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'Lives worthy of the Gospel'
in Paul: A short introduction

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'Lives worthy of the Gospel'

As a Jew, Paul had been a member of a very special community. Those who belonged to it were members of a nation, but it was a nation which now had no recognized earthly leader. Although Jews in Judaea and Galilee, together with those who lived further afield – members of the Diaspora – were all ruled by Rome, nevertheless their true leader was God, and it was to him that they were answerable. Their allegiance to him was based on the belief that God had brought their ancestors out of Egypt, into the Promised Land. On Sinai he had made a covenant with them: because he loved them and had redeemed them from slavery and had called them to be his people, they promised, in response, to worship him alone and to obey his laws. This was the foundation of the relationship between God and his people – a relationship that has been aptly termed 'covenantal nomism':¹ the covenant between God and his people meant that in response to his grace, which had been demonstrated in their salvation, they willingly agreed to obey his law.

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

As a Christian, Paul continued to believe himself to be a member of God's people – though now that community had expanded to include Gentiles. God had once again acted to save his people – this time from the power of sin – and had called them to *be* his people. So how, now,

1. 'Nomism' from Greek *nomos*, 'law'. The term 'covenantal nomism' was first used by E. P. Sanders. See *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

are they to respond to the resurrection of Christ? Paul now views as an act of response. God belongs to God. It is as being 'to bring' (Rom. 1:5; cf. 15:16). Hence. What this and love for one' in Paul's view, faith. If, as we have seen, the requirement of the 'fulfilling' comes from life, and live according to salvation in Christ (11:25), and those members of this of those who believed expected to obey filled by those who

When Paul dealt with the law, therefore, he revealed the supreme revelation of the law, is the expression of the law. He means also the people of God with Christ. And just as Christ is concerned with Lord your God, house of slavery (5:6), so Paul's death and resurrection saw in looking at the formation of the to be (Rom. 12:1) in Christ, able to

For Paul, the commandment to God am holy'

are they to respond to his love and his grace, seen in the life, death and resurrection of Christ? Not, clearly, by obedience to the law, which Paul now views as an interim system. But certainly there must be *some* sort of response. God's people must live, act and speak like those who belong to God. Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, describes his mission as being 'to bring about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles' (Rom. 1:5; cf. 15:18): trust in what God has done must lead to obedience. What this obedience comprises is quite simply the love for God and love for one's neighbour that the law required but which Israel had, in Paul's view, failed to demonstrate (Rom. 13:8-10; cf. Gal. 5:13-14). If, as we have seen, Christ's death has dealt with sin in order that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in the lives of Christians, that 'fulfilling' comes about as the result of the fact they share Christ's risen life, and live according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4). God's gracious act of salvation in Christ has in effect established a 'new covenant' (1 Cor. 11:25), and those who accept the terms of this covenant and are members of this new community must live in a manner that is worthy of those who belong to the Lord (1 Cor. 11:27-34). What they are now expected to obey can be described as 'the law of Christ', and it is fulfilled by those who have received the Spirit (Gal. 6:1-2).

When Paul describes Christ as the *telos* – the 'end' or 'goal' – of the law, therefore, he means not simply that Christ, rather than the law, is the supreme revelation of what God is like and that Christ, rather than the law, is the expression of his purpose for humanity and the universe. He means also that the defining mark of those who belonged to the people of God was not their obedience to the law but their obedience to Christ. And just as the law was about a way of life, so obedience to Christ is concerned with a way of life. Just as the statement 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery', was followed by a 'therefore ...' (Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6), so Paul's statements about what God has done through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are followed by a 'therefore ...'. As we saw in looking at Romans, the 'therefore ...' there involves a total transformation of the whole person into what God intended each individual to be (Rom. 12:1-2). Those who once offered themselves to sin are now, *in Christ*, able to offer themselves to God (Rom. 6:13-19; 12:1).

