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## A FRESH LOOK AT 1 CORINTHIANS 15:34: AN APPEAL FOR EVANGELISM OR A CALL TO PURITY?

HOMER A. KENT, JR.

*The church at Corinth was tolerating serious doctrinal aberrations which were causing moral and spiritual difficulties in the congregation. Paul's challenge: "Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame," was a call to sober thinking. It urged a return to holy conduct, and a recognition that the presence of wrong doctrine was a shameful condition which must be rectified.*

ONE of the periodic discussions which has characterized the church focuses upon the inadequacies that we perceive about ourselves. Why aren't we growing? Why do we have conflicts? Why can't our programs be as exciting and effective as they used to be? Before long we concentrate so heavily upon the problems that we forget our main business. In our very concern to find reasons for our lack of growth, our negativism makes us even more unattractive to the world we want to reach.

Not only that, but focusing on our problems can so easily make us lose perspective. "All is lost." "Things have never been this bad before." "It's a different world now. There are no biblical precedents or helps for us. We need a new program, a new formula, new approaches, new leaders." These are the things we tell ourselves.

But a careful study of the Bible makes it sound strangely familiar. Consider the congregation of the Christians at Corinth. Here was a church that was founded on pure doctrine by an apostle. It counted some very able people in its membership. Priscilla and Aquila had been there from the beginning of the work. There was Crispus, a man of recognized integrity and leadership so that he had been made ruler of the Jewish synagogue in the city. His conversion to Christ and the Christian faith led him and his household into the

new church at Corinth. The same thing seems to have happened with Sosthenes, the successor to Crispus at the synagogue. Then there was Gaius, whose gracious hospitality at Corinth made Paul's ministry more pleasant (Rom 16:23). Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus were likewise stalwart Christians with roots at Corinth.

The church at Corinth had also known some great Bible teachers. Paul and Silas and Apollos had extended ministries there. Timothy and Titus were no strangers to that congregation. Furthermore, this church had witnessed some remarkable conversions and transformed lives. Some of their members had once been idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, drunkards, and swindlers before they had been transformed by the saving work of Jesus Christ (1 Cor 6:9–11).

The church was located in a strategic spot—a commercial and transportation center, bustling with human activity, and desperately in need of moral and spiritual direction.

In spite of these advantages, the health of the church at Corinth was far from perfect. The congregation had conflicts and divisions which threatened its growth and effectiveness. Apollos, Peter, and Paul had their partisans, and then of course, there were the “super spiritual” who claimed no toleration for anyone except Christ alone.

They began to look inward instead of at the whole body of Christ. Because they were more concerned about their own parochial interests, Paul had great difficulty in getting them to cooperate with other gentile churches in raising a substantial collection for their Jewish Christian brethren in Judea.

Furthermore, they started questioning their leadership. Such questions as these must have arisen: “Why aren't our local leaders as eloquent as Apollos, or as dynamic as Peter, or as logical as Paul?” Dissatisfaction with their leaders led to disregard for the instruction they had been given by those leaders. They began to compromise their moral and spiritual standards. They were exceedingly tolerant of sin in their midst and were becoming lax in their own spiritual lives.

Even some of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith were being attacked. Prominent among these was the doctrine of physical resurrection. Implications of their wavering commitment were frightening to the apostle, and he devoted a significant portion of his epistle to a ringing call to reaffirm their faith.

All we need to do is change a few names and addresses, and the situation is very contemporary. And if we believe the Bible is our rule for faith and practice, then it surely has something to say to us.

How do you suppose Paul felt about the church at Corinth? Frustrated? Undoubtedly. Irritated? Sometimes. Deeply disappointed? No question about it. But he never gave way to total despair. His attitude was: “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this

all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:7-9 NIV).

That is the challenge: to maintain a balanced view; to be thanking God for accomplishments; to recognize needs and problems; to deal with failures while staying encouraged.

Paul managed to do it, but it was no easy task. Take a moment to analyze the Corinthian church from Paul's standpoint. Why should he have expected a church to begin and flourish in Corinth? It was a busy commercial center, not much given to contemplation or to the spiritual values of man and his destiny. It was a city with no apparent lack of religion. Today's visitor can inspect the impressive ruins of the temple of Apollo and the sites of other temples and not fail to be awed by the historical references to the temple of Aphrodite which crowned the heights of acrocorinth, just beyond the city. To the superficial observer, there would have seemed to be no need for another faith.

