagine my affection and respect for him. The idea is that he should give you a refresher course in Pauline Christianity – which, may I remind you, isn't my invention, but was given me directly by the Lord Jesus and hammered out with the other apostles, and which I've continued to deliver in church after church and province after province.

4:18-21 ¹⁸ *Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.* ¹⁹ *But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.* ²⁰ *For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.* ²¹ *What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?*

Expect my arrival

[4:18] 'So you're just sending your deputy and not coming yourself! Why should we take a blind bit of notice?' Yes, that's just the arrogant kind of frothy nonsense I would expect from some (not the majority) of you who quite frankly have an inflated idea of their own self-importance. The fact is that I have to stay here in Ephesus because of the demands of the work. I can hardly spare Timothy as it is. [4:19] But you can expect my arrival very soon, I assure you, subject to the Lord's sovereign will and strategic planning, and then I shall find out at first hand whether these bullfrogs are just croaking harmlessly from their lily-pond, or whether they really do pose a threat to your stability in Christ. [4:20] How do they think the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is advancing, as indeed it is? Is it by means of impressive verbiage and the bandying about of new ideas and nit-picking criticism of fellow-workers? Or is it by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit and lives and attitudes being transformed into the likeness of Christ? Truth doesn't just talk, it works, and what it works is human and divine miracles. [4:21] So the choice is yours: you can either let these renegades go on as they are doing, in which case I shall come armed with all the necessary authority and means to deal with them once and for all; or you can sort out the situation yourselves, in which case I can breathe a sigh of relief and step onto the quayside wreathed in smiles and goodwill. I don't want to descend upon you like a thunder-cloud; I'd much prefer to arrive like the gentle west wind, bringing the Spirit's promise of reviving rain and spring flowers.

CHAPTERS 5-12: PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH

¹It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: a man is sleeping with his father's wife. ²And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? ³For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. ⁴So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

One case in particular

[5:1] In fact, I'm not going to be very gentle in what I say next. I keep getting a very strong rumour of sexual irregularities going on in the church at Corinth, well, one case in particular. It's something you wouldn't expect to be happening in any civilised society, let alone among people who profess to follow Christ. I gather that one of you is actually sleeping with his stepmother. OK, think about it. Marriage is sacred anyway, but for a son to have an affair with his own father's partner! If that isn't straight incest, tell me what it is. It's certainly adultery. [5:2] And as if this weren't bad enough, instead of hanging your heads in shame and your leaders taking all possible steps to ban the perpetrator of this scandal from your meetings, am I to understand that you are really quite complacent about this? 'Let the lad sow his wild oats, he'll soon learn' – is that what you're saying? 'Our church is happy to embrace all lifestyles'? Does anyone talk about 'repentance' any more?

Verdict

[5:3-4] Well, if you're not going to do anything about it, I certainly am. I may be several days' journey away from you by sea, but I'm right here in the middle of you in spiritual reality, not only because it's my voice you're hearing as this letter is being read out, but because we are united in the Holy Spirit and physical distance means absolutely nothing. In my full apostolic

authority I have now taken my place on the judgment seat and hereby I deliver my verdict: here are you all gathered in the name of our Lord Jesus, and I Paul in my spirit and by the Holy Spirit am right in your midst exercising the full power of that same Lord Jesus – [5:5] I charge that the person who has willingly and deliberately committed this forbidden act should be disassociated from the Lord’s new covenant community and abandoned to the malign workings of Satan. If this means severe physical affliction for him, so be it (I’m not asking you to be the agents of this, mind) – but at least there’s a chance that God will have mercy on his soul when he stands before his Maker and Judge at the final dreadful Day. There – I have spoken.

5:6-8 ⁶ *Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough?* ⁷ *Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may be a new unleavened batch – as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.* ⁸ *Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*

Communal infection

[5:6-7] Were you going to let him get away with this? I’m really gutted. You’ve all been cheerfully conniving at sheer immorality. The risk of communal infection is blatantly obvious. It’s a well-known matter of domestic hygiene that when you’re introducing leaven into a portion of dough, you must make sure that that tiny piece of leaven, which comes from the previous load of bread, is uncontaminated, otherwise the rottenness will work its way through the entire batch. That’s of course why the Israelites held the Feast of Unleavened Bread, not only for hygienic reasons, but also as a sign that they were through with the old life. The angel of death had judged the Egypt that had enslaved them; they were going out into freedom, never to return.

Festival time

As Christians we know that this is fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. The lamb of God has been finally slaughtered; the world’s evil has been atoned for; God’s signature of forgiveness has been liberally applied to the doorposts of our hearts. We’ve all started again; however tainted our spirits have been with sin, we have died and risen with our Lord, his purifying Spirit has become our new ‘leaven’, the old has been left behind, we’re wholesome bread for the world to eat and find life. [5:8] It’s Festival time! We really do have something to celebrate as Christians: the old leaven that used to permeate our attitudes and puff us up in bitterness and pride against each other, tainting our relationships with selfishness and lust, all that has been consigned to the incinerator! It’s not just a yearly ritual, or a campaign for moral reformation – we can enjoy a weekly Resurrection feast, walking in the light with God and each other, with no need to pretend to be what we aren’t.

5:9-13 ⁹ *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people –* ¹⁰ *not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.* ¹¹ *But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.* ¹² *What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?* ¹³ *God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked person from among you.’*

Delicate balance

[5:9-10] Then we can go out into the rest of the week and not be accused of being hypocrites. I want to clear up a misunderstanding from my previous letter to you, incidentally, when I instructed you not to form close friendships with people of a dubious sexual reputation. That

wasn't meant as a blanket ban on associating with absolutely anyone who wasn't pure as the driven snow! There's a delicate balance to be maintained here. Our Lord mingled freely with the folk of this world; he rubbed shoulders with prostitutes, swindlers, rapacious tax-gatherers, idol-worshippers, you name them, he could be seen talking to them, telling them stories of the kingdom, sorting out their problems. Not flirting with them or endorsing their lifestyles, but certainly not shunning their company either. As he said on one occasion, his followers don't belong to this world or get their character from it, but they've got to be in it, and they are there with a purpose which is to live lives of holiness and truth. Otherwise they would have to live on another planet! I'm not the Pharisee I was, walking on the other side of the street to avoid a scoundrel or a whore – that was so often play-acting, putting on an external piety when internally I was as bad as any of them.

Exposing and rebuking

[5:11] No, the general point I was making then was that regular, close association with dodgy characters only breeds more corruption. That's still true. But if it applies out in the world, how much more does it apply to the company you keep within the close-knit fellowship of the church! Get hold of this. Suppose there's someone in your group who professes to be a believing Christian, and yet it's a known fact that they are having an extramarital affair. Or they're bending the rules to make a fat profit for themselves in business dealings. Or they've got a little private shrine in their house where they make offerings to their ancestral spirits or pagan deities. Maybe this person habitually uses violent and abusive language; that one can't keep off the bottle; the one over there is running a blackmailing racket. Well, are you going to invite them to dinner and introduce them to your friends as estimable Christian brethren? [5:12-13] Those categories of behaviour are what you'd expect from people who don't know Christ – it's no business of mine to throw the book at them, though I certainly don't condone them either – ultimately they are responsible to God alone, and one day they'll find themselves up before him even if they manage to slip past the earthly authorities. But it's different where fellow-Christians are concerned: it is your right and your duty to expose and rebuke their errant ways, in case you can head them off from final disaster.

So here's my sentence: I pronounce that this guilty brother should be banned from all fellowship with the Lord's people. Church at Corinth, clean up your act!

6:1-6 ¹ If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people? ² Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! ⁴ Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? ⁵ I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? ⁶ But instead, one brother takes another to court – and this in front of unbelievers!

Dispute between Christians

[6:1] Let's now deal with a different though related matter. I gather one Christian has taken another one to court over some dispute that's come up between them. In other words, rather than having recourse to the Lord's people to sort it out, you've brazenly elected to go before the secular authorities and submit to the judgment of people who are unaware of the spiritual issues involved. [6:2] It's no use arguing that we're amateurs in legal matters whereas they are the trained professionals. Are you unaware that Christ's body on earth is also his body in heaven

and that one day soon even the humblest saint is going to be pronouncing sentence over the world powers? It's not that everything's suddenly going to be different and we shall all be magically equipped with Godlike gifts of total knowledge. The basic criterion is faith in Christ. Once you have that, you can move mountains. So the little molehills of earthly disputes are child's play.

Dress-rehearsal

[6:3] You don't think I'm serious, do you? You must be familiar with what Scripture says: the work of judging is going to be handed over to the saints of the Most High. The Lord Jesus himself regularly spoke about this. We're going to share his throne. You can argue that this applies only to the chosen Twelve, but that is to reckon without the reversal of expectations that will come about when God's renewal programme gets under way. The hierarchies of this present order are simply going to disappear. That includes heavenly hierarchies too. Angelic names that would turn you into a gibbering wreck down here are going to come up before you as prisoners in the dock to receive sentence or reward appropriate to their loyalty to Christ. And the dress rehearsal for all this has already started. You are all judges-in-training. So get started on a few bread-and-butter cases down here before you're let loose on the real thing. [6:4] Don't you see how ridiculous it is, when you're presented with a few simple everyday judgments to make, to say 'Oh, all this is too complicated for us to sort out, let's turn it over to lawyers who are well known for their "no win, no fee" principles and who are more concerned for their career status than seeing justice done'? If even earthly juries can be made up of perfectly ordinary citizens, what's wrong with the church trying its own cases?

[6:5-6] You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Do you really think, given what I've already said about wisdom and foolishness and the way God upsets the world's assumptions, that you're all too stupid to decide between a couple of brethren both of whom claim to be in the right? So instead of conducting a prayerful and scripturally-inspired investigation in the presence of the community of faith, you go along to the local tribunal and hand over your judgment to a prosecution and defence composed of people who think this whole Christianity thing is a waste of space!

6:7-11 ⁷ *The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?* ⁸ *Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters.* ⁹ *Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men* ¹⁰ *nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.* ¹¹ *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

Let God do the judging

[6:7] 'Paul, we're frankly puzzled by your estimate of us, and a bit disappointed. We are, as you've said, a gifted, thriving and growing church. What's so wrong if a couple of us have decided to go to law over a matter we can't sort out ourselves? Why is the whole church at fault?' You have no idea of the seriousness of the situation. A single crack in the wall of a great house can bring the whole edifice toppling to the ground. Battles can be lost even when the army is advancing on every front, if a single contingent lets the enemy through. You may think you're defeating the world because you're such spiritual people, but actually you're fleeing headlong before its onslaught. Don't you realise that once you sign on with Jesus and the kingdom of God, your whole attitude has to change? The world says, 'So-and-so has cheated you financially or done you some kind of wrong, so get after them and make sure justice is done.' That's eye-for-

eye stuff, and I don't need to remind you what the Lord said about non-resistance and turning the other cheek. You may think the other person is thoroughly evil, but never mind, let them take your silver spoons and put you to public shame and reduce you to ruin – just let God do the judging, let him sort it out. [6:8] Instead, you play God yourselves. You've got to put the other person in the wrong. You've got to get your own back and inflict the same loss on them. That's bad enough when they're unbelievers, but this is happening between members of Christ's family! And don't pretend it's just a couple of you – you're all taking sides over this. The church is split down the middle. You're sick, the lot of you.

Kingdom people

[6:9-10] Think kingdom. Don't be under any illusions about this outfit you've joined. Who is this Lord you've signed on with? He comes to you with nail-scarred hands and says 'It's all yours. Everything. I died for you to inherit treasures beyond your wildest dreams. I just ask you to drop the old ways, to stop being the people you used to be.'

Could I spell this out to you in some detail and tell you what kind of people are going to be the subjects of his eternal kingdom:

- They won't be so obsessed with sex that all they can think of is their next bout of physical satisfaction.
- They won't sell their souls to the counterfeit gods of this world, whether it's pleasure or power or wealth or success or anything else.
- I'm sorry to go on about it, but if you are so interested in somebody else's wife or husband that you can't keep your hands off them, you're a kingdom reject.
- The same goes for those who prostitute themselves with members of their own sex – I'm under no illusions about what goes on in the Corinths of this world, but any society that condones indiscriminate sensual indulgence is way out of touch with God's ground-rules.
- Kingdom inheritors maintain strict honesty because they regard nothing as fundamentally their own; they are stewards of whatever God gives them.
- They're not out for what they can get for themselves with scant attention to the needs of others; their Lord said, 'If you want to be really, really happy, then get on the giving end rather than the receiving end.'
- They're sensible about alcohol and all forms of narcotic stimulation; yes, they enjoy parties and company, as Jesus did, but it's keeping close to him in the Holy Spirit that gives them the greatest joy.
- We're going over the same ground as I did earlier, but I need to emphasise the great power of the tongue: you're not going to serve the interests of the kingdom if you're habitually abusive and dismissive.
- Similarly God isn't going to welcome people who have dealt harshly with their employees or exploited the vulnerable.

Do you see the point? Jesus' kingdom turns the world's assumptions upside down. Putting him first as Lord isn't just a verbal profession, it has consequences for the way we live our life today and tomorrow. How can I expect to walk with the Holy One in the heavenly courts if I've consistently ignored his earthly requirements? It was such a relief to turn from my previously violent and rapacious conduct and throw myself entirely on his forgiving grace. If I am looking forward to his eternal inheritance, it's no credit to me; but it has implications for the kind of person I am right now.

Single task

[6:11] I know I'm touching on a sensitive point here, because there are those in your fellowship whose past lives have matched one or more of these descriptions. The glory of the gospel, however, is that God isn't going to bring up what you were like against you. Any shame or guilt you may feel about your previous existence has been flushed away, carried way down the river, disappeared over the waterfall. You've become brand-new people, inhabited by a Person who has all the attributes of saintliness you lack. When you tremblingly confessed, 'Jesus is Lord', a once-for-all transaction occurred which linked you with Jesus' work on the cross. He took your sins, wiped out your legal indebtedness; you took his spotless record, gained unrestricted access to God, had your names entered in the book of the deathless ones. Don't underestimate God's power and will to bring you home safely. He's the true professional. He is triply engaged, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in the single task of making you good.

6:12-17 ¹² 'I have the right to do anything,' you say – but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' – but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ You say, 'Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.' The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, 'The two will become one flesh.' ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit.

Waking up

[6:12] 'So everything in the garden's lovely, and nothing I do can affect my eternal destiny.' Absolutely true - but does that mean you can throw yourself into an orgy of sensual indulgence? Doesn't it rather mean waking up to what can damage your soul? Yes, it's a precious secret, this freedom to live our lives by the Spirit instead of by rules of morality – but that freedom also means not being mastered by forces beyond our control. When we turn to Christ, we have our eyes opened to realities and truths not revealed to most of our contemporaries. We are released from the claims of our selfish human nature, so that we can love each other in the way God meant us to.

Destined for transformation

[6:13] 'Yes, but now I know how worthless the body is; it's just a machine for processing food, its urges are concerned with this material world; one day soon it will crumble into dust and my soul will return to its Maker. So it doesn't really matter what I do with this mortal casing.' I'm familiar with this argument – it isn't Christianity, it's Neoplatonism. Shall I tell you the Christian view of the body? It's far more exciting than any dualistic philosophy. The flesh-and-blood frame you have been given for the duration of your time on earth isn't meant to be at the service of every attractive woman or man you happen to encounter; it's designed for the Lord to express his own beauty and wonder to the longing world around you. He's asked you for permission to take all your natural gifts, of personality and physique and brainpower, and to use them for his glory for a short while on earth. [6:14] And then – and then – just as surely as God the Father took the broken body of his Son out of a squalid tomb and raised him in that same but transfigured body to unimaginable heights of glory, so he plans to redesign your feeble, death-prone physical self into something incredible and immortal. You can't do it by yourself, but he can and he will! So can't you see, far from our bodies being just throwaway vehicles for whatever pleasure we can get in this fleeting world, they are destined for transformation into Christ-shaped personalities

that will last for ever. If I've got time at the end of this letter, I'll try to explain this a little more fully.

Walking Christs

[6:15] But you can probably see where this is leading: you are walking Christs. Everything you are is Jesus on earth. So, those of you who think it's perfectly all right to sleep around, as long as nobody is harmed – don't you realise that you're in effect causing the Lord Jesus to use his body parts for the purposes of prostitution? [6:16] Let me put it another way. At the very climax of the Genesis creation story the Lord God gives 'Adam' (representing half of all mankind) an anaesthetic and removes one of his ribs, deftly fashioning it into 'a woman' (representing the other half). When Adam is introduced to her, far from being disgusted that the Lord should invent anything so degrading as sex, he is so delighted that he sings the first praise song in the Bible, something about the two of them making a perfect unit. And the inspired writer adds a little note, helping us to see that God's plan for the human race is to have children splitting off from their parents and then being superglued to their wives or husbands as a single flesh item, with absolutely no shame or guilt incurred. So what happens when you enjoy physical intimacy with a partner to whom you are not married, or when you hire a prostitute for a night? You've entered into a union with them which goes far deeper than a few moments of pleasure – you are cemented together (it's a very strong word, this) body and soul.

[6:17] And to those who would assert that what I do with my body doesn't affect the salvation of my soul, let me say this: faith in Christ creates a union with him that is analogous to marriage. You and the Lord become a single item. The Holy Spirit has joined you and Christ so seamlessly that for evermore a new item has been created, 'Christ-in-me', an identity both spiritual and corporeal, in fact changing the very nature of your whole being. However strongly you may feel an urge towards another creature, your actual loyalty and longing are now towards the Lord Jesus Christ.

6:18-20 ¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies.

Physical distance

[6:18] So how should we respond when a temptation to commit sexual immorality presents itself? A good rule is to put physical distance between yourself and the source of the temptation. Remember what Joseph did when he found himself alone with the presumably attractive and certainly promiscuous wife of Potiphar? He made straight for the exit, even though it meant leaving his cloak in her hand and consequently suffering unjust shame and imprisonment. This split-second decision was grounded in his uncompromising attitude towards extramarital sex, that it was a grievous sin both against any third party involved and against the God he served.

Look at it like this: wrong choices cause damage. Most of our selfish or thoughtless actions affect our relationships with other people, such as violence, arrogance or greed; but sexual indulgence outside the marriage bond, whatever harm it may do to other people, also sets up a train of internal chaos which disrupts both my relationship with myself and my relationship with my Lord.

'My body is my own'

[6:19] Going back to what I said a little earlier about faith in Christ creating a new person altogether, let's develop that crucial truth. It is impossible, if I'm a believing Christian, to argue that 'my body is my own and I can do what I like with it.' Even for a non-Christian that statement is irresponsible because if I live in day-to-day contact with other people, inflicting damage on my body has implications beyond myself; but for someone who professes to have welcomed the Spirit of Christ into their life as a gift direct from God, it is unthinkable. Suppose a king or governor decrees that in gratitude for Divine mercies granted, a shrine dedicated solely to the deity is to be set up, an awesomely holy and beautiful temple. Suppose then a wealthy citizen decides that he's going to use that building as a pleasure-palace for himself, or worse still, as a convenient home for a zoo of wild beasts. How acceptable is that!? But that's what you're doing if you sleep around. You're taking a shrine made holy by the presence of the Lord himself and turning it into a pleasure-garden of lust. Don't you remember when Jesus found those money-changers inside the courts of the Temple at Jerusalem, he went ballistic for the first and only time in his life and drove them out with a whip of cords, going 'This is a special place for people from all over the world to come and offer prayer to the One True God, and you've turned it into a thieves' paradise'? Do you think he doesn't mind when you do exactly the same thing with your body? And when he talks about destroying the Temple and raising it up after three days, he's really talking about his own body. This applies not only to the church as we saw earlier, but just as much to our own individual selves. We don't belong to ourselves any more, we are available to Jesus, for him to walk around in and use for his own loving purposes.

Reckless extravagance

[6:20] Which brings me to the crunch point. Here you are in the market-place making everyday purchases; you decide you can afford this or that and think no more about it. Maybe you want a small piece of jewellery as a gift for a friend, and you err on the generous side even though it costs quite a bit. But what if you're investing in a male or female slave who is going to work in your household? If you see the right person with the appropriate skills, you're prepared to part with a considerable amount of silver or gold to get them, making absolutely sure first of all that they're going to be worth the outlay. No-one in their right senses would splash out on a completely worthless specimen of humanity who was fit only for the mines or the burial pit. But that's what God has done for you and me. He has paid the ultimate price of his Son's own body and blood to ransom us from slavery and worse. There's no way we can repay such reckless extravagance. We can just make up our minds to spend the rest of our lives gladly serving him and promoting his cause in the world in which we find ourselves. That's what our bodies are for. Don't you see? We really don't belong to ourselves any longer. He's paid over the top to make us his own. Isn't he an incredible God?

7:1-7 ¹ Now for the matters you wrote about: 'It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.' ² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband. ³ The husband should fulfil his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. ⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife. ⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷ I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

Holy contract

[7:1] I've been working round to some of the trickier points you raised in that letter to me. OK, we belong to the Lord, body, soul and spirit. So some of you are asking me, 'Isn't the Christian

ideal total celibacy? No marriage, no sex, not even a brief kiss or hug. No physical contact between a man and a woman.' [7:2] Let's go carefully here. Our ideal is to stay holy to the Lord in the midst of a society where sex is rampant and 'everybody sleeps around' (well, they don't, but it may seem like it). The precious, non-negotiable point is that sex should take place within the context of marriage, and therefore that marriage should exclude more than one partner. One man, one woman; one woman, one man. [7:3] So rather than seeing sex as something degrading or impure, which it isn't, each spouse should regard it as a normal part of the self-giving contract they have between them. Reluctance on either side can lead to resentment that this holy contract is not being honoured.

Self-sacrificial relationship

[7:4] God's creation ordinance sets up an entirely new relationship. Before marriage, the individual man or woman has the right to decide what they do with their own body – bearing in mind their primary allegiance to the Lord who redeemed them. Once they become 'one flesh' with each other, they surrender this right to the other partner. I'm not talking about either spouse dominating the other or demanding total control over what the other should offer; I'm describing the self-sacrificial relationship that now exists between a married man and his wife, and between a married woman and her husband. [7:5] There might be a situation, for example, where you both decide to forgo sexual intercourse for a period of time in order to go into spiritual training for prayer. It's a kind of fasting, like temporary abstinence from food. I'm not imposing a rule, I'm envisaging a strategic concentration on a particular prayer need. But it's important to resume normal relations in the wake of that! It's all too easy for one partner to start feeling unfulfilled and to turn for satisfaction to someone outside the relationship; this is not only due to fallen human nature, it's to be expected in a world manipulated by the devil and all his forces.

[7:6] 'Paul, it's amazing that you can lay down the law like this, you being a bachelor and all!' I'm not laying down any law, as I said. I'm suggesting ways a married couple can adapt by the Lord's mercy to the practical demands of their sacred relationship. [7:7] I'd personally be happy if the human race didn't have to think about sex at all (believe it or not, that's true in my case). The fact is, God has created everyone with their own set of unique qualities, and what's applicable to one person, or couple, isn't necessarily applicable to another. (Later on I'll try to show how this works out in Christ's body, the church.) There are God-given principles, yes; but it's a mistake to think that what works for you should work for everyone.

7:8-11⁸ Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): a wife must not separate from her husband.¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

Remarriage

[7:8] Having said that, I do have some fairly strong advice to certain categories of people. Some of you are celibate, others have been widowed (and I hope you're getting help from your church). If there's external pressure on you to marry or remarry, can I say that it's perfectly acceptable for you to stay as you are (needless to repeat, I'm unmarried myself and I have no plans to change that). [7:9] The problem comes when the pressure is internal, i.e. you feel a deep and steady longing to pair up with someone else. OK, that's what marriage is all about! What we don't want is super-spiritual Christians who consider that marriage is beneath them and who then spend all their time thinking about sex and lusting after the next pretty face. That's tantamount to your whole profession of faith going up in smoke.

Divorce

[7:10] However, most of you are married, so let's think about you. Should you be considering the possibility of divorce? Well, we have a perfectly clear statement from the Lord himself about this. He contrasted the Law (which permits divorce in certain circumstances) with the Creation ordinance (which considers the marital union indissoluble). God's plan is that the marriage covenant shouldn't be broken, full stop. [7:11] But what if it has been? What if, for example, the wife discovers that her husband has been unfaithful? If the worst happens and a legally arranged divorce does take place, there are really only two options for the ex-wife (remember, she is still part of that sacred one-flesh unit). The first option is to remain single and to regard remarriage as out of the question. The other is to keep open the possibility of reconciliation with her original partner, and to work towards that as long as there's even a remote chance of it happening. I know this is really tough, but I'm trying to be faithful to the express word and purpose of our Lord and Saviour. By the same token, if a husband is considering divorcing his wife, he must realise that he is going against the declared will of God. I know this goes counter to the common practice of most societies we know about, but you asked me for my apostolic judgment and I've given it. I'll talk about the cosmic background to all this in a moment.