For Paul, there is an inexorable logic about this 'therefore'. God's commandment to Israel had been: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (Lev. 19:2), and the requirement was still that God's

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people should be what God – in Christ – had revealed himself to be. But Paul's appeal goes beyond requiring what is fitting. As before, it is grounded in what God has already done, but what he has done has *already* radically changed them. In Christ, Christians have already been 'washed ... sanctified ... righted' (1 Cor. 6:11), because Christ is the source of their righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). What Paul is in effect commanding them, therefore, is to *be what they already are* – in Christ.

This appeal is sometimes described as the 'indicative-imperative': Christians are commanded to be (imperative) what they already are (indicative). It arises from the fact that Paul believes that the End has in a sense already begun. Christians are *already* living in the Age to Come, but since they continue to exist in the Present Age, they need to be continually exhorted to 'be what they are', and to live up to their calling. There is only one thing that is required of you, Paul tells the Philippians, and that is that you live in a way that is worthy of the gospel (Phil. 1:27). It is the gospel – the good news – about what God has done for them that has saved them, and that gospel must now guide their behaviour.

THE APPEAL TO LOVE

The commands to love God and their neighbour, and to live in love and harmony with one another, may not sound so very different from what had been said centuries before, but there is one essential difference. Paul is convinced that what mortals are themselves unable to achieve can in fact be achieved by the Spirit of God at work in human hearts and lives. Because Christians have died to their old life, which was dominated by sin, and now share the risen life of Christ, it is not they who obey the commands, but the Spirit working *in* them. When men and women gratify their own desires, they do 'the works of the flesh'. When they do the will of God, what they do is 'the fruit of the Spirit', since this fruit is the work of the Spirit living in them (Gal. 5:16–26).

So what did this mean, in practical terms? 'The whole law,' Paul says, 'is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Gal. 5:14). Earlier in that letter, he had summed up his present manner of life by declaring 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'. And who was this 'Christ'? None other than 'the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me' (Gal. 2:20). Clearly, then, love for others and giving oneself up for others must be the

hallmark of the Christ himself is the source of people (Rom. 5:5; 8:3) should characterize his another (1 Thess. 4:9–10) of the community together who love share the message (Phil. 2:5–11); they 'show outsiders what God is

The appeal to love is however, difficult to specify do this or that, though they shall not commit adultery shall not covet' (Rom. 13:9) harm one's neighbour. specific requirements. same love, having the fruit (2:2). It means caring for others abandoning pride in one's self the life of the Spirit of God together in compassion

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EVERYDAY PROBLEMS

The city of Corinth was part of Greece). It was a city which joined north and south to pass through it, and was a cultural centre. Corinth was a community, and this is why it was clearly open to many

hallmark of the Christian life. Paul makes repeated appeals for love. God himself is the source of love, and it is his love that saves and sustains his people (Rom. 5:5; 8:35, 39; 2 Cor. 5:14; 13:13). It is love, above all, that should characterize his people (1 Corinthians 13). They must love one another (1 Thess. 4:9–12; Rom. 13:8–10), since love binds the members of the community together and makes them a unity (Phil. 2:1–4). Those who love share the mind of Christ himself, and so reflect his attitude (Phil. 2:5–11); they 'shine like stars in the world' (Phil. 2:15), showing outsiders what God is like.

The appeal to love is an appeal to have certain attitudes. It is, however, difficult to spell out what love means in specific commands to do this or that, though naturally it includes such commandments as 'You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet' (Rom. 13:9). These things are forbidden because they harm one's neighbour. But the duties of love cannot be pinned down to specific requirements. Love means being of the same mind, sharing the same love, having the same attitude as others in the community (Phil. 2:2). It means caring for the welfare of others rather than oneself, and abandoning pride in one's own achievements (Phil. 2:3). Love arises from the life of the Spirit of God, who dwells in the community, and binds it together in compassion and sympathy (Phil. 2:1).