Yet when one searches deeper, there were some tremendous reasons, and Paul found them. The largely transient population left a spiritual void that cried out to be filled. Pagan religion, prevalent though it was, was either meaningless or corrupting. Immorality was rampant. Materialism was paramount. In such a city, Paul preached the gospel of the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and a church was founded.

But that church was now in trouble. When Paul wrote the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, he was grappling with their confusion over the great truth of resurrection. Some were denying that Christians could look forward to a literal resurrection (v 12). Some were actually denying the reality of any kind of resurrection, thus implying that Christ himself had not been raised (v 13). Some apparently rejected the whole idea because they could not explain what sort of body a resurrected person would have (v 35). Greek philosophy and contemporary culture had a stranglehold on their thinking.

The implications of that doctrinal confusion were frightening. It was not a matter of theological hair-splitting. Rather, it was a wavering before one of the foundational truths of the Christian faith. To question the very principle of resurrection was to deny the validity of Christ's resurrection (v 13). Their faith would be worthless, a dream without substance (vv 14,17). Paul's preaching would be based upon falsehood (v 15). Christians who had died would have perished forever (v 18). There would be no hope beyond the present life (v 19). Earthly and temporal pleasures would be man's only satisfaction (v 32).

Against the backdrop of this potentially disastrous situation, Paul issued the ringing challenge: "Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame" (1 Cor 15:34). The advice he gave is just as momentous today. If Christians are to fulfill their role in the light of the commission which the Lord Jesus Christ gave, these words of Paul can provide insight that may prove to be crucial if success is to follow.

#### THE MINDSET THAT IS REQUIRED

##### *Meaning of the Term*

In the stirring words of the KJV, Paul's challenge is rendered: "Awake to righteousness." NASB treats the verb as "become sober-minded." NIV translates it: "Come back to your senses." This verb used by Paul occurs nowhere else in the NT. However, it belongs to a word group that is represented nine other times. The word is actually used in two ways. Its basic meaning is to become sober, whether physically from a condition of drunkenness, or metaphorically from intoxication with one's own thoughts. Its other meaning is to awake out of sleep.

Clearly, in the Corinthian letter, the meaning in view is a soberness of mind, the opposite of mental fuzziness. The readers are urged to be on guard against mental or spiritual intoxication from their own thoughts about life and death—thoughts which are not God's thoughts. It is probably significant that every other occurrence of the cognate verb in the NT is used in a context where the reader is being urged to think rightly about the coming of Christ, the resurrection, or the life to come. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians about Christ's return, he said, "Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch, and *be sober*" (1 Thes 5:6). "Let us who are of the day, *be sober*, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for a helmet, the hope of salvation" (1 Thes 5:8). As he warned Timothy in the light of Christ's coming kingdom, he said, "But *watch* thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist" (2 Tim 4:5). Peter used the same word: "wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, *be sober*, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:13). He also said, "But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore *sober*, and watch unto prayer" (1 Pet 4:7). And after reminding his readers that Christ, the Chief Shepherd, will appear, he urged them to "*be sober*, be vigilant because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about" (1 Pet 5:8).

Thus Paul's point in this letter to the Corinthians is that believers must be thinking clearly, not fuzzily, not with confusion, or befuddle-

ment, or intoxication. Their minds must be alert, functioning properly, and focused on the crucial issues.

### *Implications in the Context*

What did this command imply to those original readers? The theme of this part of the epistle is clear. Paul was discussing the resurrection. The readers were being told to be sober-minded in contrast to wrong thinking in denying the resurrection. To develop merely an emotional attachment or loyalty to some outstanding speaker, without thinking clearly through his teaching, was potentially disastrous. They were being called to think straight. The reality of the believer's resurrection must be clearly understood, not just as part of a recited creed, but as part of their mental process. If so, it would condition whatever they did.

Furthermore, it is implied that they were already somewhat intoxicated in their minds. They were commanded to "sober up." Too much wrong teaching had already clouded their minds. They had not gone so far as to apply logically all the ramifications that denial of resurrection involved, but Paul told them they were on the way, and the end would be disaster.

It is also clear that the Corinthian readers needed to guard themselves against moral contagion from those deniers of the literal fulfillment of the scriptural promise of resurrection. If they continued to associate with those who denied resurrection, the very underpinnings of morality would be cut away. The "bad company" of those teachers of error would "corrupt good morals" (v 33). It would not take long until the weakening of their future blessed hope would bring the converse emphasis upon the present sensual and material life, and the inevitable philosophy would take over, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (v 32).