7:12-16 ¹² *To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. ¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace. ¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?*

Non-believing partners

[7:12-13] That deals with the questions on which the Lord has made a clear pronouncement. Let's move on to areas where we don't have an explicit command. I'll give you my opinion, such as it's worth. In any Christian fellowship we are likely to find believing men married to non-believing wives and vice versa. Maybe one of you came to faith subsequent to getting married, maybe other factors were involved such as a marriage arranged by the family. Never mind: let the past look after itself – what we're concerned about is the present situation. The crunch question I would put to each believing spouse, whether male or female (because in Christ there is no difference of status) is this: are you both happy to live under the same roof and share the same bed? If the answer is 'yes', then neither of you should even start to think about separating. [7:14] I'm trying to help those of you who have been taught (erroneously) that once you become a Christian, sexual union of any kind is somehow less than totally pure in God's sight. I want you to understand how sacred and fundamental this one-flesh principle is. Marriage, as I've said, is a union hallowed by the One who originally created us male and female; its validity doesn't depend on faith in Christ, important though that is. Whether it is the husband or the wife who hasn't yet come round to confessing Christ as Lord, the purity of the marital union is unaffected. Nobody's committing adultery or apostasy! And this applies just as much to any children of the marriage: their legitimacy and spiritual status in God's eyes aren't affected in the slightest.

Keeping the door open

[7:15] This isn't to say that matters of faith are irrelevant in the context of marriage – of course they are! The tension between believing and unbelieving partners may cause a serious strain on the relationship. As I've said above, it isn't open to the believer to walk out; but the non-believer

may choose to do so, such is the way of the world, so what is the brother or sister in Christ to do? Just let their partner go? It would be a mistake to think that God's purposes are inflexibly opposed to this. The gospel has brought an entirely new situation. The cross has opened channels of reconciliation and restoration which can irrigate even dried-up and hardened relationships. My judgment is that however deeply you feel about it, and however vehemently you argue against it, in the last resort you shouldn't (even if you could) prevent your unbelieving partner from moving out. [7:16] The sound of the front door slamming doesn't necessarily entail that the door of the kingdom has closed irrevocably on the departing person. You may think – whether it's your wife or your husband – that they don't stand a chance of being converted if you're not there to witness to them any more; but miracles do happen (well, every time someone comes to faith it's a miracle!), and it's as well to admit that we have no idea what the future holds, nor can we be certain just how the grace of God is going to operate. Here's the encouragement: keep the door open from your side; keep praying for this lost soul to come to know Christ, and if possible to come back into the loving relationship you once had. Leave it to God! His purpose is that all things should be reconciled in Christ; his call can break into darkened hearts and open blinded eyes. Hope is an essential component of faith. Rom. You may find that even without your saying anything at all, or now being able to, once they've had time to think about it they will realise their need for a Saviour.

7:17-24 ¹⁷ Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. ²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

Does everything have to change?

[7:17] 'But surely, once God's call has come into my life, as you say, it's so powerful that everything has to change. If it affects my marriage relationship (and you've admitted that it could lead to my beloved partner walking out of the house), what other feature of my everyday life might it not affect?' Once again I would urge clear thinking on complex questions. There is a difference between hearing and responding to God's 'call' to follow Christ, which overrides all other allegiances, and the general 'calling' in life to which God has assigned us, which may or may not need to change. You aren't the only church to have raised this point, so I'll tell you the line I've consistently taken in my pastoral visitations. [7:18] The extreme example would be circumcision. When a Jew becomes a Christian (which is the case with me), my spiritual status no longer depends on adherence to the law of Moses, it now goes back through Abraham to Christ through faith. So do I need to reverse the operation that was done on me physically? Well, this procedure is available, but you'll be relieved to hear that it is totally unnecessary. The opposite also needs to be emphasised, as I find I have to do frequently: when a Gentile becomes a Christian, they should absolutely not seek circumcision. [7:19] The mere fact of physical marks being made (or not made) on my body, which is contingent upon a range of circumstances, has nothing to do with my spiritual status in God's sight. When I put my faith in Christ, my relationship with God has changed fundamentally. My guiding principle isn't conformity to

external rules, customs and traditions, it consists in trusting him, depending one-hundred-per-cent on him, finding out what he wants for me and doing it whatever the cost.

Slavery and freedom

[7:20] So here's a rule of thumb, which I offer as my recommendation, not as an absolutely binding principle: respond to Christ's call to life, but don't reject God's calling in life. [7:21] Let's apply this to those of you who are slaves, whether in households or working for the government. People may think of you differently because you have that status in society, but it doesn't matter a bit in the sight of God! You're royalty where he's concerned. And he may want to use your witness to the people you live amongst. But this is perfectly consistent with saving up to buy your freedom, if the opportunity ever comes along. Do you see? The call of God operates within the shifting patterns of human society. [7:22] There is freedom in earthly terms, and there is freedom in heavenly terms. If I happen to be a slave, Jesus has invited me to be his freed man or woman; he has set me free to belong to him. I may not be a citizen of a worldly empire, but I am a fellow-citizen of the King of kings. Similarly if I happen to be a full Roman citizen, yes I can walk around without being subject to the orders of a master or mistress, but once I've heard Christ's 'Follow me!' I have no choice but to declare myself his servant for life.

Working for God

[7:23] 'You say I have no choice – but surely I do?' Well, maybe. It all comes down, as I said earlier, to who we rightfully belong to. Let me take you back to that scene in the slave-market. Here you are, up on the platform, with a placard saying 'For Sale' hung from your neck. You are at the mercy of the highest bidder – if you can find anyone to bid for you in the state you're in. Someone wanders up, prods you once or twice and contemptuously offers a denarius, just a day's wage for an unskilled worker. He seems likely to get you, but then another buyer turns up, sent from the Emperor himself. 'I offer all the gold in the imperial treasury for this one,' you hear them say. Later you learn that the Emperor saw you up for sale and, for no other reason than his extravagant generosity, set his heart on having you. But right now the buyer offers you the option: 'Do you want to work for me or for that other one?' Do you, do I have a choice? Really?

[7:24] The offer of a new life has been made to each one of us. Our position in society may be exalted or unimportant, our job may be menial or influential– it doesn't matter. From now on we're going to be working for God, with him alongside us in person. Not too bad, is it?

7:25-31 ²⁵ Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this. ²⁹ What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

Staying unmarried?

[7:25] Any more tricky questions? Ah yes, this one: 'We're both in love with each other, but we want to stay pure for the Lord; pressure is being put upon us to get married and have children – do you think we ought to?' I was so out of my depth with this one that I went straight to the Lord and asked him if he had a word for these people, as there doesn't seem to be anything in

Scripture about it. He said he thought he could rely on me to give a sensible answer, and if I got it wrong, he wouldn't hold it against me. So here we go. [7:26] Let's take a step back and look at the general situation. There are famines, earthquakes, floods. As a human race, it looks as if we haven't got very long. The world's pressures may seem overwhelming, but they're transient like everything else. Now two people may be in a close relationship, but they don't need to enter a permanent union for the sake of having sex. In fact it's much better if they don't. (I'm just giving my point of view, mind.) [7:27] Stay as you are. Clearly if you're already married, you've entered a binding contract and there's no getting out of it. But if you're unmarried (I'm talking to the man, who is responsible for the final decision), you can be perfectly content with that – there's no need to hotfoot it into matrimony. [7:28] Do I think there's something fundamentally wrong with marriage? Absolutely not – God instituted it and 'saw that it was good', like everything else he created. It may or may not be right for you, but that's for you to decide, and if you tick that box, there's no guilt attached. By the same token (and now I'm addressing the as yet unmarried woman), you are not doing anything sinful if you decide to say 'Yes!' to his proposal.

Troubles

But let's be utterly realistic. I don't want you to have a rose-tinted view of marriage or indeed of anything else (like being a Christian in the first place). It's not a way of escaping life's troubles; in fact, it brings troubles and anxieties of its own, as anyone who has a family (or can't have one) will tell you. If I'm erring on the side of discouragement about the marital state, it's only so that you can consider both options dispassionately, weigh up the pros and cons and so on. [7:29] Again I appeal to you to step back and take the long-term view. We live in troubled times; life is uncertain; we don't know when Christ is going to return but it may be very soon. So what should be our attitude to our material existence upon earth? Let's keep a healthy sense of proportion. I've known men who have lost their wives in childbirth or their children from war or disease, and I've tried to comfort them; but what helps them most in these tragedies is their faith in a God who gives and takes away but who never stops loving them. [7:30] You may sob till you think your heart will break, but underneath are God's everlasting arms and the morning isn't far away. By the same token, it's fine to rejoice when blessing comes, but we should never take it for granted; the lasting pleasures are those found at God's right hand. What about money and possessions? We don't have to be misers, we can spend wisely and well, but never for one moment should we think of earthly abundance as our be-all and end-all; wealth can take wings and fly off in an instant. [7:31] While we live in this world we have to have dealings with this world, but let's be faithful stewards of its resources and not squander them for our own selfish advantage.

The fundamental point is that the present physical and material universe isn't going to last. Thus the strategies we pursue in relating to it are bound to be provisional. What ultimately matters is our relationship with the One who was there before it started and will be there after it is all over and done with.

7:32-35 ³²I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs – how he can please the Lord. ³³But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world – how he can please his wife – ³⁴and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world – how she can please her husband. ³⁵I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Earthly detachment

[7:32] It's that undivided attention to the affairs of the Lord that really counts in this world. I'm not telling everyone to go off and lead a monastic existence, though that may be some folks' calling. I'm talking about a monasticism of the heart, a concentration upon the one supremely vital thing: knowing the Lord's will and doing it singlemindedly. This privilege of a carefree mind is the birthright of every Christian. Again I've got to be brutally frank. Earthly detachment is the secret of heavenly attachment. If you're unmarried, you can concentrate all your mental energy on the Lord's business; you are alert and available for every indication of his will. [7:33] If you're married, and you're fulfilling your duty as an attentive husband, the concerns of family life are going to clamour for attention; your quite proper desire to keep your wife happy will demand time and involvement that would otherwise be spent entirely on the Lord's business. [7:34] There will be a clash of priorities.

Exactly the same applies to the woman. If she remains unmarried and is not sexually active, she can attain a rare quality of holiness which involves total dedication of both body and spirit to the Lord. Women like that are mighty instruments of the kingdom. I'm not saying that once a woman is married she can't live wholeheartedly for Christ – of course she can and she should. I'm talking about emotional and physical energy. There's only a limited amount of time available and quite a lot of it has got to be spent satisfying her husband's demands, running the household, managing the children and so on. [7:35] Do you see my point? Once you get heaven and earth into perspective, you realise how relatively insignificant and actually distracting the affairs of the heart can be.

Second-best option?

'Paul, this is a trap! You are a skilled hunter luring his prey into the nets. You really want us to capitulate to the purity brigade who tell us that marriage is a second-best option for the true Christian.' Well, as I've tried to explain as carefully as I can, that is not my intention. I'm setting out the pros and cons of getting married (as you've asked me to), and I'm trying to help you to make the choice as unemotionally and clearmindedly as possible. Let me tell you the story of two sisters who asked the Lord in for a meal. Martha bustled about making all the preparations while Mary took the golden opportunity of listening to Jesus. Eventually Martha asked the Lord, none too gently, to release her sister for kitchen duties. The Lord proceeded to tell Martha that she was being distracted by the clamour of earthly concerns, whereas it was her sister who had made the single most important choice. 'But isn't that a recipe for chaos?' Well, tell me which is the more chaotic scene: Martha losing her temper in the kitchen, or Mary sitting quietly at the Master's feet, even if the meal is delayed for a few minutes? There's a bit of Martha and Mary in each of us, and we need to find the right balance.

7:36-38 ³⁶ *If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honourably towards the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.* ³⁷ *But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin – this man also does the right thing.* ³⁸ *So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.*

Trusting one's judgment

[7:36] Here is a couple in a close relationship who both want to serve the Lord and feel they can do it better if they refrain from matrimony. However, she is of child-bearing age and has reached sexual maturity, and he begins to feel that he isn't doing the right thing by her if they stay separate. There's a kind of inevitability about this, isn't there? As long as he has prayerfully made up his mind, therefore, he should go ahead and propose to her, and there's absolutely nothing wrong in their getting married. [7:37] I want to develop strongminded Christian men who aren't

swept off their feet by passion or float spinelessly down the stream of the world's opinions. I would say that if the man is totally clear in his own mind, and has got his priorities straight, and there's no pressure from her to get married, then they can stay single while remaining very much attached to each other. This may be an ideal, but it's an attractive one. [7:38] Let me repeat (and I'm mindful that I may also be addressing fathers who are wondering whether to marry off their daughters): there is no stigma attached to entering into a marriage contract, and I would argue passionately against those who think that there is. However, for the reasons I've stated – and bear in mind that this is my own personal view – I would say that you're better off if you don't rush into matrimony. I know this won't satisfy either the devotees of Artemis (goddess of total chastity) or of Aphrodite (goddess of sexual passion), but it might encourage Christian men to trust their own best judgment.

7:39-40 ³⁹ *A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.* ⁴⁰ *In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is – and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.*

Staying single

[7:39] I would give the same advice to a woman whose husband has died and she is wondering whether to remarry. Now of course while her previous husband was alive, she was in a one-flesh union with him and there was no question of anyone else; but now they have been parted by death, both legally and spiritually she is freed from the obligations of that union. However much she may miss her former partner and think about him, which is entirely natural, she doesn't have to stay single for evermore out of loyalty to him. I would just remind her that if she does enter into a second marriage, her new partner should be a committed Christian. [7:40] But, and this is consistent with my previous advice, there is absolutely nothing wrong in a mature widow staying single; in fact I would take the line that when all's said and done, she is going to lead a more fulfilled existence. (My advice to younger widows might be rather different.) She can be both Martha and Mary: she can be more available for the Lord's work – and there's plenty of that to do – and she's got more time for unhurried waiting on him. You can ignore this advice as coming from someone who has stayed single because of the demands of mission work; but don't dismiss it as total nonsense, because I'm dependent on the counselling Spirit just like everyone else. Otherwise I'd be completely out of my depth!

8:1-3 ¹*Now about food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'We all possess knowledge.' But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.* ²*Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.* ³*But whoever loves God is known by God.*

Meat offered in sacrifice

[8:1] Now for something completely different: whether or not to allow animal meat to pass one's lips when it's been offered in sacrifice during a temple ritual. In your letter you say, 'We all know that there's no reality behind a statue of a Greek or Roman god, so the meat offered to it is exactly the same as any other meat.' Stop there! 'We all know.' Isn't that a bit dangerous? It's so easy to consider oneself superior to others because one possesses some kind of insider information. It's like that game when you pass round an object using a form of words that can mean two different things: those who know the secret enjoy having the joke on those who don't. The Jesus Spirit isn't like that; it just concentrates on loving other people, not making them feel small but helping them to grow more confident. [8:2] Besides, how much do we really know? Remember Socrates' dictum: when the Delphic oracle said he was the wisest person in the world, he concluded that it was only because when everyone else thought they understood something, he was acutely aware that he didn't really understand anything. Mere head knowledge isn't the same as true wisdom.

[8:3] The best and highest form of wisdom is to understand the depths of God's love; when that starts happening to a person, they enter a realm of Divine truth which is unlike any earthly form of knowledge. This utterly humbles the person concerned, because they realise that God knows them through and through, yet he's still chosen them. They are learning the language of love, a language of the heart that totally eclipses mere cleverness or brainpower.

8:4-6 ⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: we know that 'An idol is nothing at all in the world' and that 'There is no God but one.' ⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), ⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Sham divinities

[8:4] So let's apply this to the question of sacrificial meat that has figured in a temple sacrifice and is now being sold at a discount in the market, or being served up to you at a friend's dinner-party. The 'knowledge' brigade proclaim confidently, 'Anyone who isn't completely stupid knows perfectly well that a statue is just a piece of carved wood or stone – there's no actual reality to it, it can't do anything for you, it's a human creation, not a divine presence in our world. The only Divine Presence around is the One True God – all the other claimants are sham divinities, and anyone who tells you they're real is pulling a fast one. So this meat is just meat, it can't transmit holy or unholy power into your body and soul.' [8:5] Absolutely right! I'm one hundred per cent with you on that. People have invented all kinds of religious objects to bow down to and worship, whether they're representations of mortal beings or even animals, or whether they are mysterious heavenly powers that can affect fertility or child-bearing – oh, this wonderful race of ours has set up every sort of alternative to God, even human rulers who call themselves 'saviour' and 'lord' and then turn on you when you don't happen to agree that they possess any right to divinity. [8:6] It's such a relief to turn from this frenzied madness to the sanity of belief in the I AM who is our Father, the origin and Creator of everything that exists, and who gives our lives direction and purpose so that we can know him and live with him for ever; and best of all, we have committed ourselves to the Lordship of Jesus, Jewish Messiah and King of the whole world, who was God's agent of creation in the beginning, in whose image we are made, and through whose self-giving love we find life and peace. The world's so-called gods can't give you any of that, because there's nothing to them.

8:7-13 ⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. ⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do. ⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling-block to the weak. ¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol's temple, won't that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? ¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. ¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. ¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

Qualms of conscience

[8:7] The trouble is, believing in Christ as your Saviour doesn't give a person instant insight and understanding. My own conversion was pretty dramatic, but I still had to go off for three years and get myself sorted out. If you've been brought up in a culture which takes idol worship seriously, the sacrificial meat still has some kind of spiritual aura, and when you take it into your mouth and stomach it feels as if there's a divine power entering you. For the relatively new Christian this sets up a very real tension: 'How can I square my conscience when I do this? How

can I have Christ living in my heart and still make room for alien powers and deities? If the body and blood of Christ represent his cleansing presence by faith, wouldn't eating idol meat represent a rather different spiritual presence which makes me unclean in the sight of God?

[8:8] I hope you can appreciate how some people might find this difficult. Our Lord, of course, was perfectly clear about this: mere food and drink can't spiritually contaminate us any more than it can bring us closer to God. Whatever it is we eat or drink might make us ill or overweight, but it won't confer divine potency upon us, any more than refraining from food will make us spiritually weak. It's what comes out of us that defiles us. [8:9] The trouble is that this kind of assurance and freedom might nevertheless cause a problem for those who can't shake off the irrational fear of pagan deities. It's not that their faith in Christ is deficient; just that they're really nervous about doing something that God might not approve of. Telling them to buck their ideas up doesn't help; in fact it might cause them to jettison their consciences entirely. [8:10] Suppose you get an invitation to a non-Christian friend's birthday party which is being held in one of those little dining-rooms adjoining a pagan temple; you've got no objections because you realise that all this idol business is play-acting, there's nothing behind it and no-one really believes in it anyway. On the way there you happen to meet a Christian brother who thinks you're compromising with devil-worship and contaminating your soul, so you stop and give him a little scripture lesson about made-up gods like Baal and Dagon, and he feels a complete fool for objecting to what you are doing. In fact next time he comes along with you and heartily enjoys his meal; but he hasn't entirely got rid of the old doubts so he develops a double-minded mentality where he conforms to a course of action he doesn't really approve of in his heart. [8:11] Do you see what has happened to this guy? He's lost his single-minded faith in Christ, who died for him to set him free from all the old fears and conformities, and he's gone wobbly at the knees. He needs crutches (in this case your breezy and 'scriptural' assurances) where he should be walking by the Spirit unaided. A few months later he'll be saying he doesn't think there's anything in this Christian business either, and you'll see him going into the temple with one of the girls he met at the party. His faith has gone down the drain, and all thanks to you.

[8:12] What's actually happened is that instead of being sensitive to this brother's doubts and maybe limiting your own freedom in some way, you've taken a club to his convictions and knocked his conscience senseless. This makes you directly accountable to Christ the good Shepherd, who is particularly concerned for the feeble and lame among his flock. [8:13] So this is what I've settled with the Lord: if a course of action that I can't personally see is wrong, like this meat eating we're talking about, is causing a fellow-Christian qualms of conscience, then I'm having nothing to do with it. Better a small detour of my own than inducing my companion to drive his chariot straight over a massive rock lying in the roadway. And if I never accept another temple party invitation again, then so be it.

9:1-2 ¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Love and freedom

[9:1] 'Look, Paul, surely we're free from all those superstitions about idols and contaminating food and meaningless rituals. Why tie yourself down for the sake of a half-taught Christian with an over-sensitive conscience?' I'll tell you the answer: love, the heart of the gospel. Yes, indeed, Jesus has given me my freedom, the risen Lord has walked into the prison house of the Law where I was tied hand and foot and has personally selected me to go and tell the great news to the nations of the world. I can't get over the fact that I've seen him with my very own eyes and known without a shadow of doubt that I was looking at God himself. He became my

Lord and then he became yours too. The vibrant faith you Corinthians have is evidence that I've been carrying out the work Jesus gave me to do. [9:2] I may not seem much of an apostle to certain other people, probably because I joined the team after the ascension whereas 'true apostles' went about with the Lord while he was on earth. That isn't a big deal; what really counts is whether I've done an apostolic job with you. Has the King set his seal on you and stamped his unmistakable mark of ownership on your lives, or hasn't he? If he has (and I'm certain he has!), then I'm a genuine missionary of Christ, whatever anyone else may say to the contrary.

9:3-6 ³ *This is my defence to those who sit in judgment on me.* ⁴ *Don't we have the right to food and drink?* ⁵ *Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas?* ⁶ *Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?*

'Real' apostles

[9:3] But if you insist on hauling me up before a panel and examining my credentials for apostleship, please go ahead. [9:4] Item one: 'Real apostles have an expense account and accept local hospitality from the churches.' Well, I could if I wanted to, but I choose not to, as I'll explain in a moment. [9:5] Item two: 'Real apostles bring their wives with them on their pastoral journeys; it's a powerful testimony to the power of a fully Christian marriage, and the wives can minister to the women in the congregation. What a wonderful example they all set, Cephas, the Lord's own brothers and all the other apostles.' Does not being married make me any less of an ambassador for Christ? Did it diminish the Lord's own ministry? Why should this count against me? [9:6] Item three: 'Real apostles devote themselves full time to evangelism and don't take paid jobs or do manual labour.' I know Barnabas and I are an exception to the general rule, but why should it be a rule at all? And why should it mean I haven't a heart for spreading the Lord's word (and I'll come back to that too)?

9:7-12a ⁷ *Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk?* ⁸ *Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing?* ⁹ *For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.'* *Is it about oxen that God is concerned?* ¹⁰ *Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever ploughs and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.* ¹¹ *If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?* ¹² *If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?*

Labour and compensation

[9:7] Now that my critics have set out their case against me, let's examine it carefully. Their grounds for accusation amount to this: real apostles make use of certain concessions in order to preach the gospel more effectively, I and my team don't make use of those concessions, therefore we are pseudo-apostles. Right premises, wrong conclusion. Let me demonstrate. (When I say 'you' I'm addressing the critics primarily, but also the church as a whole.)

Common sense and scripture support the idea that when one puts one's labour into something, one receives some form of material compensation. No-one joining the army expects to have to pay for their rations themselves. Anyone growing a vineyard can take home some grapes at the end of the day. A cowherd or goat-farmer won't get sacked if they help themselves to some of the milk. In other words, those who work can benefit to a certain extent from the product of their labour. Apostolic work can be described in terms of fighting battles for Christ, planting churches, being shepherds of the flock; therefore they should benefit both spiritually and materially from their work for the Lord.

[9:8] This is not only plain everyday commonsense, it's also scriptural. [9:9-10] Look at the book of Deuteronomy. It's about the law of mercy being applied to people's rights, like widows being allowed to glean in your harvest-field. Then the writer (traditionally thought to be Moses) suddenly drops in a clause about oxen not being muzzled while they are going round the treadmill grinding the grain. That leaves the ox free to chomp on the grain while he's doing his repetitive job. Now God loves oxen, like the rest of his creation, but he wasn't slipping this precept in just for animals (who can't stand on their rights when they're treated badly) – it's standing out there like a sore thumb for every single one of us to read and learn the lesson: whether you're ploughing a field, or threshing the corn, or doing any kind of labour, there's a built-in principle of expectation. You stand to gain something for yourself, and that's not selfishness, it's God's way of encouraging humanity's cooperation with himself in the work of sustaining the creation. Because ultimately he plans for us to share in the new creation. What you're doing now is going to be rewarded out of all proportion, because God's like that.

[9:11] Can you see where this is leading? The commission I've been given by Christ is to sow the seed of the gospel, which means opening people's eyes to their true spiritual situation and to bring them from darkness to light; it means doing what I've done among you, scattering a few feeble seeds of lifegiving word into your hard unrepentant soil, watering it with my tears and watching a magnificent harvest emerge. Whether or not I put in a bill for expenses and get the occasional free lunch is trivial by comparison. It is simply not an issue for my team and myself. [9:12] I suppose if we were to insist upon it, we could point out that the groundbreaking work we've done among you entitles us to a larger share of the proceeds than anyone else who's come along later. If others have made use of the material assistance you've very kindly offered to servants of the gospel, then don't we have an even greater claim?