The famous 'hymn to love' in 1 Corinthians 13 spells out what love involves. Among its characteristics, love is said to be patient and kind; it is *not* envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own rights and is not irritable or resentful (13:4–5). This passage does not appear in 1 Corinthians by accident. A closer examination of the letter will show just how relevant this chapter is to the letter's concerns, and will give us some insight into how Paul dealt with the day-to-day problems that arose in one of his churches.

EVERYDAY PROBLEMS IN CORINTH

The city of Corinth was a flourishing seaport in Achaia (the southern part of Greece). It was strategically placed on a narrow isthmus of land which joined north and south, and separated east and west. All trade had to pass through it, and as a result it was a prosperous city and a thriving cultural centre. Corinth was a key position in which to plant a Christian community, and this is what Paul had done. But such a community was clearly open to many harmful influences. Not surprisingly, various

problems had arisen and Paul has heard about them, either because people travelling on business have reported them to him (1:11), or because the Corinthians themselves have asked questions in a letter (7:1).

Paul's converts, mostly Gentiles, had worshipped the local gods, and may well have been accustomed to behaving in the kind of way castigated by Paul in Romans 1. Many of them would have been slaves, but the better-off among them would have been influenced by the ethos of competition and pride in personal achievement that characterized all areas of Corinthian society, whether intellectual discussion, business or sport. Converted to Christianity, the Corinthians continued to think in traditional ways. The city's strategic position meant that they had been visited not only by Paul, but also by Apollos (Acts 18:24–19:1), and possibly by Peter as well. The Corinthian Christians began to compare the abilities of the various Christian preachers and to divide into cliques, boasting about the particular leader whom they favoured (1 Cor. 1:10–17). Some of them apparently boasted in their own wisdom and maturity (1:18–2:13). In Paul's eyes, their quarrels demonstrate their immaturity (3:1–4) and are tearing the church apart, destroying the work of God's Spirit (3:10–23). Their devotion to human leaders shows that they have misunderstood the central message of the gospel (3:5–9; 4:1–21), which is not about gaining riches and glory and status in human terms, but about Christ crucified, and the call to become like him. Christians are those who 'have the mind of Christ' (2:16): it is a bold claim, but one that will be demonstrated in love for one another, and not in boasting. No wonder, then, that in 1 Corinthians 13 Paul reminds the Corinthians that understanding mysteries and having knowledge are of no value without love, which is never envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

The Corinthians' tendency to quarrel and to assert their own opinion is demonstrated in the fact that they are going to court, not only against outsiders, but also against one another. Paul is appalled. 'Why not rather be wronged?' he asks (6:1–8). 'Why not rather be defrauded?' Better that than oppose each other in the secular courts. The Corinthians' attitudes towards one another are anything but loving. Clearly they need reminding that 'Love does not insist on its own way ... bears all things ... endures all things' (13:5–7).

The Corinthians needed clear guidance on sexual matters, too. One or two of them were apparently indulging in practices that would not be tolerated among pagans (5:1). Why? It would seem that they had mis-

understood Paul's meaning that in their as a result they were fr that concerned their intercourse with wh (6:12–13). These peo own desires, without lawful,' they cried. 'B is, of mutual benefit. not become enslaved

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understood Paul's message about Christians being set free from sin as meaning that in their new lives sin was not a relevant concept, and that as a result they were free to behave as they wished in relation to anything that concerned their 'fleshly' existence. They could therefore have sexual intercourse with whom they wished and eat and drink to excess (6:12–13). These people were behaving as they wished, gratifying their own desires, without thought for the well-being of others. 'Everything is lawful,' they cried. 'But not everything is beneficial' retorted Paul – that is, of mutual benefit. 'Everything is lawful' – 'but,' said Paul, 'one must not become enslaved to anything' (6:12).

