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*"The Entrance of THY WORDS Giveth Light"*

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*Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD*

# THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS

BY DR. W. GRAHAM SCROCCIE  
(THIRD ARTICLE)

## 2. The Occasion and Object of the Letter (*contd.*)

### (2) THE OBJECT OF THE LETTER

#### (i) To Correct

We have already noted (see last article) the five prevailing evils that were existent in the Church at Corinth. Such evils called for strong measures; hence Paul set about to point out their true nature, and to warn the Christians of the seriousness of them. He seeks to correct by informing as well as by warning. We shall glance briefly at each.

#### (a) *Schism*. Chapters 1:10-4.

As we shall be enlarging upon this section later we shall not dwell on it here, but pass on the next.

#### (b) *Lack of discipline*. Chapter 5.

This notorious case of incest had to be firmly dealt with, and for two reasons:—

#### 1. *For the sake of the offender himself*

If his spirit is to be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus, he must now be delivered unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh. And this severe action the Apostle commands (3-5).

#### 2. *For the sake of the entire Church*

Paul reminds them that a little leaven leavens the whole lump, so that to allow the offender to remain in their midst, was certainly to imperil the whole community. They are therefore commanded to "purge out the old leaven" as Israel had done long centuries before; and to keep the feast "with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth".

#### (c) *Litigation*. Chapter 6:1-11

The Apostle in dealing with this abuse:—

### 1. *Presents an Argument*

How altogether incongruous it was for Christians to be going to law with one another (to be judged of heathen magistrates) who, one day should themselves be the judges of angels.

Surely (says the Apostle with fine irony), it would be better to set those least esteemed in the Church, to judge of such affairs, than to go before the heathen. He then further,

### 2. *Makes an Appeal*

Why did they not rather take wrong and consent to be defrauded? It were far better to be wronged than to do wrong: to suffer injustice than to perpetrate it. The thought of what they had once been, and now were, should help them to abstain from all forms of evil.

(d) *Unchastity*. Chapter 6:12-20.

This matter had been in the Apostle's thoughts from ch. 5 and is more definitely approached in verses 9-11 of this chapter. He now deals with it very explicitly, in a passage which, for sublimity, equals anything he ever wrote. Two thoughts dominate the section.

- (1) *Contempt for the body will always result in abuse of the body*
- (2) *A knowledge of the true dignity and destiny of the body will always mean salvation from uncleanness*

These are the two great and opposing ways of regarding the body. The one is Pagan, the other is Christian; and the Christian religion alone presents a doctrine of the body, which means present and future salvation.

The Apostle does not here propose, as has been done in our time and for certain classes of our people, the regulation of vice; but he lays heaven's axe to the root of the evil of uncleanness, and tells these people, so recently turned from heathenism with all its abominable rites, that they are to be pure as Christ is pure.

And with regard to the fifth abuse of which these Corinthians were guilty,

### (e) *Profanity*

Paul does not use ambiguous language in dealing with this evil, but speaks with a plainness and authority which must have struck terror to the evil-doer.

The two thoughts prominent are:—

(1) *The sacredness of the institution of the Lord's Supper and their shameful abuse of the same.* They were guilty of the grossest profanity, by making of this occasion a sort of indoor picnic at which they ate and drank to sinful excess.

(2) *The true spirit and manner in which the Supper should be observed, and the perilous consequences of disregarding these.* God had been dealing with many in the Church in the way of discipline, even removing some by death. An unworthy participation of the Supper must always minister judgment to him who so engages in it.

Having regarded the *corrective* aspect of this wonderful Letter, there yet remains for our consideration, the *constructive* aspect; for the second purpose, of the Apostle, in writing, was

(ii) **To Instruct**

We have already seen that in a letter which the Corinthians had sent to Paul (7:1), they asked his advice with respect to seven matters, at least; and in his reply, the Apostle takes up these, one by one, and deals with them. These replies are classics on the subjects of which they treat; and although the original circumstances are not everywhere to be found, the principles which were brought to bear upon them are of permanent and universal application.

All we shall attempt now is to state very briefly how the Apostle built up the Corinthians in Christian truth and practice.

(a) *Concerning Marriage and Celibacy*

(1) There were conflicting views among the members of the Church at Corinth, with regard to the respective merits of the married and unmarried states.

(2) On such a delicate and difficult subject as this no pronouncement could have been of permanent value, and even at the time at which the advice was given, only of relative importance had it been just the counsel of man.