9:12b-14 *But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*

The exercise of privilege

So I agree with your premise, that genuine apostolic workers for Christ have every right to reap material rewards from those who benefit from their instruction. And that includes the Pauline team. *But we choose not to exercise this privilege.* And the reason is the same one I was using with regard to eating sacrificial meat: if claiming our expenses meant one single person concluding that the message of God's love in Christ wasn't a 100% free gift after all, then we would endure any sacrifice and go through any conceivable personal deprivation in order to demonstrate how wrong they were.

Do you now see what I'm getting at? Like the priesthood under the Levitical system, we have dedicated our lives to serving God. Those priests serve the needs of the temple, and consequently they partake of the sacrificial meat and so on; those who spend hours assiduously attending to the rituals around the altar have every right to take home a few cuts for themselves and their families. [9:14] If you point out that the temple system has now been superseded in Christ, then the Lord's own reported words should settle the question once and for all. When he gave instructions to the Twelve going out ahead of him to the villages, he said quite clearly that they needn't take any spare cash along with them, because like anybody doing a job for others they were entitled to material remuneration for their labours. Their job was to preach God's good news; OK, but the good news had (and still has) its own spin-offs and they needn't go hungry or lack shelter just because they were working for the kingdom.

This isn't a binding principle, it's a gracious concession – the Lord himself often slept out in the open or under a hedge for lack of anywhere to stay.

9:15-18 ¹⁵ *But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast.* ¹⁶ *For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!* ¹⁷ *If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me.* ¹⁸ *What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.*

I'm a driven man

[9:15] So that's what I'm getting at: I have voluntarily surrendered my right to material rewards from my gospel preaching, in order to clear away any possible imputation that the new covenant might really involve reimbursing God for his goodness and grace. But two caveats: firstly, I am not going into all this explanation in order to wheedle you into supporting me financially, because as I've indicated *ad nauseam*, I would rather jump over a cliff than abandon my proud boast of total independence. [9:16] And secondly and much more important, when I say that I have 'voluntarily' surrendered my rights, don't think for a moment I am trying to take the moral high ground. I have no choice in the matter. I'm a driven man. The gospel is my meat and drink. I'm a compulsive, obsessive Jesus freak. If you ripped out my tongue to stop me speaking, I'd do it in sign language. Not to be able to share this world-changing story would cause me acute agony and total frustration.

[9:17] Here are two men who have each been offered an important financial responsibility. The first is a free citizen who could easily refuse, because he could opt to spend his time doing something else; so he asks what's in it for him, and arranges for a substantial fee to be paid into his bank account. But the second is a slave whose master is going on a journey and puts him in charge of his entire household. The servant realises what a massive commitment this is going to be, and tries to wriggle out of it – but he can't, because he has no choice. He is completely and totally at the disposal of his master, who is prepared to place this enormous trust in him and who expects him to make a good job of it. No question of haggling for a rise in his salary – he's a slave, he does it because he's told to and he doesn't even get a bonus.

[9:18] Oh well, I do get a bonus I suppose, and that is the perverse satisfaction I experience when I proclaim that God's love and forgiveness are available completely without any payment or repayment on our part, because Christ has footed the entire bill. There is no charge for eternal life. And in order to make this point as forcefully as I can, I resign any right I have to claim expenses. Yes, I do have such a right and so does every ambassador for Christ, as I hope I've proved to everyone's satisfaction; but no, I'm not going to stand on that right, because I want to demonstrate that *becoming a Christian will cost you absolutely nothing*.

9:19-23 ¹⁹ *Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.* ²⁰ *To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.* ²¹ *To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.* ²² *To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.* ²³ *I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.*

Reaching others with the gospel

[9:19] 'Hold there, Paul! I thought you said that Jesus' death and resurrection sets us free. What's all this talk of slavery and compulsion? I'm a bit confused.' Let's recapitulate the argument. Yes, we're free. Even a slave, who has no 'freedom' in earthly terms, receives his or her Kingdom freedom pass at the moment of new birth. The prison doors have been flung wide open, all the charges against us have been dropped, nobody is going to tell us what we can or can't do. We may have to leave behind our stinking prison uniform, and give up the dodgy practices we found ourselves adopting under the old regime, but that's not a price to pay, it's a huge relief. Before, I lived entirely for myself. Now I can live for others, because I'm living for Someone who loved me enough to give his life for me.

And that's the point. There are others that Jesus is trying to reach. How is he going to do this? Well, he needs ex-slaves to reach present slaves, former inmates to reach those still in jail. Do you know the philosopher's famous story about the man who escapes from the cave of illusion then wants to go back and bring the truth to his fellow-prisoners, no matter what they might do to him? This is what I've done. I've surrendered my freedom, I've put myself under compulsion, if only I can go back and rescue as many as possible. [9:20] This isn't the decision of a madman or a fool, in fact saving other people is the best thing one can do with one's life. I have a strategic plan, and I'll tell you what it is: incarnational servant-love, following our Lord's own example of becoming a human being, if that was the only way he could snatch us from the jaws of death and destruction.

No ready-made solutions

[9:20] It's not a case of 'one size fits all.' There are no ready-made solutions to the problem of reaching a single human soul. Let's suppose I'm talking to an orthodox Jew, or a group of those whom I am proud to call my fellow-countrymen. The badge no longer means anything to me in the sense of giving me privileged access to God, but it's still a useful area of common ground, so I dig deep into the roots of my Jewishness and talk about the One True God, our failure to keep the Law of Moses and so on, all leading up to Jesus as God's Son and Messiah. Or here I am in a seminar with some Pharisees, those utterly committed guardians of the traditions and customs of the people of Israel; yes, I'm so thankful to have escaped from those stifling and burdensome precepts which debar so many from finding the kingdom of God, but even so I know the language, oh how I know it, and I can quote one learned Rabbi against another, and deploy sophisticated arguments to show the serious gulf that has opened up between the man-made law and the true love of God. [9:21] Then I might be strolling through the market-place where I start up a conversation with some Greek philosophy students; it wouldn't make sense to batter them with Scripture, so I start with an inscription I've found on a monument, or quotations from a couple of poets, just to show I'm familiar with their thought-forms and that we're all hungering for the same God. I can't go all the way with them in rejecting God's rule, because I'm now under Christ's command, I'm subject to his new law of love – but I can appeal to their conscience, I can take them back to the truth they all know in their hearts, that there's a difference between right and wrong, and they're accountable for the choices they make. [9:22] But what about the down-and-outs I come across, the losers, the no-hopers? Well, I've been there too. I should have been serving a life-sentence for murder. Moral failure? I can preach what's right and good, but can I do it? It's only someone who knows they can't lift a finger to better themselves who can point to the Christ who went to the lowest depths for them.

Inconsistent?

Accuse me of inconsistency if you like – tell me on Monday you don't recognise the Paul you met last week – I'm not a chameleon changing hue to avoid detection, I'm an artist selecting different colours from his palette to bring out the glorious versatility of the gospel. Jesus

saves, he saves people like you and me, that's the bottom line, and if God can't get it into our thick heads by one means of approach, then he'll try another until some (how many we don't know) actually wake up and do something about getting rescued. The amazing thing is that he uses someone like me as his instrument, which shows he can use absolutely anybody. [9:23] So this indictment, that I don't claim the spin-offs from being an evangelist, therefore I must be ashamed of it or something, utterly misses the point. The job is its own reward; the more I throw myself into it, the more satisfaction I find. I'm Christ's co-worker, and it doesn't get any better than that.

9:24-27 ²⁴ *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* ²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.* ²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.* ²⁷ *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.*

Singleminded commitment

[9:24] Yes, the gospel comes to us free, without any effort on our part; but preaching it costs everything, in terms of singleminded commitment. We're all familiar with the Olympic Games, the sprints and long-distance races, the boxing contests and other events that make up that great festival. Your athletes are already in training for the next Corinthian games, I should imagine. They don't go through all that rigorous self-discipline simply to show off their rippling muscles or bask in the plaudits of the crowd. They're going all out to win. Only one person is going to carry off that coveted first prize, and that's going to be them. Coming second is coming nowhere. Now of course the Christian foot-race isn't competitive in the sense that only one disciple of Jesus is ever going to make it to the top place in the kingdom – James and John had to learn that the hard way. But there are going to be winners and losers, and the surest way to avoid winning is to opt out of the preliminary training regime. [9:25] Those Olympic athletes reach a superb degree of physical fitness, not to say mental toughness as well. They know what they're going to be up against on the actual day, and every aspect of their training leads up to that. Yet all they get from it (if they're lucky) is a crown of laurel leaves which quickly withers and gets thrown on the fire. We who are Christ's people are training for eternity, for a victor's crown that lasts for ever – and the spiritual fitness required is of a completely different order.

Spiritual fitness

[9:26] Being spiritually fit consists of two things above all: clear intention and rigorous self-discipline. Clear intention: your Olympic runner isn't always looking over his shoulder to find out where the others are, he's heading for the finishing post and that's his one goal. I'm not talking about knowing exactly where one's going at any given moment, because so often one has to trust the leading of the Spirit; what I mean is walking in the light of God's word, ordering my steps by Scripture. Nothing is more ludicrous than watching a boxing contest where one contestant is flailing madly and never landing a single blow on his opponent, because he has no idea where he is. Our opponents aren't human beings, they're spiritual powers, who can only be defeated by faith in Christ whatever it costs. [9:27] Rigorous self-discipline: again don't get me wrong, I'm not saying my body is an enemy to be slaughtered or maltreated, but it's more like a recalcitrant slave or a horse that needs breaking in, its demands have to be faced down and put in their place, my physical frame has got to be the servant of my spirit and not its master. Otherwise I'm going to find myself out of a job where Christ is concerned. I may have preached hundreds of sermons and taken the faith to the far

corners of the earth, but if I allow the flesh to get the upper hand, I'm going to count for nothing in his service.

10:1-5 *¹For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.*

The bias of the heart

[10:1] 'Hey, Paul, are you saying that if we fall victim to the temptations of the flesh, we're going to lose our salvation?' Not in so many words, but I'm warning against complacency and superficial profession. You can be a member of the people of God, you can experience the blessings of the gospel, you can even be a much-used and valued servant of the word, but you aren't immune to the bias of the heart towards idolatry. I'm sure you are familiar with the stories of the people of God as they journeyed through the rugged country between Egypt and the Promised Land. These were our ancestors, in the sense that they witnessed God's action in Christ in advance, so we can learn from them. As soon as they set off they were led and protected by the pillar of cloud, and they marched through the sea on dry ground, with the water standing respectfully aside to let them pass. This happened to all the Israelites without exception, whether or not they later proved faithful to God. In other words, they were people of faith, they committed themselves to the Lord's mercy and he demonstrated his unmistakable power to save them. True of us as Christians? Of course! [10:2] You could even say that the whole nation got baptised, because of the repentance and faith they clearly showed, as they trusted the invisible God to lead them ultimately across the Jordan, and as they left the old life behind them in the depths of the sea.

[10:3] There are even more parallels between ourselves as the modern-day people of God and those far distant pilgrims. Just as we break bread together and feed on the Lord Jesus as our spiritual nourishment, so they were sustained by the manna that God rained down on them as a gift from heaven. And I can't help thinking of the stories about the rock that provided water for them in different places – it was almost as if the same rock turned up every time they needed it – isn't that a wonderful picture of Christ travelling with his people, always there when we need him, satisfying our heart's desires and faithfully pouring out mercy and grace even when, as Moses did, we give way to moments of irrational resentment and fail to honour him as we should?

Failure to fulfil God's purpose

[10:5] And yet – and yet – the vast majority of that great Exodus nation failed to make it through to the Promised Land, because the Lord made sure that they perished in the wilderness. Why? Because he was seriously displeased with their rebellion and lack of faith. Now I want you to think very carefully about this. The story makes it clear that (partly through Moses' self-giving intercession) the ultimate salvation of the people was secure because they remained under the pardoning favour of our incredibly patient God. But he couldn't use them to achieve the conquest of Canaan! They had to wander round for forty years until they were all dead, and that included their leader Moses himself for the one moment when he totally lost his cool with them. It was only Caleb and Joshua, the old man and the young man, who showed the kind of crazy faith that delights God's heart. Do you see the point? It isn't starting out on the journey that counts, it's finishing it. You can experience the blessings of the gospel and still fail to fulfil Christ's purpose for you.

10:6-10 ⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.' ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did – and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test Christ, as some of them did – and were killed by snakes. ¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did – and were killed by the destroying angel.

Learning from the past

[10:6] Now these records of what happened to the people of God in the past are preserved so that we can learn from them centuries later. I'm going to give you five instances of where they had problems in their journey of faith and got it wrong, and I want you to consider whether you are in the same danger.

Example 1: desiring the forbidden thing

I'll start with myself. Setting my heart on what I know I shouldn't have. It doesn't matter what it is, the Tenth Commandment forbids us even to think about getting it. When we become Christians, God gives us a new set of desires along with our new nature, but the old desires are still there and unlearning them is often painful. The children of Israel needed forty years to get Egypt out of their spiritual bloodstream. Even then Achan just had to have that beautiful Babylonian robe and brought disaster on himself, his family and others in the community. Getting your hands on the forbidden thing: I've written to you in no uncertain terms about this – have you learnt nothing?

Example 2: idolatry

[10:7] Next story: the golden calf. If you think you're immune to the lure of foreign gods, just reflect that it was while the Ten Commandments were being given to Moses that his own brother Aaron actually built a golden statue shaped like the Egyptian bull-calf Apis, and the people worshipped it and praised it for leading them out of slavery. Then they indulged in merrymaking, eating and drinking, and all kinds of wild things went on afterwards. I've got more to say on this subject of idolatry; but just ask yourselves what golden things (or people) you're putting on a pedestal and worshipping, and what kind of lifestyle do they permit which the One True God would never tolerate?

Example 3: illicit sex

[10:8] This leads inevitably to the next story about the Moabite women who invited the Israelites to their sacrificial meal for the god Baal and then had sex with them. The Lord was so angry about this that he sent a plague which killed about 23,000 of them. One pair of lovers (the woman was a Midianite) were speared as they lay together in the tent. You can't possibly dismiss this story as irrelevant to modern-day Corinth! Is the Lord going to let you get away with promiscuous sexual relationships? We've talked about that too, in case you've forgotten. Or maybe you were conveniently absent when that part of the letter was being read.

Example 4: blackmailing God

[10:9] But there are other equally flagrant transgressions recorded in those epic narratives. One time was when the people complained about the lack of bread and water, presumably to get the heavenly delivery machine to send them yet more miraculous food, and the result was a plague of venomous snakes and thousands of deaths. Yes, I know Moses set up the bronze serpent to heal them, and that's a picture of Jesus on the cross. But the point is that this was a blatant example of the lack of faith which leads people to apply a kind of blackmail to God: if

he doesn't do what I ask, I'm not following him any longer. This wasn't the first or the last time that those people put God to the test, and exactly the same attitude is around today. We call Christ 'Lord, Lord' and yet we think he's open to bargaining.

Example 5: the spirit of disbelief

[10:10] God wasn't good enough for them. They didn't believe in him enough to go on his word and wait for his plan to unfold. As soon as things were less than perfect, the moaners and pessimists started up with their 'Why has God allowed this?' refrain. The predictable result was further disaster. Let's go back to that business of the spies. Despite all the powerful things God had done for them in releasing them from slavery in Egypt, the majority of the reconnaissance team brought back a negative report about Canaan and infected the whole people with a spirit of disbelief. The next thing they knew, all the grumblers were dead, struck down by plague thanks to the destroying angel whom the Almighty keeps in reserve for such situations.

10:11-13 ¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

Dependence on God

[10:11] Now don't start saying, 'Oh, all that's Old Testament; we're under the New Covenant, we're living in the last days, Christ would never allow that kind of thing to happen to his people today.' Don't be so sure! The way God deals with his children in the past isn't a one-off; it's meant to be a lesson for succeeding generations, and since the world hasn't ended yet, that includes us.

[10:12] The crucial thing God is trying to teach us – as individuals, as churches, as his hardly-won children – is not to trust ourselves, but to depend on him. Left to ourselves, we think we're doing fine, walking confidently, heads held high – the next moment we're sprawling in the dust. Upheld by him, we may stumble, but we won't totally collapse. [10:13] We may think, 'I'm being asked to go through stuff that no normal human being should have to endure.' Wrong. It's happened before: ask Job, ask Moses, ask the Psalm writers, ask any prophet or saint of God. Whatever you call it, testing, trial of faith, temptation from the devil, it's all part of kingdom experience. We see only part of the story, one side of the coin; on the other side is the invisible God, alert to our precise situation, limiting the damage evil can do, pouring in support just when needed, posting extra guards at our weakest points. This doesn't remove our responsibility, of course – it's up to us to weather the storm and fight off the assaults however desperate or persistent – but the uncanny thing is that he provides the way through, he supplies the means of enduring the trial. That's a promise he'll never break.

10:14-17 ¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

The Lord's Supper

[10:14] So how do we apply all this to the situation we were talking about, the insidious temptations of the old counterfeit gods? We're aware it isn't just a question of rituals or forms of worship, it's a world spirit posing as a God-substitute. My dearest friends, take this utterly seriously. Put distance between yourselves and the source of seduction. [10:15] You've had your eyes opened to the dangers; don't go into panic reaction mode, just use your commonsense. It's for you to work out what I'm saying and to apply it to your own situation, with the Spirit's help. [10:16] This question of whether or not to accept invitations to temple feasts: put it in the context of our own Christian fellowship meal, the Lord's Supper. Isn't that infinitely more meaningful? When we lift the cup of wine to our lips, and celebrate God's love towards us, we're not just uttering empty formulas, we're demonstrating our solidarity with a living God who took on human flesh and blood and laid down his life for us in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Similarly when we take the loaf of ordinary bread and pass its pieces round among us, we're affirming our membership of Christ's own body upon earth. This isn't make-believe or play-acting, it's commitment to a Saviour who died and rose again for us. [10:17] The symbolism of the single loaf should be obvious: we who are meeting together come from many different backgrounds, each of us has our own faith-history, yet we form a single fellowship, we are the living and believing incarnation of Christ upon earth. That's why we don't bring our own little picnic boxes and eat separately, we each take a piece of the communal loaf of bread and share together in our common faith in Christ.

10:18-22 ¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹ Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²² Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

Hostile powers

[10:18] Beware of dismissing these fellowship times as meaningless rituals. Even the priestly rites prescribed under the Jewish Law have their spiritual significance: you aren't just munching a lump of sacrificial meat, you're actually becoming part of the sacrifice itself, you're offering your whole life on the altar to God. [10:19-20] 'So are you saying, Paul, that the same applies to the temple feasts – that there is some spiritual reality behind the sacrifice they are making, or that far from it being a meaningless ritual, there is actually some substance in the idol they are worshipping?' No, and yes. No, because whatever power resides in the sham god they have created for themselves, it isn't divine and it has no claim whatsoever to receive anybody's allegiance. But yes, because it is quite possible that there are evil forces involved in all this. The old Scriptures make it abundantly clear that idolatry is a potent locus of Satanic activity, to lure people, indeed whole nations, away from devotion to the One True God. Sacrificing to a 'god' that isn't a god at all may seem completely harmless, but it isn't; it risks getting involved with powers hostile to God, it can give the enemy a foothold in your soul. Accept an invitation to a temple supper, and you sit down at table with the devil. Would I recommend that? You must be joking!

Mistaken notion

[10:21] You can see how inconsistent this all is. Here you are one moment sitting down at supper with the Lord, drinking the cup and eating the food of the Son of God who gave his life-blood for you on a Roman cross; and the next moment there you are reclining at table at the headquarters of evil, hobnobbing with the very same Satanic forces that actively plotted

and carried out his execution! [10:22] I just hope it isn't through a mistaken notion that now we're all overcomers, we don't need God's help and protection thank you very much, we can play around with idolatry without getting infected. Well, can I remind you of that final warning of Moses, that flirting with seductive pseudo-deities results in getting seduced, and nothing is more calculated to arouse the Lord's displeasure and inflame his fury. And to those who think they've been given superior spiritual gifts which enable them to cast out demons, and they can do this without the Lord's help – do you realise what you're up against? Have you forgotten Jesus' story about the 'strong man' and the 'stronger than the strong'? Are you really trying to do God's work independently of his Holy Spirit? Is it your name the demons are afraid of?

10:23-24 ²³ *'I have the right to do anything,' you say – but not everything is beneficial. 'I have the right to do anything' – but not everything is constructive.* ²⁴ *No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.*

I can do what I like

[10:23] Do you see what I'm saying? You hear people saying, 'I can do what I like now I'm a saved Christian.' Absolutely – to those who've been cleansed from the inside, nothing outside can contaminate them, everything is pure where the pure are concerned. But, and it's a big 'but', does what you allow for yourself contribute to the general good? 'I don't need my faith to be shackled by petty restrictions.' Yes, true – but are you actively helping to strengthen others' faith? A good architect is free to build a dwelling according to his own design, but he must still consider the needs of the people who are going to live there. [10:24] The cardinal principle is, not 'how can I get exactly what I want?', but 'how can I do what's best for the other person?' I've known some incredibly selfish Christians, but I've also known some wonderfully unselfish ones. Which kind do you want to be?

10:25-30 ²⁵ *Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience,* ²⁶ *for, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it.'* ²⁷ *If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience.* ²⁸ *But if someone says to you, 'This has been offered in sacrifice,' then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience.* ²⁹ *I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience?* ³⁰ *If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?*

A matter of conscience

[10:25] 'Paul, we've got to live in the real world. I'm trying to feed my household, and down at the market there's meat on sale which may or may not have come from an animal offered in sacrifice at a pagan ceremony; in fact if it's slightly discounted it probably has been. Are you saying that for conscience' sake I shouldn't buy it? Most of the church is finding it hard to make ends meet anyway, and here you are laying an extra economic burden on the poorest of us.' [10:26] No, I'm not saying this. Seeking the Lord's will doesn't mean getting tied down by petty restrictions. Scripture reminds us anyway that everything in this amazing universe belongs to God; he doesn't need us to give it back to him – it's all there for us to enjoy. [10:27] By the same token, if you are offered hospitality by someone who doesn't share your Christian convictions, and it's an invitation you don't want to turn down, of course you must go along and cheerfully accept whatever they serve up at the table; don't feel you've got to enquire into the origins of every morsel set in front of you. [10:28] But if there's a fellow believer there and he comes out with, 'Hey, I recognise this shoulder of lamb, it comes from yesterday's sacrifice in the temple of Castor and Pollux!' then you probably ought to refrain from eating it as a

matter of conscience. By 'conscience' I don't mean that you've suddenly decided that it would be wrong for you personally to tuck into that plateful; just that alarm bells have started ringing in someone else's religious sensitivities, and it is a matter of Christian love not to offend their very real scruples. It's a delicate balance to maintain, this: on the one hand I'm perfectly free to eat whatever I like without asking awkward questions and embarrassing my host; but on the other hand I don't want to rubbish someone else's faith convictions. I don't think we ought to judge one another if we get it wrong occasionally in ethically neutral cases. [10:30] I'm so grateful to God for all the good things of life – does anyone have the right to cast doubts on my commitment to Christ if they happen to see me enjoying the normal pleasures of existence?

10:31-11:1 ³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – ³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. **11** ¹ Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

Vertical and horizontal

[10:31] The cross-shaped life operates vertically and horizontally. Vertically, it gives a Divine perspective to all our regular human activities. You and I aren't just bodies to cram with food and drink for the purpose of earthly sustenance, we're God's creatures formed for his friendship and delight. Wherever I go today, I'm serving a purpose beyond myself; I'm like a mirror turned towards the sun, reflecting his lifegiving light and warmth in everything I do. I just long for the people I meet to realise for themselves what a great God he is, how good he is and how wonderfully right he is in all his ways. [10:32] So there's a horizontal dimension to my everyday life as well: I'm going to come across people of different religious traditions, especially my own Jewish compatriots; I'm going to bump into thoroughly secular folk for whom the idea of a God doesn't make any sense at all; and in particular I'm going to spend time with fellow-believers like you who form Christ's body on earth. I don't want a single person to have cause for saying, 'That fellow Paul put me off any desire for a relationship with God by his arrogant and insensitive words and attitude.'