It may well be that the root of the Corinthians' misunderstanding lay in Paul's own teaching. We have noted how in Romans 8 he contrasts life lived according to the flesh with life lived according to the Spirit. His point, of course, is that though Christians are still living in the flesh – i.e. they are physically alive – their way of life should be guided by the Spirit and not by earthly passions. The fact that the life that they lived 'according to the Spirit' had to be lived 'in the flesh', however, inevitably caused tensions, since Christians sometimes forgot that they were supposed to be 'dead to sin' (Rom. 6:11). Nevertheless, the way in which they behaved in terms of their *physical* bodies must also be guided by the Spirit.

The Corinthians had apparently taken note of Paul's sharp contrast between 'flesh' and 'Spirit', but interpreted it in terms of their own culture, which assumed that the antithesis was such that what happened in one sphere had no relevance to the other. If they were now living in the Spirit, they must have reasoned, this must mean that they could do what they liked 'in the flesh' – i.e. with their physical bodies – since these belonged to what was temporary, as opposed to the eternal. In reply, Paul insists that their bodies are more than mere flesh. The Greek word *soma*, usually translated 'body', is in fact impossible to translate accurately, since Paul uses it to denote the human personality – that is, the whole human being, who is able to relate to the spiritual – to God – as well as to the physical. As long as one has a physical existence, that physical existence is relevant to who one is, and cannot be ignored. How, then, Paul protests, can the Corinthians suppose that they can use the bodies that belong to Christ (since they themselves belong to Christ) to have physical relationships with prostitutes (6:15)? 'Do you not know,' he asks them, 'that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit within you?' (6:19).

By contrast, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul has to deal with a problem that apparently arises from precisely the opposite reaction. *Some* Corinthians supposed that the spiritual life meant the *denial* of all physical pleasures, and so adopted asceticism. Their attitude is revealed in what is apparently a quotation from their letter to Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:1: 'It is well for a man not to touch a woman.' Paul's response has often been misunderstood – partly because these words have been assumed to reflect his own attitude! In fact, he cautions against it, urging each man to have his own wife, and each woman to have her own husband. One of the interesting features of this lengthy discussion on marriage is that whatever advice is given to the husband is given also to the wife, and whatever rights the husband is said to have are ascribed to the wife also. Here is full equality between the sexes! Paul calls for mutuality and consideration: this is love for others in action. This is the more remarkable, since Paul himself has no wife (7:7). Like many others in this situation, he clearly regards this as an advantage! But we should note why: it gives him more time to devote to 'the affairs of the Lord' (7:32–5), which in his case means travelling the ancient world proclaiming the Gospel. It means, too, that he is saved from concern about wife and family during the time of distress that he expects to overtake the world before the End of all things finally arrives (7:25–31). Paul's response here is partly governed by his eschatological expectations, but the chapter gives no basis whatever for the common assumption that he was a misogynist: on the contrary, he seems to go out of his way to treat women as equals.

Another problem had divided the Corinthian community, and this concerned the question as to whether or not Christians were permitted to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Animal sacrifices were offered to the gods but were not totally consumed, and the meat that remained was sold in the nearby market. Here, too, as in sexual matters, there were those who gloried in freedom and those who advocated abstinence. The former group flaunted their knowledge that the gods represented by idols had no real existence, since there was only one God (8:4). Paul has to agree with them – but warns them that 'knowledge puffs up', in contrast to love, which 'builds up' (8:1). Later, in chapter 13, Paul reminds them that love is *not* puffed up (13:4). Here he insists that those who have knowledge must be careful lest their freedom from superstition, which allows them to eat this food without thereby feeling that they are acknowledging the existence of these gods, encourage those less confident than themselves to do something that they really consider to be

wrong. By their consciences – felt on their rights, himself. The year love their neighbours (13:5)?

This means that the apostle, who love means, rem apostle, he had cover the cost of not simply because scripture it (9:13–14) – a had refused to b order to earn his because he felt t ing all privilege erately gave up himself with obvious: Christi of others.