### *The Truth for the Church*

What is the truth from this passage for the church today? Surely it is clear that unrighteous living is the product of improper thinking, and Scripture calls it spiritual drunkenness. It is an aberration. It is contrary to that renewing of the mind which regeneration has secured for us. It means that fuzziness, befuddlement, or downright insensitivity has taken the place of the Spirit-filled intelligence which God has made possible for his children.

In addition, the passage indicates that spiritual sobriety is not just optional; it is commanded. This statement leaves no room for the notion that Christians are given the option of how doctrinally correct and how morally pure they wish to be. The only choice is to obey

God's word or disobey it. If Christ is one's Lord and Master, then the response to follow his instruction was settled long ago.

Furthermore, the passage is clear that one's mindset is the key to the matter. "Become sober-minded" is the command. It is easy to become mentally befuddled. All too often Christians have been led astray by that curious and non-scriptural dichotomy of "head versus heart" and have drawn the strange conclusion that one can trust his "heart" but not his "head." The Bible most often uses those terms interchangeably: "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Prov 23:7). When believers fail to focus their *thinking* on the teaching of the Word of God, they are in danger of mental and spiritual drunkenness, useless to themselves, and a disgrace to the cause of Christ.

Finally, the truth should be obvious that contamination from others within and outside the church continues to blunt the impact that Christians should be making on their world. Wrong thinking leads to wrong doing, and this in turn blurs our witness, destroys our integrity, and makes Christ's transforming power invisible to an unbelieving world.

### *The Manner of Compliance*

One additional matter in this opening clause calls for special comment. The common rendering "awake unto righteousness" states the goal or content of this spiritual awakening. In fact, however, this is not the most accurate way of translating these words. Paul actually used an adverb which means "rightly, justly, properly." He was not naming the object of their sober thinking, but the manner in which they were to carry it out. It is the same usage as is found in Luke 23:41, where one of the crucified thieves commented on the appropriateness of their punishment and used the identical word: "and we indeed justly." He meant that it was the proper sentence for their crimes. Thus the NASB translates our verse: "become sober-minded as you ought." The NIV renders similarly: "Come back to your senses as you ought."

In the context, therefore, the sense is that there was a proper mindset which they ought to have regarding the resurrection. There was a standard whereby their thinking could be measured, and they were as erratic as drunkards if they failed to measure up. That standard was the truth of apostolic teaching and the whole context of biblical revelation. They had heard the gospel of a risen Christ and of regeneration which they could acquire. At one time in their lives the Holy Spirit had opened their eyes to enable them to grasp the truth of the new birth, eternal life, and resurrection. There was really no excuse for their present confusion except their own imbibing of contradictory teaching. That some of them had drunk too deeply of

doubtful doctrine was becoming painfully obvious to others. They needed to return to the standard of the Word of God and its revelation to them. No longer must they let themselves be captivated by the appeal of a spellbinder. As residents of Corinth, they had heard many a Greek orator in the theater or the marketplace, and should have known full well that mere eloquence or charisma was no guarantee of truth. They must not be so willing to adopt the latest fad or be influenced by contemporary morality. "Sober-minded as you ought" meant they were obligated to think in harmony with that apostolic teaching which they had received.

People don't like the word "ought" very much. They didn't like it in first-century Corinth. Neither do we like it in twentieth-century America. Even Christians struggle with the concept. We love the Scriptures which tell us that Christ has set us free; that we are not under a yoke of bondage; that we are not under law but grace. When it is suggested that there are modes of conduct that Christians are obligated to follow, some will protest such ideas as nonsense, or old fashioned, or legalism, and proudly call themselves liberated. How easy it is to forget that the same apostle who said that "Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1) also commanded us to "fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2). In the words of our text, we *ought* to be sober-minded. We are obligated by our Christian commitment to have the right mindset toward spiritual truth. It is not just a piece of helpful advice—well-meant, but optional. It is our solemn responsibility. "Become sober-minded as you ought." There is a Christian propriety, and it is based upon the Word of God.

#### THE HOLINESS THAT IS COMMANDED

There is a second implication in our text. It tells us that there is a holiness that is expected in our lives.

"Stop sinning" is the command. Its close connection with the previous command may suggest the particular sort of sinning the apostle had in mind.