Rescue operation

[10:33] Living for Christ in the power of the cross doesn't just mean being nice and friendly to everyone I meet; it's far more than that. If I treat my fellow human beings simply as means to my own advantage and convenience, I've missed the whole point of my being here on earth. There's a rescue operation going on, and you and I are called to be part of that, because if we don't put ourselves at God's disposal today, a lot of people are going to miss out on the chance of eternal life. [11:1] If you start thinking, 'Oh, Paul's a full-time travelling missionary, I couldn't possibly take him as a model for my own life,' just consider this: I had to become a new person when I met Christ. I had to stop putting my own concerns first and reorientate my life-attitudes round his concerns. If he could make that self-humbling move from heavenly glory to the agony of the cross, simply because of his love for us, how could I cling to my privileges and comforts in the face of his call to help complete his great enterprise? Jesus made his Father's will his only priority – can we do any less, if we still want to call ourselves his followers?

11:2-6 ² I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. ³ But I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered

dishonours his head. ⁵ *But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonours her head – it is the same as having her head shaved.* ⁶ *For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.*

Responsibility scheme

[11:2] This probably sounds like another Pauline beat-up, but it isn't meant to be. I think you're amazing, the way you can repeat everything I've ever said to you, and the care you take to preserve my instructions exactly as I gave them to you – this shows a rare fidelity which must please the Father's heart. [11:3] However, there are some matters which I didn't have time to attend to, and one thing that seems to be bothering you is the question of whether women should have their heads covered when you all gather for worship and fellowship, just as they would when appearing at any public event. Rather than telling you simply to conform to cultural expectations, let's explore the theological basis of what might otherwise be a matter of personal preference. In a society where very few people acknowledge the authority of the One True God, and where consequently immorality flourishes and individualism runs riot, the church of Christ has an opportunity to demonstrate the Divine order of things. [11:3] It's the opposite of anarchy, where there is no guiding will and everyone does exactly as they please. In the responsibility scheme of Christ's kingdom, each man is accountable to Christ, each woman is accountable to a man (either her father or her husband, just as in ordinary society), and Christ has made it clear that he is accountable to his Father. This isn't to say that women haven't got direct access to God through Christ – of course they have – what I'm concerned about is that in each person's life there should be a guiding will, and that none of us should go ahead with what pleases us, as if we weren't accountable to anyone.

Head-coverings

[11:4] Now let's apply that to the public exercise of prayer and speaking God's words in the context of Christian fellowship. If a male person were solemnly to veil his head while doing this, he'd be dishonouring Christ as his great High Priest, because as you know, only priests veil their heads while conducting a sacrifice – and Christ has made the one single sacrifice for us on the cross. [11:5] Now women, too, have the right to pray and to speak God's inspired words, but they should do it with a covering on their heads, because otherwise it's as if they were saying defiantly, 'I'm throwing off the authority of any man who is responsible for me, and I'm saying this in my own right.' It's as blatant an act as if she were to cut her hair really short and declare that her vow of obedience was ended, as Nazirites do. I'm putting all this quite strongly because we're talking about the spiritual meaning of outward acts and appearances. [11:6] If a woman isn't prepared to put on her head covering in the Lord's congregation, then she's demonstrating her rejection of authority as clearly as if she were to get a really close haircut and look like a man. So that's the choice: either cut your hair off, or wear a head covering. I imagine common decency would suggest that you do the latter!

11:7-12 ⁷ *A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.* ⁸ *For man did not come from woman, but woman from man;* ⁹ *neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.* ¹⁰ *It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.* ¹¹ *Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.* ¹² *For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.*

Male and female together

[11:7-9] If you find that argument a little strange, here's another line of thought based on the Genesis creation stories. Go back to before the Fall, and you find two complementary accounts of

what God was thinking about when he got round to putting human beings on the earth. Firstly, they were to represent God himself in their essential character and role: male and female together were to exercise governance of the physical world, and as the Psalmist says, 'the crown on their heads was the honour and glory that God alone can give'. To fulfil that high responsibility, man and woman were to be equally dependent on God, and to reflect his extraordinary love and care for the whole of creation. But then we find, looking a little more closely, that the man (Adam) is created first, and is given moral freedom to decide whether or not to choose God's will in preference to any short cuts he might want to take. It wouldn't have been appropriate for him to wear any covering which might suggest that he could operate independently of God – there was to be that direct relationship of trust and obedience, the creature looking to the Creator for guidance and strength. (His failure to observe this meant that a second Adam had to be found, a Son who would restore the original relationship and remove the curse of death.) So far, so good; but then it is specifically noted that the man couldn't do this on his own – he needed a 'companion-helper' to enable him to reach his full glory and stature. So woman is created, and note the symbolism: she is moulded not only 'from the man', but from his rib-cage, the part of the body closest to the heart – a man's wife is his intimate soul-friend. She is there for him, and without her he can't be what he was meant to be. But even so he comes first in creation, which means that he is ultimately responsible for her; she isn't meant to operate independently of him.

[11:10] That, incidentally, sheds light on the strange story in Genesis about angelic beings being attracted by beautiful women and having children by them. This wasn't what the Lord had intended; in fact the whole scheme had gone badly wrong, so he decided to make a new covenant arrangement with Noah, a God-fearing man with his wife and family. The shawl on a married woman's head is an unmistakable sign that she is answerable to her husband and him alone, even if another man with angelic qualifications happens to turn up. Quite a witness to modern-day Corinth!

Complementary and interdependent

[11:11] So let's get back to our fundamental principle. Man and woman are complementary and interdependent. If this is true from the primal creation of the human race, it is also true in the new creation in Christ. The stupid male boast 'I thank God I am not a woman!' is utterly inappropriate for Christians. Marriage is a demonstration that not only does the woman find fulfilment in having a partner, it's equally the case that the man finds similar fulfilment in her partnership. [11:12] The Genesis story doesn't stop with the emergence of the woman from the man's body; it goes on to describe the generation of the man from the woman's body, with Eve exclaiming 'I've given birth to another human being' (in this case Cain, whose name means 'acquired by grace') and she thanks the Lord for this amazing gift and for his help in the whole process of child-bearing. This is God's plan from the beginning; it is not invalidated by the Fall, and it has governed male-female relationships ever since. It finds its supreme expression in the love affair between Christ and the church – but that's for another time.

11:13-16 ¹³ Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? ¹⁴ Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵ but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering. ¹⁶ If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice – nor do the churches of God.

Good witness

[11:13] So this isn't just a matter for each individual to make up their mind – it's a communal decision. Is the church being a good witness in society if it allows women to address prayers to the Almighty without their heads being covered? Surely it's the opposite – it implies a rejection of male authority, which in turn is a rejection of Divine authority. [11:14-15] And while we're

talking about heads and hair, you only have to look at the comparative lengths of men's and women's hair to realise that if a man grows his hair long, unless he has some special religious reason for doing so, he's dishonouring his male status; whereas for a woman to have long hair is a natural expression of her beauty and God-given character. It isn't given her just to look sexy; it's a kind of inbuilt head covering which is a sacred sign of her relationship firstly to the God who made her, and then to the manfriend who depends on her exclusive companionship. [11:16] If you ask, 'So why does she need to wear an extra, artificial sign of authority in church?' I would have to reply, 'You can make a big issue out of this if you want, but this is the way we do things, and it's the way all the churches I've come across do things, and God hasn't yet told us not to. End of matter.'

11:17-22 ¹⁷ *In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.* ¹⁸ *In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.* ¹⁹ *No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.* ²⁰ *So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,* ²¹ *for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.* ²² *Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!*

Terrible example

[11:17] Now there's another set of instructions I've got to give you, and that's regarding your gatherings that take place on the first day of every week. If you expect me to congratulate you on the way you conduct these, you're in for a bit of a shock. They set a terrible example, when they should be occasions when everyone can grow into greater Christian maturity. [11:18-19] I dealt with this at the start of my letter, but it's so critical that I'm repeating what I said there (unless you've sorted it out already which I doubt). It's about these cliques that you immediately form into as soon as you arrive at your church meeting. I can't believe this is actually happening! Well, I suppose I can, because when there's false teaching in a fellowship the Lord often allows groups to solidify round certain individuals, so that it becomes obvious which people are scripturally sound and which are way off track. But whichever way you look at it, it's a scandal.

Spiritual snobbery

[11:20] Then there's another thing that's happening, which again I find it difficult to believe. You arrive at the appointed hour, and I'm talking about your evening meetings when you've announced there's going to be a celebration of the Lord's supper. Now the usual thing is for this to be a frugal, almost token meal, supplied either by one person or a small group, when we all go back in heart and mind to that amazing evening, and it's as though the Lord himself is presiding over the new Passover. [11:21] But now look what is happening: as soon as the 'meal' begins, everyone produces a tasty dish they've prepared beforehand and starts tucking in! Well, I say everyone, but some are too poor to be able to do this, and consequently they sit there with their tongues hanging out while others stuff themselves, and even worse, some get only a sip of wine while others knock back cup after cup and may even end up roaring drunk.

[11:22] It isn't as if you better-off people haven't got your own homes where you can go and let off steam, and as far as I'm concerned you can eat and drink to your hearts' delight in your own dining-rooms and ornamental gardens. I just wonder if you aren't displaying almost a spiritual snobbery, making it clear that the church which the Lord bought with his own blood is socially beneath you. At the very least you're failing to show respect to folk many of whom are on their financial beam-ends and who live in tiny rented garrets in the slum quarters of the city. I really

don't know what more I can say to you if you insist on behaving like this. If you imagine I'm pleased with you, you can think again. I'm absolutely disgusted!

11:23-26 ²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.' ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Night of all nights

[11:23-24] Let me take you back to that night of all nights when the Lord was giving us the new covenant. I wasn't there myself, but we've got it on unimpeachable authority, and it's an essential part of the teaching I deposit with every church I establish or visit, as I did with you. Jesus has gathered the Apostles together in the first-floor room for the Passover meal, but it's a different kind of Passover because not only does it look forwards instead of backwards, but one of his inner circle is about to leave the room to set the fatal trap for his Master. In a very real sense Jesus himself becomes the Passover lamb. He knows exactly what he is doing. He takes an ordinary loaf of bread reverently in his hands, and breathes a word of devoted gratitude to his Father. Then he breaks it into small pieces, one for each of those present, and explains what it all means in stark and unforgettable words: 'Bread nourishes the body; but this food is different. It's my life for your life, my wounded body for your healing. This is the first of many, many times when you're going to eat this simple meal and feast your minds and souls on what I have done for you.'

New covenant

[11:25] So far, so good. But then, to make his meaning utterly clear, later on in the supper when you would normally hear the traditional words pronounced over the cup of wine, he cradles it in his hands and says, 'This drink too is different. It's the new covenant that was foretold all those years ago, God's own promise signed with the life-blood of his Son. My death for your life; my end for your new beginning. The drinking from this cup, too, you will repeat many times, and it will remind you how far I am prepared to go in my love for you.'

[11:26] That was it. Just a few words. But it started a habit which wouldn't die out till he came back again. Followers of Jesus got it into their heads that in some way they might not ever fully understand, the foretold and fulfilled death of their Master is always going to be the supremely important thing to hang on to. Repeating this totally ordinary act of eating bread and drinking wine together isn't a meaningless ritual, it is telling themselves and everyone else that Love has given itself to the uttermost. The old God has died; the new God is here, hasn't ever died, returns again and again, and one day will reign as acknowledged Lord over the whole created order.

11:27-34 ²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and ill, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world. ³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together. ³⁴ Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment. And when I come I will give further instructions.

Different spirit

[11:27] You may think I've finished, but I haven't, because things are going wrong right at the heart of this incredibly important faith-celebration. How could you possibly turn it into a self-indulgent orgy? Don't you realise that if you start playing around with this central symbol of our faith, and turning it into a display of self-importance and pride, you're just like those Sanhedrin worthies who thought they were ever so in there with God when they were really voting to get rid of him. It wasn't Jesus they were condemning to death, it was themselves. [11:28-29] They were blind – they couldn't see who it was standing in front of them. So if you think you can treat the Lord's supper like a Roman dinner-party, you're as blind as they were, and just as guilty of spitting in the face of the God who is welcoming you to his banquet. Here's my recommendation: before you turn up to the Christian meal, spend a few minutes thinking. Man, woman, whoever you are, open yourself up to God; ask the Holy Spirit to show you what he doesn't like about you, particularly in your attitude to your fellow-believers. Then you will partake in a quite different spirit, realising how very much you need that morsel of bread, that sip of wine, because they are a matter of death and life to your soul. And not only to yours, but to those who gather around you at the common feast. Because in the most extraordinary way, that little knot of believers becomes Christ, ready once again to walk the streets of the world, helping, telling, loving people into reconciliation, not letting the demons think they can run the place.

Worship gone wrong

[11:30] I gather that you're having quite a few problems with people not feeling well on the Lord's Day, or suffering from long-term illnesses which have remained impervious to healing, and that in fact you've been mourning the loss of an unusually high number of your members. I just wonder whether this could be a sign that there's something fundamentally wrong at the heart of your worship. [11:31] You've grown complacent and you can't see that there might be anything wrong with the way you do things. You've stopped listening to what the Spirit is telling you through his Word, and so the Lord has no option but to get through to you by other means, including temporal judgment. [11:32] As long as we keep ourselves open to the Lord's correction, yes we may experience his hand of discipline upon us, and that's not always a pleasant experience, but at least it results in greater Christlikeness; whereas if we resist what he is trying to tell us, we put ourselves in the same category as the unbelievers all around us, and as you know the only prospect they face is eternal and irrevocable rejection from his presence.

[11:33] So, speaking as a fellow-member of the family God loves so dearly, here's my recommendation: go on holding your fellowship meals on a regular basis, but resist the temptation to go into your little cliques as soon as you arrive. Mix up the seating at table and allow anyone to sit where they like. [11:34] Don't make the Lord's supper your main meal – don't come on an empty stomach, have something back at home before you turn up. It would be such a shame if God's people were actually meeting to earn his displeasure, rather than to discover and walk the way of his will. There may of course be other factors at work, and when I arrive, as I fully intend to, I'll sort out those as well.

12:1-3 ¹ Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols.

³ Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed,' and no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.

Deceptive spirits

[12:1] Which brings me to another, related issue: the different ways God brings his word directly to you through gifts of the Holy Spirit. I said at the start of this letter that it's a matter of

profound thankfulness to me that you have such a rich experience of these gifts. My dear Corinthian brothers and sisters, I really shouldn't have to lecture you on this topic – but I understand there's still quite a bit of ignorance around, so a short refresher course won't go amiss.

[12:2] The first essential is to distinguish clearly between false gods and the One True God. They can't speak; he can and does. Before God shone his light into your hearts through his Son Jesus, you and your pagan friends used to go off to temples and shrines and profess allegiance to all kinds of gods and goddesses which, as you now know, don't actually exist and certainly can't tell you what to do. [12:3] Even so, behind these man-made, voiceless statues there lurk deceptive spirits (as I've already reminded you) which can take a person over and make him or her shriek 'Have nothing to do with that evil Jesus – he's under God's curse!' It should be quite obvious that this isn't God's Holy Spirit speaking! So if someone turns up in your meetings and starts saying that kind of thing, you should realise that far from being a divine utterance, it comes from the father of delusion and lies. On the other hand, if someone stands up and talks about Jesus being Lord of all, and how great he is, and how we need to trust and obey him, you can be pretty sure that it comes from the Spirit of truth himself. That's what happened when you first became Christians: the Holy Spirit opened your eyes to who Jesus is and what he has done, enabling you to confess him publicly as the God who is Lord.

12:4-6 ⁴ *There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them.* ⁵ *There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord.* ⁶ *There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.*

All dependent on the Spirit

[12:4] Next point – don't make the mistake of thinking of some people as being more 'spiritual' than others. We're all dependent on the Holy Spirit for who we are and what we do for God. It's like a large sailing ship where the crew have different roles assigned to them: some attend the sails, some the sheets, others take turns at the helm, still others are engaged in repairing, servicing, lookout duty, swabbing the decks – but the force that moves them along is the same utterly vital wind, without which they couldn't make any progress at all. The Holy Spirit not only imparts the forward movement for the Church as a whole but trains and equips each member for the work they are needed to do. [12:5] Or here's a well-run business or trading outfit: the employees each have their own specialisation and contribute to the firm in various ways, and probably work long hours as a result; but they're all responsible to the Boss, and even if decision-making is delegated, it's ultimately the person at the top from whom everyone takes their orders. That's what's meant by the Lord Jesus being Head of the church (we've thought about this already). [12:6] The last picture is the family home with a wise and affectionate father at its head, where adults and children all have their different amounts of physical energy and capacity: some can move large items of furniture or equipment, others can only manage light tasks – a woman who is child-bearing shouldn't take on highly energetic jobs, because she needs all her strength for the incredibly demanding business of bringing another human life into the world and nurturing its early development. God the Father knows how we're put together and what we're each capable of achieving; it's as we look to him alone and put ourselves under his loving care that we can all fulfil our potential. Leaders need reminding not to play God with the people in their charge – that's the surest way to bring the whole enterprise to a grinding halt. Contrast all this with the pagan idea that every function in life is presided over by a different spirit being or daemon, and you'll get what I'm driving at.

12:7-11 ⁷ *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.* ⁸ *To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same*

Spirit,⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit,¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

Amazing profusion of gifts

[12:7] Which leads on to the next point. I've been saying that the church of God works by Spirit-power, and it's as each of us goes to Christ for his orders that the whole thing goes ahead effectively. We are all Spirit-driven and no-one has more of the Spirit than anyone else. However, some gifts are more 'in your face' than others (and God has showered these upon you Corinthians in amazing profusion) because the normally unseen and behind-the-scenes Christ-Spirit chooses, for his own purposes, to appear in ways that are clearly supernatural. Once again I must stress that this isn't in order to show that some people are super-spiritual while others aren't – it's to build up the church as a whole in its task of confronting the powers of evil and standing firm in a world that is bent on its destruction. All the following examples will be familiar to you folk at Corinth, but once again I must stress that it doesn't mean you're more special to God than anyone else, it's simply that the ways he chooses to reveal himself are entirely under his own control; and it is the one God who is operating, not a multiplicity of gods or a different spirit-being for each manifestation. It's the Jesus we know moving among us, setting the truth free to work and setting us free at the same time.

Examples of gifts

[12:8] So then, some of us find that we are given a message for the church which may or may not be straight from Scripture, but it's tailor-made for the situation of the moment and reveals the mind of God for us all collectively. It isn't something we make up ourselves, it comes by the Spirit stirring us up to speak certain words of wisdom for the needs of the moment. Or the church, or individual Christians, or even unbelieving visitors, may need to become aware of facts and realities that only God can reveal, so our gracious and all-knowing Spirit of truth gives someone words of insight that perfectly match the situation. [12:9] Or maybe the church is hesitating whether to proceed in some venture or other, and the Spirit inspires someone or other to speak out confidently and encourage everyone to trust God to do the apparently impossible. Or someone has fallen ill or had a nasty accident (Christians aren't immune to physical ailments), so a group of believers gathers round them and lays hands on them with prayer; their recovery isn't due to special powers residing in particular Christians, it's Jesus bringing healing just as he did in Galilee or Judea.

[12:10] I could multiply examples of the ways the Spirit works tangibly in a fellowship, often through individuals who find they can work for God in striking ways – for instance, by exorcising evil spirits in the name of Christ, or by predicting what is going to happen in the near or distant future, or by exercising special discernment where spiritual motivation is concerned; some may find that they can worship and pray in languages unknown on earth, or sometimes in actual foreign tongues, while others may be able to explain what has just been said. [12:11] I'm going to say a bit more about this shortly, but what I would stress in all such cases is that it's not different agencies taking over human faculties (with possibly destructive results), it's the Jesus-Spirit of the One True God carrying out his will in immediately practical ways. The Lord gives people particular abilities which they don't have naturally, and it's entirely up to him who he gives them to and what needs they are enabled to meet.

12:12-14 ¹² *Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ.* ¹³ *For we were all baptised by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or*

free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ And so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

Diversity in unity

[12:12] ‘But, Paul, isn’t there still a danger than some individuals, or some groups within the church, might start thinking of themselves as specially favoured by God because he has chosen them as recipients of these admittedly very striking gifts?’ Not if you get your basic theology sorted. The church is the body of Christ, all right? We can’t see Jesus any longer, because he’s at God’s right hand; but he’s still here on earth actively involved through his Spirit in the physical and visible structures of his gathered and scattered people. Bodies are wonderful things. They are a diversity in unity. They’ve got all kinds of different limbs and organs and connections, yet they are very clearly a single item. It’s exactly the same with Christ and his church; in fact, the church *is* Christ on earth, as I discovered at a particular crisis in my life. [12:13] Some of us are Jews, others are Greeks or Romans; some of us are slaves either by birth or by circumstance, others are free citizens; the point doesn’t need elaborating, but we are a quite extraordinary mix of categories that would normally find it quite hard to work together harmoniously. Yet each one of us without exception has received the Spirit at baptism and has been incorporated into the body of Christ; each one of us has taken the Spirit of Jesus into ourselves, like putting a cup to our lips and drinking a deep draught of refreshing and lifegiving water, so that in a very real and vital sense we are in Christ and Christ is in us. It’s not that some of us have received one brand of Spirit and others have received a different brand – he’s exactly the same Spirit in and for each of us. [12:14] Yet just as the human body consists not of one type of limb but of many, so Christ’s body on earth consists of many individuals who have differing abilities and functions.

12:15-20 ¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. ¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

Labouring the obvious

[12:15] At the risk of labouring the completely obvious, I’m going to illustrate this in the simplest possible way. Imagine the parts of your body talking to each other as they walk along. Your foot is limping slightly because it’s been a long day, and it says wistfully, ‘I just wish I were a hand, because hands are much more useful for the body to do things with; in fact sometimes I feel I don’t belong to the body at all.’ And the reply comes, ‘Sorry mate, but you definitely are part of the body (unless you get chopped off, which would be sad), and you’ve got a job to do which no other part can do – imagine walking ten miles on your hands!’ And the foot feels a bit better after that. [12:16-17] Then the ears strike up: ‘We’re really depressed, because all we can do is to listen all day long; we never get a chance to see anything, we’re just flaps of thick skin with hair flopping over us.’ And they get the immediate retort, ‘If you weren’t there doing your particular job, the person you belong to would find life much more difficult, because no other part can deal with incoming sounds like you can. You’re just as necessary to the whole body as the rest of us. If your human person consisted of one enormous eye rolling along the road, how would it receive verbal communications? And for that matter, if your human were composed of a single ear, how could it survive if the house caught fire, because it wouldn’t be able to smell the smoke in time to escape?’ [12:18] When God in his supreme wisdom designed the physical body, he arranged for it to have a variety of limbs and organs, each of which would have its distinctive characteristics and be adapted for its particular function. [12:19] That’s as true for beetles as it is for humans. If a body consisted of just one single limb, it wouldn’t be a body at all, it would be a monolith or

something. [12:20] I hope you get the general idea so far as the church is concerned: diversity in unity, as I said. Many different parts, but one single body.

12:21-26 ²¹ *The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!'* ²² *On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, ²³ and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, ²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honour to the parts that lacked it, ²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.*

Parts of the body

[12:21] And this leads me on to my final point: interdependence and empathy. Let's continue to eavesdrop on the conversation between the parts of the body. The eye is a handsome and talented fellow, and he starts to get ideas about his own indispensability; so he turns to the hand and says, 'I can do so many things that I don't need you at all.' To which the eye replies, 'All right then, pick up that sweetmeat you are focusing on so intently, and put it in our human's mouth.' Meanwhile the head is loosing off to the feet about how clumsy they are, always tripping over things and needing washing and so on, and how much better it would be if they were retired from service; at which the feet gently point out that if it weren't for them, the head with all its lofty thoughts and ideas wouldn't be able to get to the next council meeting. [12:22] Even the bits which look more fragile and vulnerable, like the heart or the lungs (if you could see them), are so absolutely vital that they need protecting by a stout ribcage; [12:23] and (says he, warming to his theme and probably overstating his point), things like toenails which in themselves aren't particularly attractive we make sure are clean and neatly trimmed, while – apologies to any naturists among you – most of us make sure that our private parts and our navels, which in themselves aren't visually beautiful, are given appropriate and seemly apparel to conceal them, [12:24] while we feel no need to cover up those features of our appearance of which we are justly proud.

Empathy

I hope I've made my point abundantly clear. Every part in the body needs every other part, and by the genius of our Creator the whole organism is a glorious mixture, with parts that are hidden away being given just as much respect and dignity as those that are conspicuously on show. There's the church for you! [12:25] And that's why internal division and conflict are so ruinous, because the way the body performs at full capacity isn't by tearing itself into little independent pieces, but by different parts of the assembly acting in support of other parts, and servicing them when need arises, for instance when there's a wound or a broken limb, and the nerves and tissues adapt to the crisis and rally round to help in various ways. [12:26] That's what I mean by empathy: when one member of the body feels pain for some reason, the other members don't just shrug their shoulders and get on without it, they rally round in compassion and offer what help they can. The converse is also true: when one member of the team goes up to receive a medal, the rest of the team are (or should be) absolutely delighted, and there's a general celebration.