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wrong. By their knowledge the 'strong' may destroy those with weaker consciences – fellow-Christians for whom Christ died (8:11). By insisting on their rights, they sin not only against others, but against Christ himself. The yardstick for their behaviour must be love. Do they truly love their neighbours, or do they selfishly do what will please themselves (13:5)?

This means that Christians must not insist on their rights – and Paul, the apostle, who is committed to setting an example of what Christian love means, reminds the Corinthians of what he himself has done. As an apostle, he had certain rights – rights to a 'living allowance' that would cover the cost of food and lodging (9:1–6). That was obviously his due, not simply because the same principle applied in secular life (9:7), but because scripture supported it (9:8–12) and the Lord himself had decreed it (9:13–14) – a rare appeal by Paul to words of Jesus himself. But Paul had refused to be supported by the church and had worked at a trade in order to earn his own living – not because he was not a real apostle, but because he felt that he could best win people for the gospel by abandoning all privilege and getting alongside them. Like Christ himself, he deliberately gave up what he might have claimed for himself and identified himself with others, in order to save them (9:19–23). The moral is obvious: Christians should be willing to give up their rights for the sake of others.

But having affirmed that those Corinthian Christians who insist on their liberty are right in what they claim to know but wrong in what they do, Paul issues a further warning. They may destroy not only their weaker fellow-Christians but themselves (10:1–14). The Israelites, too, were arrogant and thought themselves immune to sin – but they fell into idolatry and sexual immorality (Exod. 32:1–6; Num. 25:1–2) and were punished (Exod. 32:35; Num. 25:9; 26:62). Christians must *never* accept invitations to dine in a pagan temple (a favourite way to entertain one's friends in ancient Corinth), since that is the equivalent of eating and drinking with the gods who are worshipped there – or rather, since these 'gods' have no existence, with demons, spiritual forces opposed to God, in whom Paul most certainly *did* believe (10:15–22).

Once again, Paul modifies the claim of the 'strong' Corinthians that 'everything is lawful' (10:23; cf. 6:12). While accepting their claim, he reminds them once more that 'not everything is beneficial'; moreover, 'not everything builds up' (which is what love does, 8:1). Their primary concern must be the welfare of others, not their own (10:24). There is no

reason, therefore, why they should not themselves buy the meat in the market, and there is no need to ask where it came from (i.e. was it part of a sacrifice or not?) since everything belongs to God (10:25–6). Nor is there any need to ask questions about the meat if they are invited out to a meal. But if someone else is concerned because the meat has been sacrificed, then they should *not* eat it, lest they upset that other person. If no one else is upset, however, then Christians may eat what they wish – provided they do everything to *God's* glory (v. 31). Paul's own guiding principle is that of consideration for others, seeking their good and not his own (v. 33), and the Corinthians must do the same. They must imitate him, just as he imitates Christ (11:1). The ultimate appeal, therefore, is to be like Christ.

There is no straightforward answer, therefore, to the problem that had divided the Christian community in Corinth. The strong were right in declaring that pagan gods had no existence, but wrong to think that they could ignore the scruples of their fellow-Christians. What advice should Paul give? He goes back to first principles and appeals to the gospel itself – to the fact that Christ had died for all, and therefore for the weak, as well as for the strong (8:11). That must be the guide for their behaviour. They must do nothing contrary to the gospel – nothing that might destroy their fellow-Christians. The community that belonged to Christ as a result of his death and resurrection was called to be *like* him, and that meant that they must live according to the requirements of love. The particular course of action that they should adopt would vary according to the particular circumstance, but their guiding principle must be love for their neighbour.