#### *Meaning of the Term*

There are various words in the Bible that describe man's violation of the will of God. The one used here is the commonest one in the NT and the one with the broadest meaning. It describes sin as a missing of God's desire for our lives. The parallelism employed in Rom 3:23 helps us understand its meaning: "All have sinned and *come short* of the glory of God." We have missed the goal which men made in the image of God should have been aiming at. We have failed to fulfill God's will. We have fallen short of the expectations of a holy God.



Now this term for sin is the broadest one in the NT and embraces most of the aspects which the other words for sin emphasize. For example, there are NT terms for sin which emphasize transgressing, unrighteousness, and lawlessness. I John 3:4, however, says that "everyone who doeth sin (our word in I Cor 15:34) doeth also lawlessness (ἀνομία), and sin is lawlessness."

The use of the negative with this particular form of the verb tells the readers that they are not to continue engaging in their present practice. Usually it means to stop doing what one is now doing. The simple rendering "sin not" of the common version, is rendered a bit more precisely by the "stop sinning" of the NASB and NIV.

The two verbs in this part of our verse could well be understood like this: "Come to your senses and do not continue to sin." The readers are challenged to think straight and live accordingly.

### *The Context*

This verse has often been used as a general admonition for Christians in almost any circumstance. Surely its application is appropriate to all believers in every situation. Every Christian ought to think clearly and live in holiness.

Paul, however, gave these commands in the midst of a specific discussion. He was talking about a particular doctrinal error at Corinth in which some were denying the resurrection. Failure to believe the teaching which God had sent them through his apostle indicated their cloudy thinking, and was in turn a falling short of what God expected. It was sinning and they needed to get rid of it.

Furthermore, Paul has explained that failure to grasp the truth of resurrection would inevitably lead to a substitution of materialism and self-indulgence for the spiritual values that should be motivating believers. The philosophy of "eat and drink for tomorrow we die" would soon take over. Paul reminds us that life is interwoven. What we think determines what we do. We live the way we do because of the mindset we have. At Corinth the deviant views on the doctrine of resurrection were not just harmless philosophical speculations. They had a direct connection with the purity of their lives. To abandon apostolic teaching was to pursue a course of sin. It was to live in direct defiance of the command of the Word of God.

### *A Mark of Immaturity*

The Bible says that sin in the lives of Christians is one of the marks of spiritual immaturity. Paul had already called the Corinthians "carnal" because they had allowed the superficial, the temporal, and the cultural to dominate them. In the Epistle to the Hebrews,

maturity is explained as the ability to discern good and evil (5:11–14). One's knowledge of the word of righteousness—God's Word—enables the believer to acquire God's standards, so that he can choose the good and shun the evil. And this is no mere option. Spiritual growth *must* take place. If it doesn't there is something terribly wrong. Spiritual immaturity is not just disappointing in the lives of Christians. Paul says it is sin and calls upon us to get rid of it.

#### THE CHALLENGE THAT MUST BE FACED

The passage concludes with the sober words that carry with them a great challenge to the church. "For some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame." This statement is often applied to the great need of lost mankind for the gospel. The fact that millions of men and women are ignorant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, some in lands beyond the seas and others in our own communities, is a matter that ought to shame us if we are doing nothing about it. When Paul wrote these words, however, he was not talking about evangelizing pagans, but about correcting wrong doctrine. The point of the statement was not primarily outreach, but purity. He was warning them of the abysmal ignorance of God on the part of those who had infiltrated their church and were upsetting their faith.

#### *Existing Situations in the Church Are Often Less than Ideal*

These words serve as a reminder to us that existing situations in the church are not always ideal. Our verse speaks of "some" who are without knowledge of God. Presumably these are the "some" first mentioned in v 12, "some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead." They were not pagan citizens of the city, but certain ones in the church. They had promoted a culturally-conditioned theology which denied literal resurrection. The outcome was that emphasis was transferred from a future life to the present one. "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (v 32). Moral decline had followed. Holiness of life did not seem very important. Separation from sin was ignored. "Bad company corrupts good character" was Paul's concise evaluation (NIV, v 33).

Earlier Paul had said that he didn't expect the Corinthians to have no contact with unbelievers, for that would have required a physical departure from the world (5:10). He did not forbid them from joining pagan friends at dinner (10:27). But to cultivate bad company and take pleasure in it was another matter. The "bad company" in this passage seems to be inside the church. The danger Paul feared was the growth of spiritual contamination from those who were spiritually sick or dead. Tolerating false doctrine was

exposing the rest of the church to the infection of moral and theological disease. On another occasion Paul spoke of false teaching as spreading like gangrene (2 Tim 2:17). Ignorance of God and his word exists not only outside the church. At Corinth, it existed inside as well.