12:27-31 ²⁷ *Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. ²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. ²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? ³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? ³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.*

Multifarious organism

[12:27] So let's round this all off by applying it to the church we know. It's a single body, yet a multifarious organism; an orchestra of many sections, yet playing together harmoniously under its conductor. That's how Jesus intends his people on earth to be, at Corinth or anywhere else. None of you are the whole show by yourselves; yet each of you has a vital part to play. [12:28] Looking at the Church as a whole, then, we can see how God has arranged it so that it functions in a dynamic way. It's like a party of travellers setting off on an expedition. You've got the apostles of Christ leading the way, making sure we're following the footsteps of Christ. With them are those with prophetic gifts, discerning God's will for the present and able to see round the corner ahead where necessary. Then there are people who can explain things simply and clearly so that the company knows where they are and what they need to be doing; they can also show their fellow-pilgrims how to use the old maps, what features are permanent and which are obsolete. Meanwhile as crises arise, as they are bound to do, there are folk who can channel God's power directly to meet urgent needs at exactly the right time. This happens particularly when lives are being turned around, or when the Spirit comes in an obviously powerful way. When bodies or minds get ill or wounded, God equips certain individuals and groups with specific ministries of healing. Some people have practical gifts of providing resources or managing finances; others are natural leaders and organisers. And as the travellers proceed, they sing the songs of Zion, sometimes using well-known lyrics, sometimes uttering Spirit-given sounds, but always centring on our wonderful Lord and Master. [12:29-30] The point I'm trying to get across is that we can't all be apostles or prophets or teachers or miracle-workers; it is simply not the case that everyone can go around laying hands on people to get them well; not everybody can speak in tongues or interpret what another might be saying in a strange language. God's gifts are just that: abilities he chooses to bestow on this person rather than that, never in order to favouritise or prioritise one over against another, but all for the purpose of keeping the expedition moving forward under the direction of its unseen Leader.

CHAPTER 13: THE KING'S HIGHWAY

12:31b-13:3 ^{31b} *And yet I will show you the most excellent way. 13¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

Divine discontent

[12:31b] We've been thinking about the unity and interdependence of Christ's body, his Church, and how wonderfully varied the contributions of all its members are meant to be. I've been encouraging you to recognise the gifts each of you has been given, but I would just say this: mix in a little divine discontent. Go to the Lord in the spirit of someone asking to be interviewed for a new job. Tell him you'd like to do more for him, and be as specific as you like: 'If there's any chance of me being used, for instance, to lead someone to faith in Christ, or to teach a small Bible class, or to bring comfort to a distressed soul, then please, Lord, can I put in an application? And could I just have a small rise in my salary so I can support that work amongst feral street children? And while I'm about it, would there be any chance of my leading a church plant in the estate over there?' God loves and honours this kind of ambition, and there's nothing wrong with it; as I said, I would urge and encourage it. The church needs committed and trained workers at every level, and particularly in the areas of greatest responsibility.

I've stressed unity in diversity, but now I want to go on to unfold the heart of God for a greater and deeper level of unity, because without it even the most gifted church is sooner or later going to fall apart at the seams. It's what the Lord Jesus left as his most precious legacy to his scared and quarrelsome disciples, the 'new commandment' (as he put it) to love one another. Love. Intentional, crazy, reckless unselfishness.

The imperative of love

[13:1] 'But Paul, is this just another gift, like tongues, or prophecy, or having money to give away? Or is it something different entirely?' I have deliberately interrupted my long and careful diatribe on spiritual gifts, which the Lord may or may not allocate to individual Christians according to his own will and the needs of the local church, to remind you of what I've said already about the absolute imperative laid upon every follower of Christ: to walk the way of love.

Impressive but hollow

The gift of tongues, exercised lovelessly towards those who hear it, is meaningless noise. Some people have a facility for learning foreign languages (or can even speak them miraculously if the occasion demands it); some find themselves pouring out praises in melodious utterances which seem as if one is sharing in the worship of the angelic hosts in the very presence of God; others find they can give talks on difficult subjects which use just the right words and expressions for the level of their hearers' understanding. I myself have experienced most of these gifts and thank God for them. But if I use them in the slightest degree to boost my ego or to foster a reputation for cleverness or imaginative presentation, I might as well be strutting around the town banging a deep bass gong like the Asiatic cult-worshippers we get over here, or clashing cymbals together like those professional mourners you hire for funerals. Very impressive, but utterly hollow, least of all showing a genuine concern for the people they are supposed to be ministering to.

Using gifts to serve others

[13:2] Then again, prophecy is a major gift through which our loving and wonderful God can speak into a contemporary situation or directly to someone's deepest concerns. The same goes for words of knowledge which can unravel people's perplexities and deliver amazing insights as if they were straight from the council chamber of heaven. Or, to take our Lord's words about faith which can move mountains, there are people who are granted such intercessory power that apparently insuperable obstacles disappear like a puff of smoke when they pray about them. I'm talking about gifts with which some of you folk at Corinth are familiar and exercise faithfully for the Lord. But that's the point. Start exercising them for yourself, and not in compassion for others and service for Christ, and all the power drains into the ground quicker than the time it took Delilah to shave Samson's head. I'm not joking – the other day we had a case where some Jewish exorcists were using the name of Jesus like some magic talisman to demonstrate their power over an evil spirit, and they ended up thoroughly humiliated and needing hospital treatment. You have been warned!

Super-spirituality

[13:3] Worst of all, I might decide that in order to be super-spiritual to the highest degree I am going to sell everything I possess and donate the proceeds to the poor. I could argue that this is what our Lord required of the young aristocrat who came up to him asking the way to eternal life. Or probably the most self-sacrificial thing anyone could do would be to go into the middle of the market-place and turn oneself into a ball of fire to demonstrate one's supreme commitment to God's cause. But look at all the people who would get harmed in the process, starting with one's family and friends; how could I possibly justify it as fulfilling the will of a God whose essence is

love? One drop of the unguent poured out by Mary of Bethany was worth more than all the cash hoarded by Judas, because she did it for the Lord who was going to lay down his life for her. That's the true nature and motive of devotion. Anything else, and you risk waking up at the day of judgment and finding that your whole life has been a waste of time.

13:4-7 ⁴ *Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* ⁵ *It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* ⁶ *Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* ⁷ *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

A love beyond human capacity

[13:4] What I'm trying to say is that gifts, even the greatest of spiritual achievements like winning hundreds of people for the Lord, are worth absolutely nothing in the economy of heaven unless they are exercised solely and totally for his glory and by the power of his Spirit. And that means being possessed by a love which is beyond the capacity of fallen human nature. There has been only one person in history who has consistently lived that kind of life, and that is Jesus himself. Let me remind you of a few stories about him, which I wish someone would research properly and then we wouldn't get some of the nonsense that is going the rounds.

Jesus stayed longer with people than seemed humanly possible. All my apostolic friends had long ago given up on Judas, but Jesus gave him the favoured portion at the last meal and called him 'Friend' at the moment of betrayal. This wasn't naivety or tactical kindness, it was going the second mile with someone who didn't deserve the slightest consideration or compassion. Jesus didn't just talk about love, he walked the whole long road for every single one of us because he had that kind of heart.

Not one of us

Love helps people. Jesus did good wherever he went. Once he took a break outside his usual mission field of Galilee and was looking forward to a few days off, when a pagan woman turned up complaining about her unmanageable daughter. The disciples told her to get lost and even Jesus played reluctant for a while. Then he caught the woman's agony under her banter and tore up the rule-book. That same Spirit-inspired goodness can be ours.

Nothing slams the door on love quicker than party spirit or thinking you're keener than the other lot (I went on about this a few pages back). Jesus never allowed that. I've been spending a few days with the apostle John, and he told me about a couple of times when he was guilty of this kind of thing and Jesus dealt with it deftly and memorably. The first was when someone who wasn't a card-carrying disciple was being used by God to rid people of demonic forces, and John suggested he be told to stop because 'he isn't one of us'. Jesus simply said 'Anyone who isn't against us is for us.' Then on their way to Jerusalem they encountered some antagonistic Samaritans and John and his brother zealously asked Jesus to burn their houses down. Jesus looked at them completely amazed and said something like, 'I'm actually here to save people, not to destroy them. Let's try the next village.'

Self-importance

If you're being used to help people, for instance financially, don't clog up the love channel by telling everyone about it. Jesus saw really saintly Pharisees (I knew some of them) making sure they had a sizeable crowd around them when they tossed a few coins to beggars. 'If you're doing charitable works,' Jesus said, 'do them for God's eyes alone, not for self-advertisement.' Otherwise love quietly tiptoes out of the room.

Beware of self-importance. You can't love people if you're always thinking how much more 'spiritual' you are than the next person. Inside every apparently humble person there's a large bullfrog longing to croak. Genuine lowliness comes from the Spirit of Christ who said, 'I am gentle and humble in heart'.

Sexual relations

[13:5] While I'm doing this plain speaking about love, I'd better touch on relations between the sexes in a Christian fellowship. Love of the kind that comes from the Spirit avoids flirtation or suggestive words or behaviour. One of the things that really got up the noses of Pharisees like me was the way Jesus included attractive women in his band of followers. There must have been something going on. But there wasn't. Ask Mary Magdalene and she'll tell you that Jesus never behaved improperly towards her. In fact he set her free to be herself, in a way no one else ever had. There isn't a hint in the records (those of reliable provenance) of sexual scandal among the disciples. Otherwise how could we even begin to talk about holiness?

Unselfishness – impossible?

Love of the Jesus kind is utterly unselfish. This may seem obvious but it requires clear-minded intentionality as I said a few pages ago. If Jesus had thought of his own interests for even a moment he would never have gone to the cross. 'But this is completely impossible!' Not where God is concerned. This isn't a requirement just for a few specially advanced saints. Jesus regularly told his undecided hearers that if they followed him it would mean crucifying their own self-interest. The trouble with the Corinthian scene is that your leaders aren't modelling self-denial and consequently everyone settles with what makes them comfortable. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you examine your hidden agenda. Then experience the joy of aiming to please God first, others next and yourselves last, if at all.

Love buries misdemeanours

Losing one's temper. Watch Jesus in that last week of his life, dealing with devious questions, let down by his disciples, misquoted by witnesses, bullied by ignorant soldiers, jeered at by bystanders – and he stayed cool. Yes, he chased moneylenders out of the temple, mercilessly slated religious hypocrites and turned a fig-tree barren, but those who witnessed it never said 'He's lost it,' only, 'What if this is the way God himself feels?' If you want to love people, don't bite their heads off, don't get sour with them – particularly if you're married to them.

Loving someone doesn't mean your relationship is going to be perfect. You're going to let each other down. So do you start keeping a tally of the number of things the other person did wrong yesterday, last week, last year? Peter thought he was being incredibly restrained if he only let fly after the seventh offence, but Jesus said, 'Don't even start counting.' If it's serious, deal with it on the spot; if it's trivial, forget it. Love doesn't dig up past misdemeanours, it buries them beyond reach. If God sent our sins to the grave with his Son, who are we to resurrect them?

Getting into trouble

[13:6] It's so sad when a relationship deteriorates to the point where one person raises three cheers when the other gets into trouble. John told me an amazing story about Jesus' sensitivity on this point. The spiritual police had got hold of a married woman they'd surprised in bed with her lover; the law of Moses said she should die and their hands were already curling round some meaty stones. They were literally dancing with glee because they'd sniffed out this flagrant breach of the rules. Jesus simply said, 'And what about you? Pure as driven snow?' The truth hit them like a battering-ram and they all tiptoed home to think about it. Jesus looked the woman full in the face and told her she was now free to lead a new kind of life, because that's the secret of true happiness: letting the Lord of truth find you a way out of the mess. But don't, whatever

you do, join the 'holier than thou' party; that's the surest way to drain the love and the joy out of your Christian life. We're all in it together.

The supreme example

[13:7] One more example, the supreme one. You can't begin to plumb the depths of love until you look at the cross of Christ. It's so comprehensive that it's four-dimensional. It's wide enough to embrace the whole world, because it bears and covers over the sins of the human race throughout space and time. Its roots go deep down into the soil of faith, because the Son never for one moment doubts the goodness of his Father; even at the point of utter desolation God is still 'My God', and the closing moments are full of childlike trust. Its upward extent reaches through the stifling darkness to a glorious future – the hope of Resurrection and Paradise. Its forward gaze holds steady through emotional anguish and physical agony, because this Lover is not going to give up until the last sheep is brought safely home and the task of salvation finally accomplished.

13:8-10 ⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

The one thing left standing

[13:8] Love is never eclipsed. It remains undimmed throughout eternity. It is the one thing that will be left standing once the demolition of the old creation is complete. In fact it is the fundamental principle of both the old and new creations. Let's look at the 'must have' list for the world to come: what about those gifts we've been talking about, prophecy, tongues, words of knowledge, that kind of thing? Will we have any use for prophetic gifts in heaven? Well, no, because it's arrived, it's all here and now, there's no future we need God to speak into through us. Prophecies were valuable while we were building the kingdom and struggling to get the details right, but one day past, present and future will all have fused into one glorious Presence, and the old bits of rusty scaffolding will be thrown on the scrap-heap.

The same with the gift of tongues, about which I want to say more in a few moments. The secret language of worship some of us share from time to time on earth will be the common dialect of heaven which all will know, use and understand. Tongues as a puzzling phenomenon which some experience and others do not – if you personally don't, rather than being jealous of those who do, thank God for the gifts he has given you – will be a thing of the past.

The same applies to the insights and almost uncanny awareness some are given to help others in need. The message that comes to you direct from God, as it would seem, via someone else's words. This is another gift he has allowed us to have to help us as we walk by faith through this world's confusion – but it simply won't be required in the new world, as a candle is snuffed out at the dawning of day. [13:9] The point is that however deeply we may peer into the recesses of God's will, we are being permitted to see only a tiny fraction of the full reality. This is one reason why spiritual gifts come and go. Knowledge, prophecy, that kind of thing, are all well and good in their place, but one day they will be folded up and put away for ever. [13:10] It stands to reason, doesn't it, that when the state of perfection is reached, all the stages that led up to it are no longer needed. When you reach the end of the journey, the maps can be put away. When the building is complete, the scaffolding comes down.

13:11-12 ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Riddling reflections

[13:11] I was a small child once. I used childish language, I had childish attitudes, and the way I worked things out was with a childish logic. Once I reached adulthood, I dispensed with those childish ways of thinking and consigned them to the attic together with my once so beloved toys. I'm not saying that once we reach a certain level of Christian maturity we can look upon tongues and prophecy as things of the past – they are honourable servants that can still provide a valuable service. I'm talking about the new creation when we shall see the full truth for the first time and for ever.

[13:12] Have you ever tried to see your reflection in a copper bowl? However highly polished the bronze surface is, the image is still grotesquely distorted and almost unrecognisable. 'Do I really look like that?' you ask. So too with God. Will the One I long to see always remain so opaque and puzzling? In this life, yes. All our relationships here on earth are to a lesser or greater extent unsatisfying, because they were never meant to be ultimately satisfying. But there's a life coming, Life with a capital L, when we won't be frustrated any longer by riddling reflections – we shall gaze full into his face with nothing in-between.

Foretaste

You think I'm fantasising. Well, there has already been an anticipation of this unclouded vision; and it was granted to Moses, not just once, but regularly. Now, the bottom line is that, however much one longs to behold God's glory in this mortal life, for any sinful human being to see the Divine Presence directly means instant death. But Moses is going to come as close as is humanly possible. It may have something to do with his astonishing humility and purity of motive, or it may just have been a foretaste, a momentary lifting of the veil to encourage all of us to keep seeking God, because one day the unmediated access will be fully ours.

Till then, we must be very humble. We may be tempted to make comparisons between the degrees of wisdom different people possess, but the fact is that none of us really understands very much at all. Add up all the insights of all the sages throughout human history, and they amount to an infinitesimal percentage of the full picture. Compare this with God's own one hundred-per-cent knowledge of all things, including his perfect understanding of every human being who has ever lived. He knows me inside out, all illusions stripped away. So, what a relief it will be to experience at first hand the whole truth about our wonderful Lord and Master, the full extent of his love, the beauty of his eternal being, the sheer goodness of the One-in-All.

13:13-14:1a ¹³ *And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.* ¹⁴ *Follow the way of love.*

Abiding realities

[13:13] Meanwhile we must all walk the mountain path of life, often steep, narrow and uncertain. There are no easy formulas for reaching our goal. What we need is a firm footing, a handrail to hold on to, and someone to be our companion and guide. Faith is the rock under our feet, the certainty we cannot see, the word we have to obey. Hope is the fragile thread we cling to, telling us that there is a destination ahead of us, a dawn after the endless night. And love is the knowledge that we are not alone on our journey, that we have an ever-present Friend who both encourages us and in whose strength we can keep company with those who journey alongside us. These three – faith, hope and love – are the abiding realities during our mortal lives. Then one day we shall enjoy the view from the summit, and the path and the handrail will have done their job. But our Companion will still be there with us, the only difference being that we shall see him in his full glory. So when I tell you to follow the way of love, I'm not recommending a religious system or a set of moral rules, I'm pointing you to Jesus, the Shepherd-God who gave himself for each and all of us. If he made no distinctions, how can we?

CHAPTER 14: PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH (continued from Ch 12)

14:1b-5 ¹ Eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

Prophecy and tongues

[14:1b] The trouble is, we tend to evaluate our fellow-Christians on the basis of their spiritual endowment, by how significantly God seems to be blessing them or using them in the work of the kingdom. In particular, we often get it wrong about the relative importance of speaking in tongues as compared with giving an inspired word in ordinary language (what we call prophecy). Now don't get me wrong – I'm not saying that spiritual gifts are not important for the life of the church; they most certainly are, and I would encourage everyone to set their heart on acquiring and practising these gifts which the ascended Lord Jesus began to pour out on his people at Pentecost. But, as I say, we may need a bit of guidance about these two gifts in particular.

My first point is that the church needs prophets and teachers. That is, people who are equipped and skilful in bringing the word of God on a regular basis to the gathered people of God. I was one of these, with Barnabas and others, at Antioch, and it's a ministry many more folk should be aspiring to. [14:2] Now when someone breaks into angelic utterance in a church meeting, there is intimate worship going on between that person and God, but no-one else can join in that worship, because what they are speaking about is shared between them and God alone through the Spirit; its meaning isn't revealed to anyone else, and maybe not even to them – they are receiving private reassurance that God loves them and that they are precious to him. [14:3] Whereas the words of a prophet are in intelligible human speech (or ought to be!), bringing divine encouragement and assurance and guiding the church more perfectly into the will of God. [14:4] Who receives more honour in the city – the citizen who puts up a little maisonette for his own exclusive use and enjoyment, or the skilled architect who constructs an elegant and practical apartment block for dozens of people to move into with their families? Or to change the metaphor, the tongues speaker is like someone tucking into a good, healthy meal all by themselves, whereas the speaker who brings God's word is spreading a table with nourishing life-support for everyone present.

[14:5] I'm not trying to disparage the gift of tongues, in fact it would be marvellous if everyone were given that ability (then we wouldn't have nearly so much bickering and posturing), but the point I'm making is that we need more people who can bring an uplifting message in normal speech. The benefit of the latter is out of all proportion to the benefit conferred by the tongues speaker. Of course, if someone else interprets what the tongues speaker is saying, then it might be to the general advantage; but the crucial thing is that the church of Christ needs to hear his word on a regular basis, and apply it to their lives, and inspired preaching and testimony does this, whereas tongues utterance doesn't.

14:6-12 ⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

Confusion vs revelation

[14:6] Apply this, then to the present situation, where I am intending to visit you wonderful people in order to give you teaching direct from God. I stand up to speak, but out of my mouth there pours an angelic cascade of completely unintelligible words. What use is that going to be to you? I might be transported to realms of ecstasy and experience the intimate presence of God, while you would be left confused and frankly rather underwhelmed. On the other hand, if I speak in everyday Greek, I can still bring you a new revelation direct from God, or a message that hits the nail on the head in a difficult situation, or some guidance for the weeks and months ahead, or most precious of all, a scripture that sheds fresh light on our wonderful Lord Jesus. Then you would really get some solid benefit and glorify God in your day-to-day lives.

Call to spiritual warfare

[4:7] 'But the human element so often obtrudes in normal utterance, whereas tongues speaking communicates directly with the Divine!' I hear this so often; yet apply it to skilled music-making, such as flute-playing or lyre-playing. Here the human element is minimized; but there still has to be a meaningful tune. If the musician were to play a random series of notes, all you would get would be a monotonous jangle rather than harmony that delights and uplifts the spirit. If we need sense and sequence and colour in music, how much more do we need them in speech? [4:8] 'So isn't tongues speaking a peculiarly beautiful heavenly music, because it's stripped of its earthly imperfections?' Yes, if all you want from your teaching sessions is to bathe in waves of beautiful sound – but what about the challenge and the call to spiritual warfare that is inseparable from Christian growth? Here's an army drawn up for battle and waiting for the signal to charge; if all they hear is a confused series of trumpet noises, however well-played they are, not a single soldier is going to stir – they're going to look at each other in puzzlement and try to work out what their commander wants them to do, and the enemy is going to catch them unprepared.

Divine communication

[4:9] Your tongue and mine are given to us to convey meaningful speech; if we simply jabber at one another, how are we going to understand anything anyone says? We might as well be shouting at the winds of heaven. [4:10-11] 'Sorry to go on objecting,' says the tongues speaker, 'but with all the different languages in the world – and Corinth is full of foreigners whose native language isn't Greek – wouldn't it be wonderful if we could find a common language to share, and aren't tongues that universal Christian language?' Yes, it would be wonderful to have a single world language, but no, tongues can't fulfil that role, because no-one understands what is being said, not even the speaker! To turn your example on its head, though there are undoubtedly thousands of languages and dialects in the world, none of them is nonsense to the people who speak them; but if I don't know the precise force of the words used in another language, the speaker and I are going to be complete foreigners to one another. This happened to

us in Lycaonia: when we had healed the lame man, the crowd started shouting something about us being their gods in human form, but we didn't grasp what they were on about and we nearly ended up having sacrifices made to us, which wasn't going to save anyone. This is the whole point of the Pentecost miracle: if the Spirit wants to get through to people, he speaks in their own language, makes sense to them as they are, not by using meaningless sounds. We need to work really hard at Divine communication; tongues are useless where cutting-edge mission is concerned.

Go for the big gifts

[14:12] So what's my advice to you at Corinth? I don't need to tell you to aspire to spiritual gifts, because I know how much you value them and practise them; but I do want you to realise what they are for. The Spirit longs above all to build his Church right where you are, a temple put together with living stones, the dwelling-place of the living God on earth. You people are not only the materials from which that temple is made, you are also the construction team, actively involved in its development. It makes sense, therefore, to maximise church-building gifts like teaching, prophecy, words of insight, everything I've been talking about. Don't get hung up on the lesser gifts, spectacular as they are – go for the big ones!

14:13-19 ¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. ¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. ¹⁶ Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an enquirer, say 'Amen' to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? ¹⁷ You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified. ¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Spiritual and rational

[4:13-14] Let me give you a relevant example. You may be someone to whom the Spirit has given the ability to worship God in non-earthly languages. It's wonderful that you can do this, but you ought to go one step further and ask the Lord for the ability to make sense of what you find yourself saying. The problem is that only part of you is engaged in worship: your mouth and tongue are doing a lot of work, and your spirit is praying like mad, but your rational mind is standing by completely idle – you're having a glorious experience of communicating with the Divine, but you probably won't come away with a greater understanding of God or indeed any memory of what he has said to you (I admit there may be exceptions to this general rule). [14:15] In fact, you're having only half the experience you could be having – and not only are you missing out, but others are too. What you need (and it's something I had to learn myself) is to be able to pray spiritually and rationally at the same time; or if it's singing in tongues that we're doing, then you should be singing with understanding while you are making heavenly music. Then your whole worship will be considerably enriched. And so will other people's.

Engaging with God's word

[14:16-17] The problem is, that there are those in the congregation who (whether they choose to or not) have no endowment from God in this particular area. Why should this exclude them from participating in worship? It's all very well for you who can speak in tongues to be pouring out blessing and praise to God, but how can they (the uninitiated ones) say heartfelt 'Amen's' to your rapturous prayers of thanksgiving? They haven't the slightest clue what you are so grateful about. You are doing a great job of glorifying God, but the person next to you remains firmly

earthbound and probably goes home without getting anything from the gathering. Which means that that part of the building hasn't grown – such a pity!

[14:18-19] 'So, Paul, do you think we oughtn't to be using the gift of tongues at all?' Absolutely not! In private worship I use it a lot, in fact God has given me a richer experience of this gift than any of you folk at Corinth – this isn't a boast, it's a sober fact – but let me tell you frankly, when we all meet together for communal worship and teaching, I'd rather utter five seconds' worth of rational, intelligible speech, than a whole hour's worth of angelic language. That's how important it is to engage with God's word, to understand what he's telling us about his Son, the Word made flesh.