WORSHIP

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul turns to various problems concerning the community's worship. First comes the question of how men and women should dress while worshipping. Because of Paul's teaching on this matter, insisting that women must cover their heads while men must be bareheaded, Paul has been maligned as a misogynist. This is a gross injustice. We have to remember that Paul, a Jew, had been brought up in a society that expected women to dress modestly, and that included covering their heads. In Greek and Roman societies, rules were not so strict, but women who did not cover their heads might well be taken to be prostitutes. It is not surprising that Paul expects Christian women to

behave modestly, and not to dispute, even though his argument (1 Cor. 11:2–16). Paul's judgment by the social customs and the fact that he did not condemn him because he certainly did not intend to lay down a law is considerably irony in that the Corinthians were living 'in Christ' and were living under a law-giver whose teachings were as sacrosanct!

Concentration on what Paul says has obscured important features of chapter 7, Paul deals with the question of whether it is appropriate for women to pray and prophesy on the presupposition that men, a presupposition which was not true today. Secondly, we must remember that they were given protection from unbelief by Paul as contributors to the Christian community. Members of the Christian community should note that Paul assumed that women should pray and prophesy in prayer and prophecy.² Paul certainly sat apart,³ and was not present in the congregation. Paul, however, was not saying that women will be joining in the next chapter.⁴ To do so, however, they

A second issue concerning the Last Supper eaten by Jesus and the fragment of tradition about the written tradition that we

2. Although Jewish prophets were not present, it would have been rare.
3. This has been disputed, and the practice seems to go back to the 'Court of Women'. Women were not present with men. For a full discussion of this see pp. 358–401 in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul* by James D. G. H. Clendenen, Davies and John Sturdy (Cambridge, 2000).
4. Paul gives no instructions about the practice of Christian worship. In the third

behave modestly, and not to bring the Christian community into disrepute, even though his arguments supporting this are somewhat tortuous (1 Cor. 11:2–16). Paul's judgement on this matter is clearly conditioned by the social customs and attitudes of the first century, and it is unfair to condemn him because he did not share those of the twenty-first. He certainly did not intend to lay down rules for future generations, and there is considerably irony in the fact that Paul, who insisted that Christians were living 'in Christ' and not 'under law' should have been turned into a law-giver whose teaching on this particular matter was treated for centuries as sacrosanct!

Concentration on what Paul says about women's headgear has obscured important features of his teaching. First, we note that, as in chapter 7, Paul deals with what men should wear side by side with what is appropriate for women – though here, it is true, his argument is based on the presupposition that women are in a subordinate relationship to men, a presupposition which offends the very different assumptions of today. Secondly, we must remember that women's head covering offered them protection from unwelcome attention, and so would have been seen by Paul as contributing to mutual respect and concern for other members of the Christian community. Thirdly, and most importantly, we should note that Paul assumes that women will be taking an active part in prayer and prophecy.² In the Jewish synagogue, women almost certainly sat apart,³ and worship was conducted by the male members of the congregation. Paul, however, apparently takes it for granted here that women will be joining in the leading of worship by praying and preaching.⁴ To do so, however, they must be properly attired – as must the men.

A second issue concerns the community's practice of gathering together to eat 'the Lord's Supper'. Paul links this specifically with the Last Supper eaten by Jesus and his disciples, and provides us with a rare fragment of tradition about Jesus' ministry: it is in fact the earliest written tradition that we possess about the Last Supper. Paul recounts

2. Although Jewish prophets were not unknown (Anna is mentioned in Luke 2: 36–8), they would have been rare.
3. This has been disputed, and there is in fact no clear contemporary evidence to prove it. Nevertheless, the earliest records and archaeological evidence that we have support this view, and the practice seems to go back to worship in the Temple, where there was a separate 'Court of Women'. Women were clearly included in Jewish worship, but were separated from men. For a full discussion of the question, see William Horbury, 'Women in the Synagogue', pp. 358–401 in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, Volume 3, eds. William Horbury, W. D. Davies and John Sturdy (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).
4. Paul gives no instructions about whether or not men and women should sit separately in Christian worship. In the third century AD, however, segregation was apparently common.