Surely the church of today has reason to heed the counsel of the passage. It is no great surprise to find churches where some lives are not honoring God; where some are joining with those who are more concerned with personal gratification and enjoyment of this present world than they are with spiritual goals and present sacrifice; where some are really without the knowledge of God, his holy character, and his will for his children.

### *Some Less-Than-Ideal Situations Are Positively Shameful*

"I speak this to your shame." At Corinth, it was shameful because it was *contrary to what the church had been taught*. They knew better, and thus they were without excuse. Christ had risen from the dead. He had taught his followers that a day was coming when those who were in the grave would hear his voice and come forth in resurrection (John 5:28-29). To believe or to teach otherwise was a clear repudiation of the truth implicit in the gospel.

Furthermore, the situation at Corinth was shameful because the church was *tolerating this false teaching*. By letting this "bad company" exist in their congregation, they were implying that it didn't matter; that doctrine was less important than more "practical" matters. In so doing, they were virtually joining forces with those who were ignorant of God and his revelation.

In addition, it was shameful because it was *leading the church into impure living*. The Corinthians knew perfectly well the standards expected of a child of God. Their former lives had been recognized as sin. The new life in Christ had been startling in its contrasts. As new converts they had revelled in the fact that their guilt before God had been cleansed and that their sordid lives had been transformed. But now they had allowed a situation to develop in their church in which spiritual values were being subordinated to material and temporal ones.

It is one thing to acknowledge that local churches are less than perfect. It is far more serious when we learn to be at ease with impurity in our midst. Within Christianity today, we can find almost every sin known in the world being tolerated in some congregation. There are congregations consisting of practicing homosexuals. There are churches where adultery is so commonplace that partners exchange mates and all parties continue in good standing in the same

congregation. Surely Paul would term this sort of thing an absence of the knowledge of God and a matter that ought to cause us shame.

*Paul's Challenge Was to Grasp the Truth, Decide to Obey It, and Then Put It into Operation*

If this challenge was needed at Corinth, and none will deny that it was, it is surely needed today. There is still great ignorance of God, not only in our communities, our nation, and in the regions beyond, but also as at Corinth *in our churches*. I am convinced that there is not nearly as much understanding of biblical truth as the average Christian thinks he has. I have often heard it said that most Christians already know enough doctrine; they just need to put it to work. I would like to counter that notion by insisting that the reason we are not "putting it to work" is because far too many of us don't understand God's truth all that well. When we *really* have the knowledge of God and his program, it will grip our minds and propel us into appropriate living. Those who have really come to "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6) have no problem deciding to obey it. Our attitude, our mindset is what Paul is appealing to. We can *decide* to do it. We must never allow anything else, no matter how temporarily attractive, to sidetrack us from the emphasis upon the Word of God—his revelation to us, the instrument by which we know God and avoid the problems Paul was warning the church against.

This challenge is just as relevant to us as to Corinth. We too are finding that the people in our churches are not exhibiting much distinction from the world. The continual pressure from our culture, which through the astounding effectiveness of the news and entertainment media has injected its influence into every home, has blurred our distinctiveness. Christians are not easily recognizable any longer by the things they do or don't do. The need is not for arbitrary, legalistic taboos, but for intelligent, meaningful discernment followed by consistent choices of what is right, not only on Sundays, but every day of the week. "Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning" is a challenge every Christian should take to heart.

Finally, this challenge to make up our minds to do the will of God carries with it the need for sensitivity to the condition of others, both inside and outside the church. "Some have not the knowledge of God." There are those in our neighborhoods who live in spiritual darkness and need to be reached by godly Christians whose lives manifest the transforming grace of God. There are those in other cities whose veneer of sophistication in so-called Christian America really masks a hopeless groping for meaningful lives that is doomed

to failure unless God's people share their knowledge of God. But there are even some within our churches who have the kind of ignorance of God Paul was speaking of here: their knowledge of his truth is minimal. They have never been sufficiently challenged or effectively taught.

Paul's desire for his readers is still relevant: that each of us will be so captivated by what God has done for us in Christ, and by what he has planned for us as revealed in Scripture, that it will make a difference in our lives; that it will lift our eyes to spiritual goals; that the world's values will be less attractive; and that our excitement over what new life in Christ really means will make us sensitive to others whose greatest need is the knowledge of God.