(3) But this chapter is much more than that. The underlying principles of the teaching here are as valid and valuable for us today as for the Corinthians 1900 years ago. It is a marvellous compendium of practical wisdom; and concerning the

most diverse and difficult social problems, definite and saving advice is here given. Let us beware of imagining that this is an obsolete chapter.

(4) Speaking generally, the Apostle says that the married state is good, and, when entered into, should be kept inviolate; but, that, under the circumstances which then prevailed, and in the light of the transitory character and all things here, the unmarried state was better. Different advice is given to different needs, and each is left to apply to himself that which is suited to his case.

(b) *Concerning Eating Meats Sacrificed to Idols*

(1) Here also, a subject of great delicacy was raised, and one, the treatment of which, required the utmost wisdom.

If the Apostle had definitely forbidden the eating of meats that had been sacrificed to idols, he would have laid himself open to the charge of bolstering up a stupid superstition.

If, on the other hand, he had definitely sanctioned the eating of such meats, he would have laid himself open to the charge of having some sympathy with such a practice.

(2) But this question does not receive, either a positive, or a negative, answer. Like a great many other questions, it does not permit of either the one or the other, and yet it requires an answer. How then will the Apostle deal with it?

(3) In his reply he makes it quite clear that the practice of offering meats to idols, and then eating of such meats, was idolatrous and ridiculous. He makes it clear, also, that he has a good deal of sympathy with those who, knowing the practice to be a stupid and ridiculous one, ignore it altogether, and regard all such meats as they would any other meat, and freely eat of it.

(4) But to have left the answer at that, would have been sadly inadequate, both in view of the need of that day and of this; because it would have left out a consideration which must in all time exercise a great influence upon the conduct of the children of God. That consideration is: *The relation and obligation of the strong to the weak; and of the enlightened to the ignorant.*

(5) Paul says the idol truly is nothing, and there is no

difference between that meat which is offered to it, and all other meats, but there were many of these converts from heathenism who, as yet, had not been able to disabuse their minds of the evil doctrines of a lifetime; and it ill-became those who had done so, to employ their knowledge, without any regard for their less enlightened fellows. In short, Paul's solution of this difficulty is, that *Liberty* must never be at the expense of *Love*. And that principle solves for the Christian a hundred problems in all ages. This also is the wisdom of God.

(c) *Concerning the Conduct of Women in Public Worship*

(1) The matter in chapter 11 of women being veiled or unveiled in the assembly; and that in chapter 14 of their right to a share in the public ministry of the Word, are both matters of some difficulty of interpretation.

(2) But from the replies of the Apostle on both these points, two things emerge clearly.

First, that the advice then given was intended to be taken quite literally, and must have been all of a piece with the consummate wisdom everywhere displayed in this Letter.

Second, that whether these directions are literally of perpetual and universal application or not, they inculcate for all time and everywhere the need for the strictest propriety and decorum in the smallest details of outward conduct on the part of those professing the Name of Christ.

(d) *Concerning the Exercise of the Spiritual Gifts*

(1) We have seen that the Church at Corinth was richly endowed with spiritual gifts (1:5-7); and that in the employment of them an unholy rivalry had been generated, which had led to quarrelsome dissension as to which were the more important of these gifts. About this they had written to Paul. The Apostle deals with the matter at considerable length and with much precision of detail.

(2) First of all, he declares that spiritual gifts are of great variety; that they are imparted to believers by God, and that in the bestowment thereof, God exercises His sovereign wisdom.

(3) He then shows by the analogy of the Human Body that these gifts bestowed by God upon His people, Christ's Mystical

Body, are all necessary, and are all vitally related to one another, so that, just as no member of the human body can afford to dispense with any other member, and just as all the members are necessary to the perfection of the whole, so is it with the Church.

(4) True it is that there are superior and inferior gifts, as there are superior and inferior members in our bodies, but each is designed to aid all the rest; each has its place to occupy and its work to fulfil. There should therefore be no rivalry.

(5) Neither would there be any rivalry if they were subject to the golden law of Love. Without love the gifts were nothing. Those all would be done away, but love would last for ever, therefore, they should pursue love.

(6) But, to reply yet more specifically to the question these Corinthians had asked, the Apostle in a careful argument shows that the gift of prophecy is superior to that of tongues; and goes on to speak of the dishonour done to the Name of Christ in consequence of the abuse, at Corinth, of this latter Gift.

(e) *Concerning the Orderly Conduct of Meetings*

(1) The gifts were exercised chiefly in the public meetings, so that, in consequence of the rivalry they were of a disorderly character.