14:20-25 ²⁰ *Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.* ²¹ *In the Law it is written: 'With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.'* ²² *Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.* ²³ *So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and enquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?* ²⁴ *But if an unbeliever or an enquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all,* ²⁵ *as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'*

Grown-ups, not children

[14:20] My dear fellow-Christians, once again I plead with you just to do some growing up. Don't leave your brains at the door when you come to a church meeting. You're adults, not tiny children! Well, as far as dabbling in evil is concerned, of course we should all be as innocent as babes at the breast; but in this matter of thinking through difficult issues we need to have our wits about us. [14:21] We don't screen the people who come to our meetings for the amount of faith they have, and there will always be those who haven't started believing in Christ, or who are open-minded enquirers, or who need God to speak to them about some area of their lives. What effect is tongues-speaking going to have on such people? Scripture gives us a clue, if we turn to the prophet Isaiah: he complains that the leaders of Judah haven't heeded the Lord's insistent message to find rest and peace in trusting him, because they think it's too elementary, too childish; 'All right then,' he says, 'if you won't listen to me in plain speech, then I'm going to babble at you in foreign languages like Assyrian, and even then, instead of waking up and realising that judgment is upon you, you won't take a blind bit of notice.' [14:22] Apply this to modern Corinth: people are going to come along needing desperately to hear the simple appeal to trust in Christ for salvation; if all they get is gibberish, they will conclude that God has turned his back on them and that he doesn't want them to understand the slightest thing. In short, tongues are a 'Keep Out!' sign to non-believers (even if they are an encouragement to believers). What is really going to convict unbelievers is a word of God that they can fully understand, spoken in plain language by a gifted prophet.

Think of outsiders

[14:23] Do you really want your meetings to be just a holy huddle for insiders? You may be enjoying yourselves with everybody rabbiting on in unintelligible languages (I exaggerate because not everybody has the gift of tongues, as I've said), but supposing an outsider happens to drop in, or suppose a believing wife has managed to get her sceptical husband to attend – the conclusion they will come to, if they haven't come to it already, is that Christians are completely out of their minds. [14:24-25] Now let's imagine a different scenario: there's no tongues speaking, only one person after another getting up to share in ordinary, simple words what God has told

them to say. The effect on the sceptic or outsider is going to be profound, because each message is going to be a hammer-blow from the Holy Spirit, showing how wrong they are about the things that really matter, as God shines his light on the murky places in their lives and they discover things even they didn't know about themselves. That's the moment when they're going to fall on the floor and acknowledge the Lordship of Christ. It's what God has always wanted for his people, to be the place where complete foreigners are going to hear the message about the One True God, and fall on their faces, and then stand up and tell everyone, 'Yes, I realise it now, there is a God and he's right here.' General rejoicing all round!

14:26-33 ²⁶ *What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.* ²⁷ *If anyone speaks in a tongue, two – or at the most three – should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.* ²⁸ *If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.* ²⁹ *Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.* ³⁰ *And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.* ³¹ *For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.* ³² *The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.* ³³ *For God is not a God of disorder but of peace – as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.*

Utter chaos

[14:26] The trouble is, you may be lovely people and you are, but to be frank, there is utter chaos in your meetings and that is so dishonouring to God. A typical Lord's Day assembly consists of one person after another (or even two or three at the same time) getting up and sharing something they've been given. Someone over there might be singing rhapsodically through one of the Psalms; someone else might be reeling off a series of verses from the Law or the Prophets; here we've got someone describing a vision God gave them last night, while in row three there's tongues-speaking going on, with two people in row five offering competing interpretations. It's all so heady and exciting – but is anyone learning anything from it? Whatever God is trying to tell you is drowned out in the hubbub. How can the congregation possibly be growing under such an anarchic regime? I've never known another church like it. [14:27] Here's what to do – and remember, I'm all in favour of the Spirit's gifts being exercised, but only in a way that deepens everyone's faith and understanding. Fine for people to speak in tongues, but let's have a maximum of two or three such messages per assembly, in sequence not all jumbled together, with each utterance receiving one interpretation and one only. [14:28] If the speaker starts up and finds nobody is interpreting, then they shouldn't continue – it's fine if they pour out their hearts to God in the privacy of their own houses, but it's self-indulgent to inflict a stream of unintelligible language on the whole church.

Example of orderliness

[14:29] As for prophetic messages, again let's keep it to two or three, with everyone else on the lookout for possibly misleading instructions – each prophecy, remember, should be tested by scripture, because you can't believe everything you hear these days. [14:30] It might so happen that while the first person is in full flow, a second person gets an overwhelming impulse to interrupt them; in that case the first person should break off what they are saying as a matter of courtesy. No-one has the right to hold the floor to the exclusion of anyone else – and some people, quite frankly, go on far too long! [14:31] Normally, anyone who is given a prophecy should be allowed to hold the floor without interruption, as long as (and this is the key point) the church as a whole is learning more about Christ and receiving definite encouragement in their Christian lives. [14:32] It's not like the pagan cults where people writhe helplessly in the grip of

their ecstasy and have no idea what they are saying – the gifts of the Holy Spirit are consistent with rational control by those who exercise them. If you find you're spouting nonsense you should sit down and shut up. [14:33] The God we know isn't the author of random or uncontrolled ferment – he's the Creator-God under whom everything happens in a definite order and who preserves the calm of unity and harmony. I'm not asking you to be exactly like all the other churches, because you're not – but I have to say that the others set an example of orderliness which you would do well to follow.

14:34-35 ³⁴ *Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.* ³⁵ *If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.*

Chattering women

[14:34] For instance, there's too much chattering from the female element in the congregation. How do I know this? Because some of the women themselves have said so! I'm not talking about women exercising prophetic gifts or praying out loud or speaking in tongues – that's fine, as I've said, as long as they're dressed decently – what is unacceptable is unrestrained comments or interruptions or casual conversations, not only coming from groups of women sitting by themselves but also resulting from some sitting amongst the men in the church and chatting volubly about this and that. Those brought up in the Jewish tradition find this frankly shameful. Now I would be the first to champion the freedom and equality that comes from our faith in Christ; but the church should be setting an example to the rest of their contemporaries, and if we tolerate a babble of female conversation during our times of worship and teaching, we are effectively demonstrating that the conventions of normal society simply don't apply in church. [14:35] All of us, men and women alike, are in church for one purpose and one purpose only, which is to listen to God's word and respond to it in faith and obedience. If we want to discuss what we've been hearing, the place to do that is back at home where we can express our opinions freely and ask questions that may be troubling us. I have to say that a married or single woman having an intimate discussion with someone else's husband in a church meeting is highly disruptive, if not likely to lead to actual scandal.

14:36-40 ³⁶ *Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?* ³⁷ *If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.* ³⁸ *But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.* ³⁹ *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.* ⁴⁰ *But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.*

Honourable tradition

[14:36] Please try to see your place in a long and honourable tradition. I've already made the point that God's word from way back still has vital relevance for us today. It's not as if God's revelation suddenly started at Corinth, or that you folk are somehow the first recipients of Divine instructions about how we find salvation freely in Christ. There's much that's original about your church worship, I've never denied that, and it's wonderfully rich and refreshing – but it shouldn't be out of kilter with the way God has consistently moved among his people. [14:37] The same applies to certain people's prophetic utterances – however spiritual and profound they may seem, if they clash with the clear instructions you are getting from the Lord through my letterwriting, they have not been sent by the Lord and they have no validity. [14:38] I know some of them question the authority of my teaching, but that's par for the course, and quite frankly the best thing you can do is to ignore them, because God doesn't take any notice of them either.

Not letting things get out of hand

[14:39] So let's sum up what I've been saying about prophetic gifts and other manifestations of the Spirit. You wonderful people are very much in my heart, and I want you to have all the kingdom presents the Father is longing to bestow upon his worldwide family. Chief among these is to have an abundant supply of dedicated and inspired teachers, who are in close touch with the Lord and able to express his mind intelligibly and powerfully. As I've said before, you should be setting your heart on having such gifts and continuing the scriptural tradition of God speaking to his people through prophetically gifted men and women. As for the gift of speaking in tongues, if people want to exercise it, fine, but keep a sense of proportion about it – it's not the be-all and end-all. [14:40] Above all, preserve a spirit of orderliness and seemliness in your gatherings. Don't let things get out of hand. You're the army of Christ, fighting his cause in an unbelieving and hostile world – don't let squabbling and indiscipline break out in the ranks!

CHAPTER 15: THE RESURRECTION PRINCIPLE

15:1-2 ¹Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

Revision course

[15:1] Now I want to concentrate on the biggest topic of all: the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I haven't said much about this so far, which is why I'm devoting a huge section to it now. I hope everyone's still listening, because this is where the action is.

I've tried to show you that the only way forward is to follow the love of Christ for one another; I've also gone into detail on matters of clarity and good order in worship, because it's important that you get things right. But, brothers and sisters at Corinth, I don't want you to be so obsessed with the different gifts the Spirit is so obviously showering upon you, that you forget the foundation truths that form the basis of your faith. So here's a little revision course, to remind you of the gospel I brought you in those first crucial days and months. It wasn't something you just listened to casually then consigned to the dustbin – you really took it on board and made it your own. [15:2] That was only a few years ago, I know; but are these truths as crucial to you now as they were then? Do you understand how your stability as a church depends upon them, indeed, how the salvation of each and every one of you is bound up with them? Don't you remember when I first declared the good news of Christ to you, I said repeatedly that you need to get a firm grasp of these things and *not let them go*? The only reason, then, for letting go of them, would be that they have turned out to be false; that the whole edifice of the Christian faith is built on such shaky foundations that it must inevitably collapse in a cloud of dust. I expect you're familiar with such attacks on your faith. Well then, how are you going to deal with them?

15:3-4 ³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...

Testimony of Scripture

[15:3] So let's get down to first principles. I did not invent this story. I heard it (as indeed you have subsequently heard it) from impeccable sources. I have cross-examined the primary witnesses of the death and resurrection of Christ. I have exhaustively studied the Scriptures and have repeatedly found these events predicted as the unalterable counsel and purpose of God,

revealed to us in the prophets and now gloriously fulfilled in our own lifetime. Also, as I never tire of telling everybody, I have experienced the risen Christ and heard the gospel from his own mouth. I'm simply a member of the relay team that has run with the news until it reached you; and I haven't dropped the baton, nor have I subtly changed it into something else that it wasn't to start with.

So what is this gospel we have always proclaimed? That as Jesus, God's chosen Messiah, hung on that cross, he was bearing away the sins of the whole world, yours, mine, everybody's. From Abel's firstborn of the flock, through Abraham, Isaac and the ram, the blood of the Passover lamb, the scapegoat sent into the wilderness, and above all the Servant suffering for the sins of the people – all Scripture testifies to the crucial transaction that took place on that day in Jerusalem. He paid our debt, he died our death. Our sins were buried with him.

Two nights passed and a third morning dawned. Despite the stone, the seal and the guard, the cave-tomb was empty. God the Father woke his Son from the sleep of death and Jesus was restored, not to the old mortal existence but to a new, invincible and inextinguishable quality of life. Again the Scriptures point unmistakably to this: Isaac rising unbound from the altar; the Holy One not abandoned to the realm of the dead; the forsaken victim delivered from the dust of death; the Servant seeing the light of life after going like a lamb to the slaughter; the Lord who revives the fatally wounded on the third day. You must have heard me preaching again and again on these texts!

15:5-7⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles...

Eye-witnesses

[15:5] The Scriptures, the Suffering Servant, the third day, the empty tomb – all this is impressive enough evidence for Christ's resurrection, but then there is the eye-witness testimony. People saw him, met him, threw their arms around him, conversed with him, ate breakfast and supper with him.

Call Simon Peter, the Rock man who had crumbled to pieces: he won't tell you much about it because it was so personal, but the Lord sought him out early on that first day of the week to make everything right between them; then he recommissioned him for a lifetime of grateful and sacrificial service.

Call the Twelve (Eleven really) and question them each individually about Jesus appearing in the Upper Room that first evening and again a week later. Ask Thomas why he's still with them.

[15:6] Call over five hundred witnesses (well, you'll have to get some of them back from the grave because they've given their lives for Christ, some of them, I confess with shame, martyred at my hands) who saw Jesus on one single occasion, and try to convince all of them that they'd had the same identical hallucination.

[15:7] Call a man called James, once the sceptical brother of the Lord; ask him why he's joined the group of praying followers less than two months after the crucifixion and is now leading the church at Jerusalem and calling his own sibling 'the Lord of glory' – and he'll tell you how Jesus met him and sorted him out once and for all.

Call the apostles again and try to make sense of the number of times the Lord taught them, commissioned them and promised them his unfailing presence. Then how he parted from them promising he'd come back soon.

15:8-11 ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Latecomer to the resurrection scene

[15:8] I could call plenty of others to the witness box, but there's one more I need to cross-examine: the present writer. If I keep going on about my own experience, it's because I don't want you to think my knowledge is all second-hand. I too met Jesus. It wasn't quite like the encounters I've cited, for the obvious reason that whereas they all took place while Jesus was still physically on earth (though, as I hope to show in a moment, with a body that belonged to the new rather than the old creation), mine happened after his Ascension. I suppose you could call it a Caesarean birth, a rescue operation after the normal time for birth was well past. (I've even been described as a freak or a monstrosity, who should have been stillborn.) But it was Jesus himself I met as I travelled the death highway, God's own life glorious and abundant, grace shining so brightly that while my spiritual eyes were being opened, my physical eyes were robbed of their sight. [15:9] Yes, I was a latecomer to the resurrection scene; so if I call myself an apostle, I want you to realise that not only am I the last one to be appointed, the final witness to the risen Christ, but I've been squeezed into the team at the last moment, a reserve player promoted from the bench. In fact I absolutely did not deserve to be part of the team at all, as demonstrated by my track record of murderous assault upon the Lord's own flock, the church he purchased with his own blood. The wolf turned shepherd – I still can't quite believe it myself. [15:10] The only word for it is grace, the extraordinary generosity of a King who refused to give a rebel his due comeuppance, who tore up the charge sheet against him and gave him the keys of the kingdom. That's what I am, an ex-prison warder; my job used to be locking up people against the light but now it's setting them free from their cells.

Please don't think I take God's mercy for granted – it's not a free ticket to an easy life. I've had to work my passage, I can tell you! At the risk of only slightly exaggerating, I reckon I've had a harder time of it than all the other apostles put together. But this doesn't make me a hero, in fact it's quite the opposite; I owe everything to the constant supply of the Spirit's unconditional love and strength, sufficient for every need, just the right amount of oil fed to the dry wick, to keep the lamp steadily burning through the darkest hours. [15:11] That's true for all of us; we're each engaged in our different ways in the one supreme task, loudspeaking the good news in every way possible, the story I've been outlining to you, the gospel you took on board as God's own truth, his rescue plan centred on Jesus, God's risen King.

15:12-19 ¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Romantic myth or fundamental truth?

[15:12] And here we come to a big, big issue that I gather is a further cause of division among you. Does resurrection happen, or doesn't it? When we announce (as we have done loud and clear from the very beginning) about Jesus meeting his death upon the cross, being buried and

embalmed, then at the summons of God the Father emerging from the sealed tomb and meeting his forgiven followers and sitting down to meals with them, is this all some romantic myth after all? Apparently there is a group of wise, enlightened people among you who realise that resurrections don't actually happen in this universe of ours, so let's treat it as a 'happy myth,' a story in picture language about Jesus' memory continuing among his disciples and inspiring future generations. Or something.

[15:13] There's a fundamental truth at stake here. Deep in the Jewish faith there is the tradition that everyone who has ever died, in the physical, mortal sense, is going to come back to life again at the great and final Day. It's there in the Scriptures, outcropping in Daniel, in Isaiah, in the Psalms, in Job. The Lord himself taught it and challenged the Sadducees about it. So it's not just some peculiar Pharisaic tradition that I'm clinging to, a ghost from the past that we need to exorcise by a return to rationality. You see why it's so important. If resurrection can't happen, as a fundamental principle of God's plan of creation, then clearly it doesn't happen, full stop. Jesus never left the grave. Everyone who dies, stays dead.

Where the logic leads

[15:14] Stay with this line of thought for a bit and see where the logic leads you. No resurrection, right? So even the Messiah doesn't come back to life. Jesus may have been the Messiah, but forget any idea that he might have returned from the grave. So when Paul and other poor, misguided apostles stand up in your market-place and start talking about the third day and all that, they're fantasising. [15:15] Worse than that, when they swear black and blue that God has given them this message, and say they're prepared to die for it, they are perpetrating a massive scam which is actually misrepresenting God himself. They are blaspheming against their Creator who couldn't possibly have made the universe, once you look at it with the enlightened eyes of sober reason, with such a colossal and crazy loophole. [15:16] Dead people start walking around again? It simply can't happen – and therefore it didn't happen to a man called Jesus, even if you tack 'Christ' onto him as a kind of superman title.

[15:17] Moreover (says our detractor, warming to the task), when you take them at their word and start believing all this rubbish, you're being led up the garden path. Your simple childish faith in Jesus being the Son of God and all that is exposed as just that: a nursery tale, nice enough in its way, but to be put in the attic with all the other toys once you reach maturity. And as for the idea that when Jesus rose from the dead, he left all our sins in the grave so that we could rise with him to a new life of holiness, sorry, that has to go too. Sin killed Jesus and left him dead, so you have to struggle on as best you can with his noble example to encourage you. Forgiven? Justified? Believe it if it makes you happy, but there isn't a shred of evidence to support such a belief, once you remove the resurrection from the pages of history.

Pathetic bunch of losers

[15:18] And so it goes on. Why, all that comforting stuff about Jesus bringing with him all your loved ones who have died, believe it if it helps to assuage the pain of bereavement, but sooner or later you've got to accept the plain fact that dust returns to dust and ashes remain ashes. Job was right: people don't rise again to a better life, when they're dead they stay dead, and life goes on without them until the universe packs its bags and declares 'end of story'.

[15:19] You Christians (so this version goes) may think you're on the winning side, trusting Jesus for your eternal salvation and all that, but actually you are a pathetic bunch of losers. You think you're going to go through death with Christ and come out the other side, when all you'll meet is one final and permanent full stop. The only comfort is, you won't ever discover how utterly misguided you were.

15:20-24 ²⁰ *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* ²¹ *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* ²³ *But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* ²⁴ *Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.*

Guarantee of more to come

[15:20] Now hear the other side of the story. What if Jesus really is the first person in history to have got up after being well and truly dead, through God's direct action? If he's the first, there are going to be others to follow. The first bound sheaf taken from the harvest-field has special pride of place, precisely because it's the guarantee of many others to follow. Life can go on for ever! [15:21] Death came into God's world through a single human being, so resurrection life comes through a second human being. Get hold of this absolutely fundamental principle. I'm not talking about the natural cycle of physical death and (in the case of plants and so on) reinvigoration, which may turn out to have been simply a kind of parable of the far bigger Life drama that is going on. Jesus didn't just return to the same old mortal existence when he left the tomb behind on that first Easter Day. He abandoned the old system and inaugurated an entirely new one. I'll try to explain what I mean.

Two representative men

[15:22] Let's go back to the Adam story in Genesis and the theology of the Fall. Adam, the first representative man, whatever you like to call him, was the captain of the human ship. His choices affected the entire complement, crew, passengers and all. His decision to take a short cut, rather than go the long way of complete obedience to God, was utterly disastrous both to himself and the whole boatload. The ship hit the rocks and all on board were flung into the freezing waters. We're thinking, of course, of the broken relationship that exists between Creator and created being. Only in his will do we have peace, light, life. Out of his will there is hostility, darkness, death.

Then a rescue ship is launched, whose captain is Christ, the second representative man. His mission is to thread his way among the dangerous rocks with no thought for his own safety, and to pluck as many as he can from the lethal seas. There is room on board for billions of people, as there has always been. We don't yet know the full number of the rescued. [15:23] All we know is that God has his own programme, centred upon Jesus Christ. We are impatient to see how this new scheme of things, a world of vibrantly alive people emerging from the chrysalis of a world of useless rejects, is going to work out. All we have at the moment is the sure hope generated by Christ's resurrection. But one day soon he is coming back to reign in his full glory; the great ship of salvation is going to tie up at the quayside and the King will step ashore thronged by all those he has plucked from the icy waters of death. [15:24] Then we will witness the grand closing ceremony (but really the inaugural ceremony of a new age entirely). In an act of supreme homage, our great Lord and King will take off his crown and lay it humbly at the feet of the One even greater than himself. The Son will yield the kingdom for which he gave his last drop of blood to the Father in whose love and obedience he has always lived.

You may ask, 'But what about all those earthly empires that have occupied the scene of history, with their pomp and swagger and power for good or evil? And for that matter, what about those even mightier angelic empires which have exercised such beneficent or destructive sway?' All finished. They have no more stage to strut upon. Their day is over. God's eternal reign is the single, solid reality.

15:25-28 ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For he 'has put everything under his feet'. Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

Coronation Day

[15:25] I'm not making all this up. It's there in the Psalms. For instance, in that great Messianic passage which our Lord applied directly to himself, the Most High Lord God says to David's Lord (who is the Christ), 'It's your coronation day! Take your throne next to me. Bring in your enemies one by one and receive their submission. Use their necks as your foot-rest. They will never trouble you again.' This has always been God's plan – and how long he has been prepared to wait for its fulfilment! [15:26] Death itself, of course, is the ultimate enemy. It has held the human race in thrall for so long. Jesus himself tasted its bitterness, suffered its double agony in Man for man. But now death's day is over. Its power has been finished, of course, ever since that final triumphant cry from the cross; now it's going to be removed from the scene entirely. It simply isn't going to be part of the system any longer.

Love rules

[15:27] And that brings us to another Psalm that foretells the final victory of the God-become-Man. On the surface this Psalm looks like a straightforward hymn of praise to God the Creator, and a reminder of our proper place as human beings in the wondrous order of creation. But as we now realise, it's all about Jesus. He's the Man who was once, for a short while and for the purposes of our salvation, put in a position of humility and subjection, but now is exalted to be King and Lord of all. Earlier I said that the apparent imbecility and incapability of a God who allows himself to be crucified is actually the most powerful force in the universe. Love rules, and the feet before which we must all one day bow still have nail-marks clearly visible in them.

The Kingdom of God

'But if Jesus is Supremo of the universe, doesn't that mean God is dethroned?' Don't get confused by ancient myths of the old gods losing their power to newer gods. The One Most High God has never resigned nor surrendered. Look at the actual syntax of this Psalm: the subject of the verb 'put under his feet' is God. If it's God who makes the arrangement, clearly he is the one exception to the arrangement. The author may act within his own play, but when the final curtain comes down he comes out and takes his bow. He never remains less than the one in charge of the whole enterprise. [15:28] Yes, the relationship of Father and Son in the whole scheme of things is a mystery whose depths we may never fully plumb even in eternity. We only have human ways of trying to express it. Even the word 'kingdom' has its limits, but let's use it and see how far we get.

It is 'the kingdom of God,' which means its king is God. Jesus said in parable after parable that the kingdom would 'come' fully when its King came back after a long absence. This could refer to his own second coming; but it could climactically refer to the moment when he has brought the kingdom to full completion, with all its uncountable multitudes – and then he will hand it back to the God over all, the Author of everything, from whom all existence flows and to whom all glory is due. Does this mean that the Son is in all eternity subordinate to the Father? Absolutely not! We are not talking about degrees of greatness, but about structures of command. Once the Son's job is done, once the kingdom has fully come, his temporary commission has been carried out. He can take his place in the centre of the throne, and reign in love. The Son and the Spirit can do what they have always delighted in doing, which is to honour and glorify the Father. It is a

return to the beginning, how things always were, always should have remained, and (praise God!) always will be. The war is won, the battles are over – now let the celebration begin!

15:29-34 ²⁹ *Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptised for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptised for them?* ³⁰ *And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour?* ³¹ *I face death every day – yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord.* ³² *If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'* ³³ *Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.'* ³⁴ *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame.*

Immediate applications

[15:29] But in case I get carried away, I've just thought of a couple of immediate applications for this resurrection hope. For instance, there's a practice I've heard of in some churches, though I don't encourage it myself, of holding a baptism service for those who have died before they can be baptised for themselves. They may be very young children who have sickened and died, or older people going through a course of preparation but taking ill or even dying suddenly in battle or something like that. Another believing Christian steps forward and undergoes baptism on behalf of the dead person. This is obviously a very solemn and sacred moment – but if there's no hope of a resurrection to come, it becomes an utterly pointless ritual. [15:30-31] Then there's my own personal angle on all this. As a Christian missionary I take my life in my hands. Not an hour goes by when I'm not in real danger of someone sticking a knife into me in the marketplace, or of getting arrested and beaten up. When I go through times like these, it makes all the difference to reflect that I'm doing it for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I'm doing it to show solidarity with you. In fact I'm proud to wear the badges of shame for people like you! [15:32] You've probably heard that a few weeks ago I was hauled into the theatre here at Ephesus and nearly torn to pieces by the crowd like one of those poor unfortunates being savaged by a pack of wild animals. What we have to go through for our God! But all this is actually worthwhile, because suffering and death don't have the last word.