the story because the Corinthians are behaving inappropriately, breaking up into cliques. Those who arrive first eat their fill and get drunk, while latecomers get nothing. The problem may have been caused by social differences, with the well-to-do arriving first and slaves coming last.⁵ Whatever the cause, one group is humiliating the other, and showing contempt for the Church of God. Once again, the law of love is being ignored. Those who eat and drink for their own satisfaction, without being aware of the needs of the whole community, are ignoring what the celebration of the Supper proclaims – the Lord's death for their sakes. Their behaviour is thus a flagrant denial of the gospel itself. Paul urges the Corinthians to wait for one another – yet another example of his demand that they show love for others (11:17–34).

Paul turns next to the issue of 'spiritual gifts'. Even this has caused problems in Corinth! The reason is that some members of the congregation claim to have been given more significant gifts than others. In first-century Corinth, spectacular gifts – such as the ability to speak in tongues or to perform miracles – were highly rated. The result was that some members of the community were boasting about their own particular gifts and despising those who did not have them. Paul reminds them that whatever gifts they have derive from the Holy Spirit, and that there are many different kinds of gift, all of which are necessary to the well-being of the community as a whole (12:1–11). Paul here uses his famous analogy of the Church as a body in which each limb and organ has a vital part to play. A body consisting entirely of eyes would be useless (and so, he implies, would be a community where the only gift was that of speaking in tongues). Each member of a body must be concerned for the others, and all must share the suffering of one member or rejoice when one member is honoured (12:12–26). Once again we have Paul insisting on the necessity for mutual concern and esteem of others within the Christian community. His next words, however, must have startled the Corinthians: 'Now you are the body of Christ' he writes (v. 27). Their relationship with Christ is so close that, together, they constitute Christ's body – his physical presence in the world, and the embodiment of his character. It is a brilliant image, for it conveys not only the reality of the relationship between Christ and individual believers, but also that between themselves. They are intimately bound together, members of a community whether they wish to be or not. As John Wesley was to say

5. See Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982), pp. 145–74.

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6. Sermon on the Mount

many years later: 'Christianity is essentially a social religion ... to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it'.⁶ One cannot love God without loving one's neighbour.

From hankering after showy gifts, Paul points the Corinthians to 'a more excellent way'. It is nothing less than the way of love. Without this, the ability to speak in tongues and the gifts of prophecy, of insight into mysteries, and of knowledge are worthless (13:1-3). Love is the one essential gift – greater even than faith and hope, linked with it here as the three qualities that endure (1 Cor. 13:13; cf. 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; Col. 1:4-5).

It is from the view-point of love, therefore, that Paul now assesses the spiritual gifts which the Corinthians prize. Prophecy helps to build and encourage others, and is therefore valuable; the gift of tongues is less valuable, since it helps only the speaker; it is useful only if what is said is interpreted (14:1-25). It is clear from the lengthy discussion that Paul gives to this question that the pride of some Corinthian Christians in their ability to speak with tongues was causing Paul considerable concern. Again and again he reminds them that the measuring-rod for assessing the value of spiritual gifts and for judging all that is done in the community is the question: 'Does this build up the church?' (14:3-5, 12, 17, 26.)

In gatherings for worship, everyone who has something to offer – a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation – should be allowed to do so – provided it builds up the church (14:26). The principle on which worship was conducted seems to resemble the one followed by the Society of Friends, who have no set form of worship, but who gather together in silence in the presence of God, waiting for individual members of the congregation to be stirred to speak. There appears to have been little silence in the Corinthian gatherings however! Worship there was clearly much noisier and more disorderly, since the Corinthian Christians were apparently all speaking at once. Those speaking in tongues must do so one at a time, urges Paul; there must not be too many of them, and there must be someone who can interpret what is said. Otherwise, they must be silent; speaking in tongues was self-indulgent, and of no help to others, if what was said was not understood (vv. 27-8). Prophets, too, should speak one at a time. When one of them has had his turn and someone else is inspired, the first must be silent (vv. 29-33). Women should not be speaking in church – they, too, should be silent (vv. 34-6). Since Paul has already spoken about women praying and prophesying (11:5), this command to them to keep silent is strange: Paul