(2) The Apostle lays down some practical rules whereby these meetings shall be conducted after a becoming fashion. He bids the Christians speak in turn, and not all at once, and reminds them that the prophets are subject to the prophets.

(3) The women of the Church were the cause of not a little of the disorder, and Paul gives instruction with regard to them. He exhorts, finally, that all things be done decently and in order.

(f) *Concerning the Reality and Nature of the Resurrection*

(1) This is one of the sublimest chapters in the Bible. Herein, Paul, moved by the Spirit of God, sets forth, for all time, the Doctrine of the Resurrection, with vehemence and passion with a tenderness and beauty, with a luminosity and logic such as has not been rivalled.

(2) He declares that the fact of the Resurrection is essential to the Gospel, and that, moreover that fact has been abundantly attested.



(3) The connection between Christ's resurrection and that of His people can never be severed. If they are not to rise, He has not risen. If He is risen, then, certainly, they are to rise.

(4) The Resurrection in its various stages is outlined, and its relation to the whole future plan of God is displayed.

(5) But there were great difficulties of an intellectual kind accompanying the teaching of a physical resurrection, and the Corinthians had written asking for light on some of these. In reply, the Apostle writes with great eloquence on the nature and glory of the resurrection and on the Second Coming of the Lord when the bodies shall be raised.

(6) It should be borne in mind that this great revelation concerning Christ's Coming, and our resurrection and transformation is the second written statement on the subject in the Apostolic Letters. The first will be found in 1 Thess. 4, and a careful comparison of these passages should be made.

(g) *Concerning the Collection for the Saints*

The Apostle had already spoken to the Corinthians on this matter, and perhaps had mentioned it in that Letter of his to them which is lost. But they were not clear on some points regarding it, and had asked him for further information. This information he gives in the closing chapter of the Epistle.

No one can read these chapters carefully without being impressed with their great importance, enshrining as they do, principles which are as indispensable today to true Christian living, as they were eighteen hundred years ago. Doctrine and practice are never divorced in life. In this second group of the Pauline Letters, two are pre-eminently doctrinal—Galatians and Romans—and two are practical—First and Second Corinthians. These two last show what sanctification in Christ means, for sanctification is not an idea to be admired, but a life to be lived. Let them who imagine that sanctification is something soft, study these two Epistles, and see how severe a sanctified Apostle can be. Nowhere is Paul so revealed as in these two Letters, his tenderness and severity, his passion and pity, his anger and love, his humility and dignity, his simplicity and profoundness. And nowhere as here do we get an insight into the problems and perils which confronted

converts from Paganism in the first century. The first chapter in Romans was written from this city, and that terrible picture of human degradation was before the Apostle's eyes as well as in his mind. Yet, it is out of such material as this, that the Lord secures the greatest triumphs, and the power of the Gospel of Calvary is most grandly demonstrated. While we deplore the low tone of spirituality of the Corinthian Church, we may well ask ourselves whether with all our privileges over and above what belonged to them, we are comparatively so much better in our Church life of today. It behoves us to ask this, and insist upon an answer.

### 3. Outline Survey of the Epistle

Under this head all that we attempt is to mark off with clearness the great main divisions of this Epistle; and after these are thoroughly grasped, the reader should proceed to a more acute analysis.

#### INTRODUCTION. 1:1-9.

##### Part (A). Corrective. Chs. 1:1-9

#### I. CONCERNING CONTENTIOUS DIVISIONS. 1:10-4:21.

1. The FACT of Divisions. 1:10-17a.
2. The ERROR of Divisions. 1:17b-4:5.
3. The CAUSE of Divisions. 4:6-21.

#### II. CONCERNING CARNAL DISORDERS. 5-6.

1. With Reference to DISCIPLINE. 5.
2. With Reference to LITIGATION. 6:1-11.
3. With Reference to IMPURITY. 6:12-20.

##### Part (B). Constructive. Chs. 7-15

#### III. CONCERNING CERTAIN DIFFICULTIES. 7-14.

1. The Matter of MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY. 7.
2. The Matter of CHRISTIAN LIBERTY. 8-11:1.
3. The Matter of PUBLIC WORSHIP. 11:2-14.

#### IV. CONCERNING CENTRAL DOCTRINES. 15.

1. The GOSPEL of the Resurrection. 1-11.
2. The CERTAINTY of the Resurrection. 12-34.
3. The NATURE of the Resurrection. 35-58.

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