Bleak alternative

Let me face you with the bleak alternative. Either there's resurrection, and a future, and eternal glory, and everything to play for – or there's blank nothingness, annihilation, wipe-out, and death the winner takes all. What you believe affects how you live. If you opt for the second of these alternatives, as my friends the Epicureans do, then you might as well fling caution to the winds and make appetite your god. If we're all going to die tomorrow, then we'd be stupid not to live it up today, cram our bellies with as much good food as we can, drink ourselves silly and do all the other things people get up to when the party's in full swing. [15:33] In fact there are plenty of these irresponsible hedonists around, and I would counsel you to beware of them: they are very charming, plausible people, delighted to number you in their company, always inviting you along to the next knees-up. I'm not saying don't try to win them for Christ – of course you should! – but don't let them make inroads into your self-discipline.

'Go around with scoundrels and you'll soon lose your high principles' – it's a well-known line in a popular sitcom, but it's not a joke in real life. I've seen many a promising Christian steered off the straight and narrow by candlelight dancing on a silver goblet or by an attractive set of eyelashes. [15:34] Wake up, believer! There are eternal realities at stake. God's ways aren't our ways, and a life of sin simply isn't an option. It's understandable for those who don't know

anything about our wonderful God to throw themselves into an orgy of unrestrained pleasure-seeking; but why should you cast away your birthright for a single tasty meal? Forgive me if I sound like a Stoic lecturer, but if it steers some of you away from the cliff-edge, it's got to be worth it. Or do some of you think there's no cliff-edge? Are you so confused??

15:35-41 ³⁵ *But someone will ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?'*
³⁶ *How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.* ³⁷ *When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.* ³⁸ *But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.* ³⁹ *Not all flesh is the same: people have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.* ⁴⁰ *There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another.* ⁴¹ *The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour.*

Knockdown objection

[15:35] Whenever I lecture on the subject of the final resurrection, there's always some eager young philosophy student who comes up with what he thinks is the knockdown objection to the whole thing: 'Ah yes, but can you tell us a bit about the mechanics? How exactly do dead bodies start walking around again? Either they're made of the same stuff they died with, in which case we've got a problem with funeral pyres where lots of corpses are cremated together and all their bits get mixed up (laughter from the audience), or they're made of a different stuff, in which case there's a problem with organic continuity and you have to posit a whole new set of physical laws.' [15:36] This sounds like a clever question, but if it implies that God (if there is a God at all) doesn't know what he's doing, then it's going to be the questioner who is the fool. I usually ask this kind of objector, 'Are you a gardener? Familiar with the processes of nature? OK, when you plant something in your flower-bed, what actually happens to the seed you start with? Does it continue to exist alongside the plant it is designed to become? Or does it lose its original existence in order to become a new form of life, continuous in essence with the old husk, yet containing a whole range of new potentialities?'

God of surprises

[15:37] When he has to admit that it's continuous but different, I take him over the same ground from another angle. 'Here you have a farmer who wants a field of wheat. Does he start with the harvest-field he's going to end up with? Or does he simply put down rows of shrivelled little objects that contain the nature of wheat, or barley, or maize or whatever, and then go about his other business while nature does her stuff?' [15:38] This way I try to make him see that what he calls Mother Nature or physical law or some other inanimate force is really God the Creator's grand design at work. God is continuously inventive, and the principle of seed-bearing plants is one of his fundamental inventions; it's the way things retain their own distinctive nature whilst having the potential to become something very different in design and capability. And we humans cooperate with him in researching the different treatments needed in processing different kinds of food, herbal medicines and so on. You can't second-guess God, or tie him down to a predetermined plan of your own devising – he is the God of surprises who will always stay several leaps ahead of your wildest imaginings.

[15:39] God's designs aren't drearily monochrome, they're infinitely varied, constantly adapting to new contexts and fresh requirements. Take the physical natures of human people, animals, birds and fish, all shaped according to their native environment, all developing attributes fitted to the modes of their existence. [15:40] The same goes for heavenly and earthly bodies. You see where my argument is leading, don't you? If God is fitting us for life in his eternal heavenly kingdom, he's going to give us bodies that are superbly appropriate for that existence. And they

are going to be absolutely glorious creations. Why, even in this old, provisional, natural creation, there are degrees of beauty and splendour; on a bright day after rain dewdrops glisten on the grass while the sun shines in a cloudless sky – yet you can catch the whole of the sun reflected in a single dewdrop. Sun, moon, stars all have their own peculiar strength and intensity – even the planets differ from each other in size, colour and luminosity. God isn't short of an idea or two.

15:42-49 ⁴² *So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable;* ⁴³ *it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;* ⁴⁴ *it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.* ⁴⁵ *So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.* ⁴⁶ *The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.* ⁴⁷ *The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.* ⁴⁸ *As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.* ⁴⁹ *And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*

New modes of being

[15:42] Well, then, why can't we see these natural processes as parables of the resurrection principle? What's dead doesn't stay dead, it turns into something else. Just as seeds have to die in order to become plants, so mortal bodies have to die in order to become immortal ones. [15:43] Here is an old person dying, and it's not a pretty sight; they're wrinkled and incontinent, so feeble that they can't do anything for themselves, resembling nothing so much as a shrivelled husk sinking into the ground to perish. Yet out of that human wreckage is going to awake such a glorious, beautiful, powerful and versatile new body that the indignity and incapacity of death will be entirely forgotten.

[15:44] We start with bodies that are equipped with the five (or six) senses, with intelligence, imagination, moral sense and so on – pretty impressive in their own way and well adapted to their physical and mental environment. But this isn't the body we shall end up with, not a bit of it. When the Spirit of God breathes God's own nature into a person, new modes of being become the order of the day. Don't make the mistake of thinking that our present mode of physical existence is the highest or even the only 'reality' – there's a spiritual reality to come which will make our present mode of being seem as flimsy as a wisp of dandelion. This is because God is himself the great 'I AM', and when the full spirituality of Godhead is breathed into our previously mortal frames we become possessed with his own unquenchable life-force.

[15:45] Let's go back to that key statement in Genesis about the creation of the first human being, whom we call Adam. Let's tell it like a children's story. Here is the Lord God with nothing much to do, and he's fooling around with a pile of mud as you might play with modelling clay – and he finds he's making a figure, in fact he's got a face staring at him with lifeless eyes. So he gazes full on at this face which he can't help loving, and his breath enters the pair of nostrils, and lo and behold there emerges a living, breathing soul! Now, however much we get to know about the origins of life and consciousness and personality, it's still a marvel and a mystery, and it depends utterly upon the relationship between a loving God and a creature who is given an independent existence from its Maker. A capacity for survival and growth in the demanding and testing environment of the natural order. Fast-forward the story to another Man, the one we call the second Adam, who comes breathing a new sort of life altogether, enabling those who receive it to survive and develop in the altogether different life-environment of eternity in heaven.

Two stages of humanity

[15:46] Let's be clear about God's plan here. The first Adam and Eve didn't receive the breath of eternal life right from the start. They had to live by faith and wait for God's moment for them to

receive Life with a capital L. As we know, they tried to take a short cut and blew their chance. That's why Jesus had to come bringing the Holy Spirit. [15:47] What we have, therefore, is two stages or levels of humanity. The first stage, Mark One, is creatures made (picturesquely) of mud and clay, emphasising their physical and earthly nature, impressive indeed, but lacking any capacity for breathing the air of heaven – until God chooses to give it to them and turn them into Mark Two beings who can live for ever. So the first gift of life is from the earth, the second is from heaven. [15:48] Thus you have two levels of human existence, two classes of people: Mark One, those equipped with the capacity for earthly life, Mark Two, those equipped with the capacity for heavenly life. Adam people, and Jesus people. Do you get the picture?

[15:49] Now apply all that to us in the first or twenty-first century of the new age of Christ. We started as Mark One people, descendants of Adam, bearing his image as the scripture says, marked with the stamp of (sadly, now fallen) earthly humanity. Through Christ we have already become Mark Two people, looking forward to the day when we can appear in the glorious Jesus-clothing ready for us in the heavenly wardrobe, and meanwhile experiencing the transforming work of the Holy Spirit as he gets us ready for that day. So here's the challenge: are we cooperating fully with this resurrection work of his? Or are we settling for the old pre-resurrection behaviour, with a vague hope that God will wave a magic wand and turn us into something different when the time comes?

15:50-57 ⁵⁰ *I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.* ⁵¹ *Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed –* ⁵² *in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* ⁵³ *For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.* ⁵⁴ *When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'* ⁵⁵ *'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'* ⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Miracle needed

[15:50] 'Paul, this is wonderful stuff, but you're getting me confused. One moment you say that believers in Christ are completely new creatures, the next you seem to suggest that there's still more to come. At the moment of death, will Christ have done his full work in me, or won't he?' Excellent, crucial question. I'm talking to people who are fellow-members of God's family. In Christ, by grace, we are Mark Two people, sure of inheriting God's eternal kingdom, right? But there is still the problem of the old Mark One Adam nature, mortal flesh and blood which is liable to temptation and sin, and which is corruptible up to the moment we die. We need to get rid of that old nature, once and for all – otherwise there is no way we can attain immortality. But by ourselves we can no more achieve that than we can fly. Flesh-type humanity stays on the level of flesh; the physical components out of which we are made disintegrate and become part of the earth once more. There is no way that the corruptible can suddenly make the huge leap into incorruptibility. Life snuffs out with our last breath.

[15:51] So you will appreciate that it needs a miracle for any of us to go on living after we've died. It just doesn't happen in the ordinary way of things. Now, listen to the deep, deep, secret plan of this God of ours who knows exactly what he is doing. All of us are going to die, we are going to reach the end of our lives and as we've already seen, we are going to sleep in the dust of the earth. Maybe some of us are going to be spared the actual moment of death because Jesus will have returned, but the principle is the same for all. What happens then?

Metamorphosis! Transformation!

[15:52] Just like that. Blink and you miss it. Think back to the original moment of creation: one instant there's nothing there, then comes the word of command, and the next instant it's all happening. It's like being on manoeuvres with the army: there you are fast asleep in your tent, dead to the world, then comes this unmistakable bugle-blast right in your ear, and you jerk awake and it's morning. Well, as with the old creation, so with the new: there's going to be another great wake-up call at the end of time and all the dead are going to rise from their graves never to sleep or die again. But we aren't going to be the same people as we were before we were dead – we're going to be completely different.

Total change

[15:53] This was always the plan and God's not going to alter it now. Suppose you go to bed this evening, and after you've put on your night clothes, you look at yourself in the mirror. Everything you see there is mortal, perishable, transient. It's simply not made to last more than a short space of time. Then you climb into bed and go to sleep. You wake up next morning and look in the mirror again, and you can't believe your eyes! You are the same person, but the body you're made of is immortal and the clothes you're wearing are resplendent. [15:54] A total change has taken place, designed and effected by our Lord Jesus Christ. Instead of our old mortal clothes being ripped off us leaving us standing there shivering and naked, we've been given a new set of Christ-made robes which are ideally tailored for the deathless life of God's kingdom.

How can I be so sure about this? There are two texts in Scripture that talk about the final overcoming of death. The first is in Isaiah, where death is compared to a poisonous drink which everyone on earth is going to be forced to drink; but then along comes the Sovereign Lord and swallows the entire potion in one gulp. If this seems a faintly ludicrous picture, remind yourself of that scene in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus is praying desperately not to have to drink that very same lethal cupful, brewed from the sins of the whole world. Yet he goes through with it. He swallows down the poison of death so that we will never have to. And what happens? The moment of Death's greatest triumph, as it gulps down the Prince of Life himself, is also the moment of Death's total and permanent defeat. Life has dissolved death from within.

[15:55] This links with a second Scripture where apparently total disaster turns into a glorious victory celebration. Hosea is lamenting, or rather the Lord God is lamenting, the irreversible downfall of Israel /Ephraim to the sins of idolatry and spiritual pride; judgment and destruction are inevitable. And at the very height of the crisis, when the Lord is calling upon the forces of Death and Hades to sweep down and exact just punishment upon the rebellious nation, his love for them wins the day and he finds the ransom himself. 'So where now is your rightful victory, O Death? Where is your lethal sting?' The suicidal plunge of the nation has been arrested by the overwhelmingly generous intervention of its true King. Tell me this isn't about the cross of Christ.

Eternal principles at work

[15:56] Yes, Scripture reveals eternal principles at work. There is a Law that runs through all God's dealings with mankind. Do the will of God and you live; resist it and you die. Death, that is the dissolution of our mortal and physical frames, would be harmless and benign if it were not for sin. Sin introduces an altogether more bitter element into death, because it brings us up against the judgment of God. I may think sin is harmless, a short-cut across the grass, a momentary departure from the path of obedience to a holy God; but then I see that the Law has slapped a 'No way!' penalty notice on my self-chosen route. The very same Law that graciously pointed the way of salvation has become an iron-clad adversary delivering the sentence of doom.

[15:57] So how did we end up on the winning side? It's all down to our Lord Jesus Christ. He himself took the full penalty of the offended Law upon himself. He had no sins of his own to suffer for, so he suffered for ours. He accepted the mortal sickness of death so that we should be healed. No credit to us – all credit to him. That is why we are standing here praising God with glad voices and from hearts full of gratitude. Love has won the final victory.

15:58 ⁵⁸ *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

Nothing we do for Christ is wasted

[15:58] This isn't some visionary dream far in the future distance. It's got practical and urgent relevance in the here and now. My dear, struggling brothers and sisters in the metropolis of Corinth, please realise how very, very greatly you are loved. God's love for you has foundations deeper than death itself. Settle your lives four-square on those foundations. Don't let yourselves be shaken by any earthquake, whether of persuasive false teaching, or human scorn and opposition, or apparently malign circumstance. We have a Lord who is utterly committed to working for the salvation of his world, and he has asked us to be his instruments in that work. Let's not hang back reluctantly; let's dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the Master's service. We are full-time, professional workers in the Lord's vineyard. It's hard work, yes, and the world isn't going to spare us suffering and discouragement. At times we may wonder whether it's all worthwhile. But nothing we do for Christ is wasted. One day we shall discover how he has been able to use even our feeblest efforts for his eternal glory. How many families was he able to feed from a single picnic lunch? And how many baskets of fragments were collected afterwards because Jesus didn't want a single crumb to go to waste? That's the kind of resurrection God we have. That's where our hope is centred in this world and the next.

CHAPTER 16: FINAL INSTRUCTIONS

16:1-4 ¹ *Now about the collection for the Lord's people: do what I told the Galatian churches to do.* ² *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.* ³ *Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.* ⁴ *If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.*

Intentional giving

[16:1] Just a couple of matters you raised in your letter. You want to know how to organise your collection of funds for the Lord's people at Jerusalem, who are still suffering from the effects of the recent terrible famine, so it might be helpful if I told you about the procedure I recommended to the churches I visited in Galatia and Phrygia, who have made a similar collection. [16:2] I don't want a last-minute scramble to find any loose change you happen to have; it's got to be thoroughly intentional. What I suggest is that every first day of the week, when we celebrate our Lord's resurrection, each of your households carefully lays aside an amount corresponding to how the Lord has prospered you over the past week. Put it somewhere safe, and keep proper account of it, then when I arrive (as I fully intend to) I will simply organise a central collection of all the individual funds. [16:3] Then there's the question of how they are to be taken to Jerusalem. Again we've got to be very careful about this. You must write letters of recommendation for a number of totally trustworthy brethren, and then they can escort the gift to the mother City. [16:4] If it is judged necessary for me to go along as well, then we can all go together. I don't think you need to write a reference for me as well!

16:5-9 ⁵ After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you – for I will be going through Macedonia. ⁶ Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

Immediate plans

[16:5-6] Which brings me to your questions about my immediate plans. I'm going to make a broad sweep north and west when I leave Ephesus, and travel through Macedonia visiting places like Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea and so on, and then come south to spend time with you at Corinth. I haven't any definite length of time in mind – it may be just a few days, or I might spend the whole winter in your company, which would be ideal. I'm sure the Lord has his own ideas about what's best for everyone! It should then be clear where I'm to go next: Jerusalem, or wherever. I'd really appreciate it if you could act as my resource base for that next stage in my journey – I and my team will need adequate provisioning, shoes mending, medical attention and so on. The only actual finance involved will of course be the treasure-chest of your collected funds.

[16:8] So the question is, when are you to expect me? Well, for one thing I'm not abandoning Ephesus for the time being – in fact, I'll probably stay here to celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, after which the travelling season can really begin in earnest. [16:9] How dangerous is it for me to operate here? We're on maximum alert, I have to confess. There are plenty of individuals and whole gangs who could cheerfully stick a knife into me at a moment's notice; yet at the same time I've never known such abundant opportunities for talking about Christ. The Holy Spirit is working powerfully, especially among the non-Jewish population who are realising the hollowness of the old pagan gods. It's as though the Lord has propped the door of the kingdom wide open with a massive boulder (thanks in part to your prayers, I'm sure), and until that door closes, we've got our work cut out right here in Asia.

16:10-11 ¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. ¹¹ No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.

Timothy

[16:10] Even so, as I said, I've been able to spare young Timothy, and you're to expect him any moment. He's quite nervous about turning up in your midst, so please give him no grounds for concern and treat him with the same exuberant generosity that you've always shown me; he's a really hard-working servant of Christ and he'll give you every bit as good a course of Pauline teaching as I would have done myself. [16:11] He may not cut a very impressive figure compared to some of your visiting lecturers, but he's solid gold, and I'm not having anyone devaluing the currency by making cutting remarks or suggesting that he's not up to the job. When he's finished his teaching assignment, give him a good send-off and make sure he and his companions get back here safely, because my current team is a bit depleted, and I could do with reinforcements. In fact I'm on tenterhooks till they get back here.

16:12-14 ¹² Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. ¹³ Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. ¹⁴ Do everything in love.

Apollos

[16:12] ‘When are we going to see Apollos again?’ I know some of you badly want this, because he has been such a help to you, and whatever our differences, we’re all working together for the gospel. Believe me, I’ve been trying really hard to get him to take a small team and include Corinth in his schedule – but you know what he’s like when he’s made his mind up, and he said no, he’s got other plans at the moment thank you very much, but that’s not to say that he won’t make the trip when he (under God) judges the time to be right. [16:13-14] In fact, he’s just walked through the door, and he wants to send you a message in his own inimitable hand. ‘Wake up, stand up, play up, stay up! Love whatever!’ Typical punchy stuff. Unforgettable. And thanks for the reminder, old friend and sparring-partner – without love, our lives are a waste of time.

16:15-18 ¹⁵ *You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord’s people. I urge you, brothers and sisters,* ¹⁶ *to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labours at it.* ¹⁷ *I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you.* ¹⁸ *For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.*

Stephanas and friends

[16:15-18] Now I’ve got a few messages of my own to finish off with. The first is a heartfelt plea to all of you at Corinth. I’ve got Stephanas and his two freedmen ‘Lucky’ Fortunatus and ‘Old Greek’ Achaicus here with me – as you know, they brought your letter to me, and they’re going to be bringing this one back to you. You will remember that the church in Southern Greece really began with Stephanas, because he was the first one to step up and be baptised, and of course his entire family and household were baptised with him. That was only the start; since then, I needn’t tell you how they have tirelessly put themselves at the disposal of the Lord’s people and provided service of every possible kind. You can imagine how delighted I was to see them when they turned up a few weeks ago! If you couldn’t all be here with me in person, I can’t think of any who would better represent you than these three. They’ve been a breath of fresh air to me here, just as they always have been back in Corinth. Now please listen: you’ve got to listen to them and do what they tell you. They’re classic examples of gospel-workers who will go to the ends of the earth for Christ; nothing is too much trouble for them. Please recognise them as true messengers of the Lord himself, that’s all I ask. There aren’t many like them.

16:19-20 ¹⁹ *The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.* ²⁰ *All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

Solidarity

[16:19] Every church I’ve visited, not only in Ephesus but throughout the whole province of Asia, has told me they’re praying for you and feel great solidarity with you. The church that particularly asks to be remembered to you is of course the one hosted by your old friends Aquila and Priscilla, who think of you constantly and whose devotion to the Lord Jesus is such an inspiration to me. [16:20] In fact, every Christian brother and sister here in Ephesus would like their name mentioned to you, but we’re rapidly running out of space. So just pause the reading for a moment, and everyone hearing this give each other a warm greeting (not too warm, mind!) to signify our togetherness in Christ with our brethren overseas.

16:21-24 ²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. ²² If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord! ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴ My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Personal signature

[16:21-22] Now I've grabbed the pen from my longsuffering scribe and I'm going to finish off the letter with my own illegible scrawl. Let me see – something pithy and challenging. Another one-liner from Apollos? 'You either love the Lord or you don't. If you don't, you're out.' Couldn't be clearer than that. Or what about this codeword that's going round the Aramaic-speaking churches: '*Marana Tha*, the Lord is coming back! Don't be too long, Lord!'

[16:23] Now, I'm going to end as I normally do. I commit you to the Lord's ever-present love; with him around, you'll never lack for anything. [16:24] We're together in Christ Jesus; I love every one of you. Signed, Paul.

CROSS-REFERENCES: 1 CORINTHIANS

References are listed in biblical order. Underlined: direct quotation from or reference to an Old Testament passage. *Asterisked: probable or possible allusion to an Old Testament passage or earlier part of the letter. Some references may be anachronistic in that Paul would not have known the text referred to, but they show a similar line of thought.

1:1-3 *Public beating* Acts 18:17. *Worldwide membership* Mal 1:11. *As I did myself* Acts 22:16.

1:4-9 *True of some of you* 1 Cor 6:11.

1:10-17 *Turned into Babel* Gen 11:1. *Sit at the feet of Christ* Lk 8:35. *Christ in the Scriptures* Acts 18:27-28. *More about him later* 1 Cor 3:4-6, 16:12. *Gospel for the Jews* Gal 2:8. *Soldiers gambling* Mk 15:24. *My dear Crispus* Acts 18:8. *Wonderful host Gaius* Rom 16:23. *I did baptise Stephanas* 1 Cor 16:15. *Job the Lord has given me* Acts 26:17b-18. It is the reason Jn 3:16.

1:18-25 *The prophet Isaiah* Isa 29:9-19. *As a scroll* Isa 29:10-11. *Straight on the rubbish-heap* Isa 29:14b. *Deepest darkness* Isa 29:18, Mt 4:16. *Epicureans* Acts 17:18.

1:26-31 *Count for nothing with God* 1 Sam 16:7. *Son's heavenly glory* Jn 17:24. *Passage in Jeremiah* Jer 9:23-24. *Gifts come from me* 1 Cor 4:7. *Source of wisdom* Col 2:2-3. *Forgiveness and restoration* 1 Jn 1:9.

2:1-5 *Turned up in your midst* Acts 18:1. *The great Gamaliel* Acts 22:3.

2:6-10a *Only wise God* Rom 16:27. *Don't lie on the surface* Job 28:20-21. *Before time began* Prov 8:22-23. *Pilate's eyes to the truth* Jn 18:36. *Final chapters of Isaiah* Isa 64:4, 65:17. *Make everything right* Rom 8:28, Gal 5:5. *Foretaste of what is coming* 2 Cor 1:22.

2:10b-16 *Secrets of the kingdom* Mt 13:34-35. *Penetrates their understanding* Mt 13:13. *Understood by faith-hearing* Rom 1:17. *Isaiah asks* Isa 40:13. *His own return* Mk 13:32. *At the feet of Jesus* Lk 10:39. *Answering to deep* Ps 42:7.

3:1-4 *Faith in Christ Jesus* Gal 3:26. *Still on chapter one* Acts 18:11. *Teenagers or young adults* Heb 5:12-14.

3:5-8 *Cool of the day* Gen 3:8. *Makes everything grow* Gen 1:12. *Brings forth new life* Isa 55:10-11. *Mature stalk of wheat* Mk 4:28. *Energy we've devoted to it* Jn 4:35-38.

3:10-15 *Structures to the ground* Acts 26:9. *Foundation Stone himself* 1 Pet 2:4. *Laid them from eternity* Rev 13:8. *Ground-plan of everyone's life* Jn 1:3. *Earthquakes, floods* Mt 7:24-27. *Solomon's temple* 1 Chr 29:2. *City of God* Rev 21:19-21. *Tested and tried* Mal 3:3. *If necessary by fire* 1 Pet 1:7. *The ultimate fire-test* Mt 13:40. *Faithful servant* Mt 25:21. *Shake your hand* Ps 126:5-6.