6. Sermon on the Mount IV. 1.1 (John Wesley's *Fourty-four Sermons*, Sermon XIX).

perhaps has a particular kind of speaking in mind here – namely the asking of questions (v. 35). Presumably – unlike the spirit-inspired prayer and prophecy mentioned in 11:5 – he believes that this does not contribute to the building-up of the community. Whatever it is that he has in mind, his chief objection is that this particular activity is ‘shameful’, because it is contrary to social convention (and so will bring the church into disrepute, not build it up).⁷

It is clear from 1 Corinthians that the meaning of the command to ‘love one’s neighbour’ needs to be thought out in each situation. Its implications are far more pervasive than a simple list of prohibitions such as ‘Do not kill, do not steal, do not commit adultery’. When Jesus was asked, ‘Who is my neighbour?’ he did not offer a definition but told a story, spelling out what loving one’s neighbour meant in a particular situation (Luke 10:25–37). For Paul, too, it is necessary to think through who one’s neighbour might be and what loving him or her might involve. Love for others will be shown in different ways according to the circumstances. There are, of course, certain constants – courtesy, mutual respect and concern – but the appropriate way to love one’s neighbour will be affected by social convention and pressures. Sacrificed meat may be harmless in itself – but it is harmful if it destroys another’s faith. Spiritual gifts come from God – but even they can be misused and so destroy the Church’s unity. Men and women must not flout social convention if that will bring shame on the Church, instead of building it up. In different situations, the decisions about how to love one’s neighbour will be different, but the command to love remains as the constant rule by which those decisions must be judged. It is the measuring-rod for Christian behaviour because the gospel itself is the story of God’s love for us. The Christian calling is to live lives that are worthy of that gospel.

Paul’s ethical judgements about how Christians should live, and about the behaviour that was appropriate in particular situations, were shaped by various influences. Whether or not he was familiar with the teaching of Jesus is a matter of dispute, though he certainly refers to teachings of the Lord on two occasions in 1 Corinthians.⁸ As a Jew, he

7. There is some textual evidence to suggest that vv. 34–35 are a later addition to the letter. Although they are found in all our manuscripts, they occur after v. 40 in a few of them, and it has been argued that the verses were originally a marginal gloss, which subsequently made its way into the text. In that case, the comment would have been made by someone who supported the view expressed in 1 Tim. 2: 11–12.
8. 1 Cor. 7: 10–11; 9: 14. There are no other explicit references. Among those who have argued for the influence of Jesus’ teaching on Paul are David Wenham, in *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1995).

inherited certain assumptions, and frequently wrong, and frequently (14:34). His Greek education, and his familiarity with Greek philosophers, and with the ideas of the Stoics and Epicureans, which may be more important than these influences, provided the motivation for his story was, however, open, but looked also towards the future (Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 13:11–13), and sometimes towards the theme of the coming Day.

inherited certain assumptions about what was right and what was wrong, and frequently referred to scripture for a ruling (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:13; 14:34). His Greek education would have given him a knowledge of Greek philosophers, and there are parallels between his teaching and theirs which may be more than coincidence (e.g. Gal. 5:19–23). Important as these influences may have been, it was the gospel itself that provided the motivation and pattern for Christian behaviour. The gospel story was, however, open-ended. It told of what God *had* done, in Christ, but looked also towards a future Day of restoration and judgement (Romans 8; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Cor. 5:10; Phil. 3:12–21). The approach of that Day added urgency to Paul's appeal to live holy lives (Rom. 13:11–13), and sometimes influenced his advice (1 Cor. 7:26). It is to the theme of the coming Day of salvation and judgement that we turn next.

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