3:16-17 *Building-blocks* 1 Pet 2:5.

3:18-20 *Mind-bending philosophies* Col 2:8. *Angelic encounters* Col 2:18. *Personal discipline* Col 2:23. *Can't be fathomed* Job 5:9. *Traps they've set up for others* Job 5:13. *Know the Psalm* Ps 94. *Leave God out* Ps 94:11.

3:21-23 *Inherit absolutely everything* Acts 20:32, 1 Pet 1:4. *Life and death* Rom 8:38-39. *Nothing to dread* Rom 8:18, 2 Cor 4:17. *Bringing you safely through* Jn 10:28, 17:24. *Not disappointed* Ps 22:5. *Highest place of all* Phil 2:9.

4:1-5 *Complete integrity* Acts 23:1; 2 Cor 1:12, 2:17. *Exact date of his return* Acts 1:7. *Generosity of their Master* Mt 25:22-23.

4:6-7 *God's oracles* 1 Pet 4:11.

4:8-13 *Spiritual blessings* 1 Cor 1:5. *The King's feast* Lk 14:15. *Experienced that* 1 Cor 15:32. *Half of it yet* 2 Cor 1:9. *Often fragmented* Acts 17:14. *Reckons we're scoundrels* Acts 17:6-7, 19:26. *Good things going on in Ephesus* Acts 19:17-20. *Extraordinary things* Acts 19:11. *Told us not to* Mt 5:39, Rom 12:19. *Smell like to the world* 2 Cor 2:16. *Time you're reading this letter* 2 Cor 4:8-10.

4:14-21 *Compromising the gospel* Lk 6:26. *New-born infants* Acts 18:8. *A few pages back* 1 Cor 2:5. *Following my Lord and Master* 1 Th 1:6. *Sending Timothy* 1 Cor 16:10-11. *Through my ministry* Acts 14:21-22, 16:1. *Great faithfulness* Phil 2:22. *Given me directly* Gal 1:12. *With the other apostles* Gal 2:2.

4:18-21 *Arrival very soon* Acts 20:2-3. *As indeed it is* Col 1:6. *Gentle West wind* 2 Cor 10:1.

5:1-5 *Certainly adultery* Exod 20:14. *Heads in shame* Ezra 10:1-6. *Final dreadful Day* 1 Cor 3:15. *Forbidden act* Dt 22:30. *New covenant community* Mt 18:15-17. *Abandoned* Rom 1:24-28. *Workings of Satan* 1 Tim 1:20. *Severe physical affliction* Job 2:6.

5:6-8 *Entire batch* Gal 5:9, Heb 12:15. *Feast of Unleavened Bread* Exod 12:14-20. *Lamb of God* Jn 1:29. *Atoned for* 1 Jn 2:2. *Applied to the doorposts* Exod 12:7. *Old has been left behind* 2 Cor 5:17.

5:9-13 *On one occasion* Jn 17:14-19. *Play-acting* Mt 6:5. *Breeds more corruption* 1 Cor 15:33. *Final disaster* Jas 5:19-20. *Expose and rebuke* 1 Tim 5:20. *Banned from all fellowship* Dt 17:7, 2 Th 3:6, 14-15.

6:1-6 *Body in heaven* Mt 16:19. *Saints of the Most High* Dan 7:22 LXX. *Regularly spoke about this* Mt 19:28; Lk 22:30. *Share his throne* Rev 3:21. *Upsets the world's assumptions* 1 Cor 1:27-28.

6:7-11 *As you've said* 1 Cor 1:5. *Turning the other cheek* Mt 5:38-42. *It's all yours* 1 Cor 3:21-23. *Eternal kingdom* Gal 5:21. *God's ground-rules* Rom 1:26-27. *Receiving end* Acts 20:35. *The greatest joy* Eph 5:18. *As I did earlier* 1 Cor 5:11. *Power of the tongue* Jas 3:1ff. *Jesus is Lord* 1 Cor 12:3.

6:12-17 *Truths not revealed* 1 Cor 2:14. *God meant us to* Jn 8:32, Gal 5:13. *You happen to encounter* 1 Th 4:7. *A little more fully* 1 Cor 15. *Genesis creation story* *Gen 2:21-24. *A perfect unit* Mal 2:15. *Single flesh item* Gen 2:24. *No shame or guilt incurred* Gen 2:25. *A new item has been created* 2 Cor 5:17. *Christ-in-me* Gal 2:20.

6:18-20 *Temptation to commit sexual immorality* 1 Cor 10:8. *Remember what Joseph did* Gen 39. *Straight for the exit* Gen 39:12. *The God he served* Gen 39:9. *Thieves' paradise* Mk 11:18. *About his own body* Jn 2:21. *As we saw earlier* 1 Cor 3:16-17. *To ransom us* 1 Pet 1:19. *To make us his own* Rev 5:9.

7:1-7 *God's creation ordinance* Gen 2:24. *Who redeemed them* 1 Cor 6:19-20. *Devil and all his forces* 1 Jn 5:19. *Later on* 1 Cor 12.

7:8-11 *Help from your church* 1 Tim 5. *Marriage is all about* Gen 2:18. *Statement from the Lord* Mk 10:2-12; Mt 19:3-12. *Marriage covenant* Mal 2:10-16. *Has been unfaithful* Mt 19:9.

7:12-16 *No difference of status* Gal 3:28. *Status in God's eyes* Mt 18:10. *Reconciled in Christ* Col 1:20. *Open blinded eyes* 2 Cor 4:6. *Component of faith* Rom 8:24-25. *Saying anything at all* 1 Pet 3:1.

7:17-24 *Totally unnecessary* Acts 15:1ff. *Not seek circumcision* Gal 5:2. *Changed fundamentally* Gal 6:15. *People you live amongst* Mk 5:19. *Servant for life* Exod 21:2-6. *As I said earlier* *1 Cor 6:20. *Menial or influential* 1 Cor 1:26.

7:25-31 *Being a Christian* Acts 14:22. *Gives and takes away* Job 1:21. *God's everlasting arms* Dt 33:27. *Morning isn't far away* Ps 30:5. *God's right hand* Ps 16:11. *Be-all and end-all* Ps 49:16-17. *Wealth can take wings* Prov 23:5. *Selfish advantage* 1 Tim 6:17-18. *Over and done with* Ps 103:15-17.

7:32-35 *Supremely vital thing* Mk 10:21. *Asked the Lord in for a meal* Lk 10:38-42.

7:36-38 *Nothing wrong in their getting married* Heb 13:4.

7:39-40 *Advice to younger widows* 1 Tim 5:9-16. *Counselling Spirit* Jn 14:26.

8:1-3 *Depths of God's love* Eph 3:18-19. *Knows them through and through* Jer 1:5, 1 Cor 13:12. *Chosen them* Eph 1:4.

8:4-6 Carved wood or stone Isa 44:9-20. One True God Deut 6:4. Even animals Rom 1:23. Right to divinity Deut 10:17. In the beginning Jn 1:2-3, Heb 1:2. Life and peace Col 1:20.

8:7-13 For three years Gal 1:18. Perfectly clear about this Mk 7:15. What comes out of us Mk 7:20. Made-up gods like Baal Jud 6:31. Dagon 1 Sam 5:1-5. Wobbly at the knees Heb 12:12-13. Feeble and lame Ezek 34:16.

9:1-2 After the Ascension 1 Cor 15:8-9. Isn't a big deal 2 Cor 5:16.

9:3-6 Accept hospitality 2 Cor 11:9. Choose not to 2 Cor 12:13. Cephas Mk 1:30. The Lord's own brothers Mk 6:3. Do manual labour Acts 18:3.

9:7-12a Glean in your harvest-field Deut 24:19, Ruth 2:2. Sustaining the creation Gen 2:15. God's like that Mt 25:21, Rev 14:13. Darkness to light Acts 26:18.

9:12b-14 Instructions to the Twelve Mt 10:10. Under a hedge Mt 8:20. Meat and drink Jn 4:34. Going on a journey Lk 12:42.

9:15-18 Without any payment Isa 55:1. No charge for eternal life Rev 22:17. Philosopher's famous story Plato Republic Bk 7. Best thing one can do Prov 11:30. Death and destruction Mk 10:45, Heb 2:14.

9:19-23 Privileged access to God Phil 3:5. Son and Messiah Acts 9:20-22. Debar so many from finding Mt 23:13. Through the market-place Acts 17:17-18. Found on a monument Acts 17:23. A couple of poets Acts 17:28.

Hungering for the same God Acts 17:27. New law of love Jn 13:34. Appeal to their conscience Rom 2:14-15.

Accountable for the choices they make Acts 17:30-31. Life-sentence for murder Acts 22:19-22. Can I do it Rom 7:19. Lowest depths for them Heb 7:25. Colours from his palette Eph 3:10, 1 Pet 4:10. How many we don't know Rev 7:9-10.

9:24-27 Learn that the hard way Mk 10:35ff. His one goal Phil 3:14. Ordering my steps through Scripture Ps 119:105. Spiritual powers Eph 6:12. Whatever it costs 1 Pet 5:8-9, Rev 12:11.

10:1-5 Pillar of cloud *Exod 13:21-22, 14:19-20. On dry ground *Exod 14:22. Across the Jordan Josh 4:22. Depths of the sea Mic 7:19. Sustained by the manna Jn 6:31-33. Rained down upon them *Exod 16:4. In different places *Exod 17:6, Num 20:11. Satisfying our hearts' desires Ps 37:4. Fail to honour him Ps 106:33. Perished in the wilderness *Num 14:16. The story *Num 14. Self-giving intercession Exod 32:32. Caleb and Joshua Num 14:30. Blessings of the gospel Heb 6:4ff. Christ's purpose for you Heb 3:7ff.

10:6-10 Start with myself Rom 7:7-8. Tenth commandment Exod 20:17, Deut 5:21. Unlearning them Rom 8:5. Spiritual bloodstream Num 11:4. Achan Josh 7:21. I've written to you 1 Cor 5. The golden calf *Exod 32:1-6. Went on afterwards Exod 32:6. Moabite women *Num 25. 23,000 of them Num 25:9 gives the number as 24,000. Talked about that too 1 Cor 6:12-20. Plague of venomous snakes Num 21:6. Jesus on the cross Jn 3:14. Put God to the test *Num 14:22, Ps 95:9. Plan to unfold Ps 106:12-13. Business of the spies *Num 14, 1 Cor 10:5. Negative report about Canaan Num 13:32. Struck down by plague Num 14:36-37.

10:11-13 Don't be so sure 1 Cor 15:34. We won't totally collapse Ps 37:23-24. Part of kingdom experience Acts 14:22, 1 Pet 1:6. The invisible God Heb 11:27. The damage evil can do Job 1:12, 2:6. Desperate or persistent Rev 2:10.

10:14-17 We were talking about 1 Cor 8:1ff. Source of seduction 1 Cor 6:18. With the Spirit's help 1 Cor 2:15. Eat separately 1 Cor 11:21.

10:18-22 Under the Jewish Law Lev 7:15. Locus of Satanic activity Deut 32:16-18. We're all overcomers Rom 8:37, Rev 12:11. Final warning of Moses Dt 32. Inflammation of his fury Dt 32:21, Ps 78:58. Stronger than the strong Lk 11:22. The demons are afraid Acts 19:13-16.

10:23-24 Can contaminate them Mk 7:15. Everything is pure Tit 1:15. Strengthen others' faith Rom 14:19. Wonderfully unselfish ones Phil 2:21-22, 30.

10:25-30 Hard to make ends meet 1 Cor 1:26. Tied down by petty restrictions Ps 119:45. Belongs to God Ps 24:1. Give it back to him Ps 50:12. For us to enjoy 1 Tim 6:17.

10:31-11:1 In all his ways Deut 32:4. Agony of the cross Phil 2:6-8. His only priority Jn 6:38.

11:2-6 Accountable to his Father Jn 5:30. Of course they have Rom 5:2, Eph 2:18. One single sacrifice 1 Cor 5:7, Heb 9:12. As Nazirites do Num 6:18.

11:7-12 Governance of the physical world *Gen 1:27-28. As the Psalmist says *Ps 8:5. Might want to take Gen 2:16. The curse of death Heb 2:9. Companion-helper Gen 2:18. From the man *Gen 2:23. Strange story in Genesis *Gen 6:2. New covenant arrangement Gen 6:18. The man from the woman's body *Gen 4:1. For another time Eph 5:23, 25, 32.

11:17-22 *First day of every week* 1 Cor 16:2. *Greater Christian maturity* Eph 4:13. *First part of my letter* 1 Cor 1:10. *Bought with his own blood* Ac 20:28. *Socially beneath you* Jas 5:5-6.

11:22-26 *Night of all nights* Exod 12:42. *Passover meal* Lk 22:15. *Passover lamb* Jn 1:29. *Wounded body for your healing* Isa 53:5. *What I have done for you* Lk 22:19. *New covenant that was foretold* Jer 31:31.

11:27-34 *Sanhedrin worthies* Mk 14:64. *Think they can run the place* Mk 3:13-15, 1 Cor 10:21. *Telling you through his word* 2 Tim 3:16. *Not always a pleasant experience* Heb 12:11. *Rejection from his presence* Mt 25:41, 1 Pet 4:17.

12:1-3 *At the start of this letter* 1 Cor 1:4-7. *Shone his light into your hearts* 2 Cor 4:4-6. *Already reminded you* 1 Cor 10:20. *He's under God's curse* Mk 3:22. *The God who is Lord* Rom 10:9.

12:4-6 *Thought about this already* 1 Cor 11:3.

12:7-11 *More of the Spirit than anyone else* Rom 8:9. *In amazing profusion* 1 Cor 1:5, 7. *Setting us free at the same time* Jn 8:32, 36, Rom 8:2, 2 Cor 3:17. *Unbelieving visitors* 1 Cor 14:25. *Spirit of truth* Jn 16:13. *Lays hands on them with prayer* Acts 14:20, Jas 5:14-15. *Work for God in striking ways* Jn 14:12. *Exorcising evil spirits* Lk 10:17. *Near or distant future* Acts 11:28. *Where spiritual motivation is concerned* Acts 5:3.

12:12-14 *Crisis in my life* Acts 9:4-5. *Each of us without exception* Gal 3:27-28. *Christ is in us* Jn 17:21-23.

12:27-31a *Those with prophetic gifts* Eph 2:20, 4:11. *Lives are being turned around* Heb 2:4. *Obviously powerful way* Gal 3:5. *Spirit-given sounds* Eph 5:19.

12:31b-13:3 *Love one another* Jn 13:34. *I've said already* 1 Cor 8:1-3. *Speak them miraculously* Acts 2:6. *Very presence of God* 2 Cor 12:4. *Most of these gifts* 1 Cor 14:18. *Hire for funerals* Mk 5:38. *Prophecy is a major gift* Eph 4:11, 1 Cor 14:3. *Words of knowledge* Dan 2:19. *Move mountains* Mk 11:23. *Shave Samson's head* Judg 16:19. *Jewish exorcists* Acts 19:16. *The way to eternal life* Mk 10:17-22. *Turn oneself into a ball of fire* Reading 'giving my body to the flames' with the original NIV. *Mary of Bethany* Jn 12:1-6. *Waste of time* Mt 7:21-23.

13:4-7 *Nonsense going the rounds* Lk 1:1-4, Apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*. *Portion at the last meal* Jn 13:26. *Moment of betrayal* Mt 26:50. *Wherever he went* Acts 10:38. *Unmanageable daughter* Mt 15:21-28. *Spirit-inspired goodness* Gal 5:22. *A few pages back* 1 Cor 3:3-4. *Isn't one of us* Mk 9:38. *Burn their houses down* Lk 9:54, 2 Ki 1:10. *Not for self-advertisement* Mt 6:1-4. *Humble in heart* Mt 11:29. *Talk about holiness* 1 Th 4:7-8. *A few pages ago* 1 Cor 10:33-11:1. *Never have gone to the cross* Phil 2:4-5, 8. *Where God is concerned* Mk 10:27. *Their own self-interest* Mk 8:34-35. *Hidden agenda* Ps 139:23-24. *Don't even start counting* Mt 18:21-22. *Deal with it on the spot* Mt 18:15. *Buries them beyond reach* Prov 10:12, Mic 7:19. *To resurrect them* Ps 130:3, Rom 3:25. *An amazing story* Jn 8:3-11. *Way out of the mess* Jn 8:36. *Four-dimensional* Eph 3:18-19. *Thoughtout space and time* Lk 23:34, 1 Jn 2:2. *Still 'My God'* Mt 27:46. *Childlike trust* Lk 23:46. *Hope of Resurrection* Isa 53:11. *Paradise* Lk 23:43. *Emotional anguish* Jn 19:26-27. *Physical agony* Jn 19:28. *Brought safely home* Jn 17:12, 20. *Finally accomplished* Jn 19:30.

13:8-10 *In a few moments* 1 Cor 14.

13:11-12 *A valuable service* 1 Th 5:20. *Nothing in-between* 1 Jn 3:2. *Instant death* Exod 33:20. *As close as is humanly possible* *Num 12:8, *Deut 34:10. *Astonishing humility* Num 12:3. *Purity of motive* Mt 5:8. *Will be fully ours* Rev 22:4. *Knowledge of all things* Rom 11:33. *Who has ever lived* Ps 139:1-6.

13:13-14:1a *Certainty we cannot see* Heb 11:1. *After the endless night* Rom 8:25. *The Shepherd-God* Jn 10:11. *Each and all of us* 1 Pet 2:24-25.

14:1-5 *At Pentecost* Eph 4:8. *Prophets and teachers* Eph 4:11. *At Antioch* Acts 13:1.

14:6-12 *Our wonderful Lord Jesus* Rom 15:7-13. *In Lycaonia* Acts 14:11. *The Pentecost miracle* Acts 2:6. *With living stones* 1 Cor 3:16, 1 Pet 2:5. *The living God on earth* 2 Cor 6:16. *Involved in its development* Eph 4:12-13.

14:13-19 *The Word made flesh* Heb 1:2.

14:20-25 *Once again I plead with you* 1 Cor 3:1. *The prophet Isaiah* Isa 28. *Blind bit of notice* Isa 28:11-12. *Has the gift of tongues* 1 Cor 12:30. *Hammer-blow from the Holy Spirit* Jn 16:8. *Complete foreigners are going to hear* Isa 45:14*.

14:26-33 *Tested by Scripture* 1 Th 5:21. *Everything you hear* 1 Jn 4:1.

14:34-35 *The women themselves have said so* 1 Cor 1:11. *Dressed decently* 1 Cor 11:5. *Freedom and equality* Gal 3:28.

14:36-40 *Long and honourable tradition* Eph 2:20. *Already made the point* 1 Cor 10:11. *Not been sent by the Lord* Jer 23:21-22. *Authority of my teaching* 2 Cor 11:5. *Intelligibly and powerfully* 2 Tim 2:15. *As I've said before* 1 Cor

14:1. *Prophetically gifted men and women* 2 Chr 34:22-28. *Want to exercise it* 1 Th 5:19. *Said much about this so far* 1 Cor 6:14.

15:1-2 *I've tried to show you* 1 Cor 13. *Clarity and good order in worship* 1 Cor 12; 14. *The only reason* The RSV translation '- unless you believed in vain' makes the sense clearer.

15:3-4 *From his own mouth* Acts 22:14. *Subtly changed it* Gal 1:8,9. *First-born of the flock* Gen 4:4. *Isaac and the ram* Gen 22:13. *Passover Lamb* Exod 12:13. *Scapegoat* Lev 16:10. *Sins of the people* Isa 53:8. *Buried with him* Rom 4:25. *Unbound from the altar* Gen 22:13. *Realm of the dead* Ps 16:11. *Dust of death* Ps 22:1, 24. *Light of life* Isa 53:7, 11. *Third day* Hos 6:2. *Preaching again and again* Acts 18:11.

15:5-7 *The Lord sought him out* Lk 24:34. *Recommissioned him* Jn 21:15-19. *That first evening* Lk 24:36. *A week later* Jn 20:26. *Why he's still with them* Jn 20:24-28. *Martyred at my hands* Acts 7:58, 8:1, 22:4, 26:10. *Brother of the Lord* Mk 6:3, Jn 7:5. *Praying followers* Acts 1:14. *Church at Jerusalem* Acts 15:13. *The Lord of glory* Jas 2:1. *His unfailing presence* Mt 28:16-20, Acts 1:2. *He'd come back soon* Lk 24:51, Acts 1:9.

15:8-11 *Should have been stillborn* Job 3:16. *Witness to the risen Christ* Acts 1:21-22. *Purchased with his own blood* Acts 20:28. *Harder time of it* 2 Cor 11:5-31. *Sufficient for every need* 2 Cor 12:9.

15:12-19 *Outcropping in Daniel* Dan 12:2. *Isaiah* Isa 26:19. *Psalms* Ps 16:10. *Job* Job 19:26. *Lord himself taught it* Mt 25:32, Jn 5:28-29. *Sadducees about it* Mk 12:24-27. *Sins in the grave* Heb 9:26-28. *Loved ones who have died* 1 Thess 4:14. *Dust returns to dust* Gen 3:19, Eccl 12:7. *Job was right* Job 14:12.

15:20-24 *Reign in his full glory* 1 Cor 1:7. *Single, solid reality* Dan 7:14.

15:25-28 *Messianic passage* *Ps 110. *Directly to himself* Mt 22:44. *Necks as your foot-rest* Ps 110:1. *In thrall for so long* Heb 2:14-15. *Man for man* Heb 2:9. *Triumphant cry from the cross* Jn 19:30. *Another Psalm* Ps 8. *Humility and subjection* Heb 2:8-9. *Earlier I said* 1 Cor 1:25. *All one day bow* Phil 2:10. *Clearly visible in them* Rev 5:6. *Always will be* Jn 17:24.

15:29-34 *Arrested and beaten up* 2 Cor 11:24-27. *Theatre here at Ephesus* Acts 19:23-41. *Party's in full swing* Isa 22:13; Lk 12:19. *Popular sitcom* Menander (Greek comic poet) 218. *Silver goblet* Prov 23:31. *Set of eyelashes* Prov 6:25. *Single tasty meal* Heb 12:16.

15:35-41 *If there is a God at all* *Ps 14:1. *Nature does her stuff* Mk 4:26-29. *Seed-bearing plants* Gen 1:11. *Herbal medicines and so on* Isa 28:23-29.

15:42-49 *Statement in Genesis* Gen 2:7. *Those who receive it* Jn 1:12. *Life with a capital L* Gen 3:22. *Bearing his image* Gen 5:3. *Heavenly wardrobe* Col 3:10. *Here's the challenge* Reading 'let us bear' (NIV footnote, and see Fee).

15:50-57 *Sure of inheriting* 1 Pet 1:3-5. *Stays on the level of flesh* Jn 3:6, Gen 3:19. *Part of the earth once more* Eccl 3:19-30, Ps 90:3. *With our last breath* Eccl 12:7. *Dust of the earth* Dan 12:2. *Original moment of creation* Gen 1:3. *Great wake-up call* Jn 5:28, 1 Th 4:16. *Christ-made robes* 2 Cor 5:4, Phil 3:21. *The first is in Isaiah* Isa 25:8. *Garden of Gethsemane* Mt 26:39. *Finds the ransom himself* Hos 13:14. *Sentence of doom* Rom 7:10. *We should be healed* Isa 53:5. *Won the final victory* Rom 7:25.

15:58 *You are loved* Jer 31:3. *Hang back reluctantly* Heb 10:39. *A single crumb to go to waste* Jn 6:12.

16:1-4 *Raised in your letter* 1 Cor 7:1. *Collection of funds* 2 Cor 8:6, 10. *Terrible famine* Acts 11:28. *Galatia and Phrygia* Acts 18:23. *Celebrate our Lord's resurrection* Jn 20:19.

16:5-9 *Has his own ideas* Acts 16:6-7, 18:21. *Stick a knife into me* 1 Cor 4:12. *Old pagan gods* Acts 19:11-20, 26. *Your prayers* Col 4:3.

16:10-11 *As I said* 1 Cor 4:17. *Expect him* Acts 19:22. *Servant of Christ* 2 Tim 2:15.

16:12-14 *Such a help to you* Acts 18:27-28. *Together for the gospel* 1 Cor 3:5. *Wake up* 1 Th 5:6. *Stand up* 1 Th 3:7-8. *Play up* 2 Sam 10:12, Dan 10:19. *Stay up* 1 Sam 4:9. *Waste of time* 1 Cor 13.

16:15-18 *Brought your letter to me* 1 Cor 7:1. *Step up and be baptised* 1 Cor 1:16.

16:19-20 *Whole province of Asia* Acts 20:18. *Aquila and Priscilla* Acts 18:2, 19.

16:21-24 *Don't be too long, Lord* Rev 22:20.

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