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Pp 295 - 312 (1 Corinthians)

12. The Corinthian Correspondence

OUR KNOWLEDGE OF earliest Christianity would be considerably diminished without Paul's two Letters to the Corinthians. We find in them a portrait of a community whose life together was a mixture of confusion, pettiness, and ambition, combined with enthusiasm and fervor. The community struggled to define its identity as the church of God in a complex and sophisticated urban setting. The letters also reveal Paul's relationship with a beloved but stubborn community founded by him, a tie that forced him to delineate his full understanding of his mission, his apostleship, and the implications of these for his authority. We thus meet here Paul the pastor and the father of a community.

The Corinthians were the first to face the problems that have proved to be perennial for all Christian communities: how to live in holiness and freedom within the very real structures of a given social world. They confronted these issues in culturally conditioned cases—for example, eating meat offered to idols, women wearing veils while prophesying—that provide structural analogies to situations faced by churches in every generation. In this correspondence, we discover the difficulty of defining an identity within a pluralistic context. Rather than the specific solutions offered by Paul, it is his way of thinking about these issues and the principles he invokes that remain of contemporary interest.

The Church and the Correspondence

The restored city of Corinth, a port city with harbors to the east and to the north, was the capital of the province of Achaia. It hosted a large transient population, which typically brought its trades as well as its cults to the city. The diversity that developed out of this phenomenon is attested by archaeology, which confirms the presence of both synagogue and Isis shrine in the same city. As one would expect, numerous problems accompanied such an influx of peoples into the region. For instance, like most ancient ports, Corinth enjoyed a reputation for sexual immorality. And with the constant movement of people in and out of the city, attachment to particular pagan rituals and clubs became a necessary means of maintaining some form of social stability, a practice that would become a particular problem for early Christians.

Paul established the first Christian community in Corinth (1 Cor. 4:15). The evidence of Acts is generally confirmed by that of the letters. Paul came to Corinth from Athens and met Aquila and Priscilla (see 1 Cor. 16:19), who had recently been expelled from Rome with other Jews by Claudius (Acts 18:2). Paul joined them in tentmaking, and began preaching in the synagogue. Rejected there (18:6) and rejoined by his Macedonian delegates (1 Thess. 3:6), Paul moved next door to the house of Titus Justus (Acts 18:7). He converted Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue (18:8; cf. 1 Cor. 1:14), and stayed in Corinth some eighteen months (18:11). During that time, he was brought before the proconsul Gallio (18:12). When Gallio dismissed the case, the Jews beat Sosthenes, whom Acts refers to as a "ruler of the synagogue" (18:17) and who appears as Paul's "brother" and co-writer in 1 Cor. 1:1.

When Paul left Corinth to return to Antioch, he took Aquila and Priscilla with him as far as Ephesus (18:18-21). In his absence, they encounter the charismatic Apollos, instruct him, and support his journey to the province of Achaia (18:24-28). Thus Apollos worked in Corinth after Paul (19:1). Acts gives special attention to Apollo's eloquence (18:24), and it is evident that he played a significant role in the life of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4-7, 21-23; 4:6; 16:12).

In Acts 19:21-22, we find Paul planning to return to Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem and then Rome (1 Cor. 16:5; 2 Cor. 1:15). One of his delegates at that point is Erastus, identified in Rom. 16:23 as the treasurer of the city (cf. 2 Tim. 4:20). Paul then spends three months in Achaia before departing for Macedonia (Acts 20:3). Paul's letters basically agree with this sketch, but fill it out considerably with reference to frequent visits by Paul and his delegates Timothy and Titus (1 Cor. 2:1; 4:19; 16:3-10; 2 Cor. 1:15; 8:6; 9:3; 12:14). Paul also wrote the letters to the Thessalonians and Romans from Corinth.

The church had members from both Jewish and gentile backgrounds. The issues treated in the first letter highlight the difficulties of former pagans, but the overarching symbolism by which the whole community understood itself came from Torah (see esp. 1 Cor. 10:1-13). The community also had a mixed social background. Paul says, "Not many of you were of noble birth" (1 Cor. 1:26), but some enjoyed a more prominent status than others, such as Erastus (Rom. 16:23) and the heads of households where the community assembled (1 Cor. 1:11, 16; 16:15-17). One cause of strife in the young church came from the diverse social origins, expectations, and perspectives that were carried over from their world into the assembly of God.

The Corinthians' faults came from over-enthusiasm, not tepidity. Impressed by the powers given them by the Spirit (1:5-7), they were less concerned with understanding these powers (2:12) than with using them. They were fascinated by the specious and the spectacular. Although a difficult community for Paul to deal with, they were, nonetheless, very much a Pauline church, even if they tended to reduce the distinctive elements of his gospel to slogans and catchwords (see 6:12-13; 7:1; 8:1; 10:23; 14:22). Paul had the uncomfortable task of reaffirming his premises while trying to lead them to better conclusions.

Stemming from their overenthusiasm for the powers of the Spirit, a form of spiritual elitism infected the community. Some were so awed by their new knowledge and freedom and capacities for ecstatic speech that they considered themselves fully mature and perfect (2:6—3:4). They tended to judge each other and even their mentors (4:1-5) while at the same time neglecting the moral demands of their calling (5:1—6:20). These tendencies seem to have been rooted in an understanding of the resurrection that stressed its present power within them but denied its completion in a future life; they had no need of transformation, for they enjoyed the life of glory now. They collapsed the delicate tension between the "already" and the "not yet" by regarding themselves as already rich and ruling in God's kingdom (4:8). Such attitudes are also found in varieties of Gnosticism, which became a recognizable Christian option in the second century C.E. Ideas like those of the Corinthians were developed in later gnostic texts. Congregations like this one, indeed, may have provided the connection between an earlier diffused dualistic outlook and later more fully developed Gnosticism. We find here, however, only the possible first seeds of that astonishing many-branched growth.

Spiritual elitism led to factionalism. The Corinthians tended to define themselves by their differences rather than by their common life. From the beginning of 1 Corinthians, we find groups identifying themselves by their allegiance to a particular apostle—"I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas"—or claiming the need of no teacher at all: "I belong to Christ" (1:12). Much scholarship has treated these groups as representatives of competing factions within earliest Christianity, construing the lines as Jewish-Christian against Gentile-Christian, for example. Little in the letters supports such hypotheses. Not even in 2 Corinthians, where disputes between teachers become explicit, does any teaching show a clear delineation of disparate factions. Paul certainly does not align himself with a Pauline group, and rejects entirely even the idea of such groups, asserting his role as teacher of the whole community (4:14-21). The factions, in fact, were, if not generated, at least made more explicit by the circumstances leading to the first letter: the Corinthians' own concerns regarding their conduct in the church and the world.

The canonical collection contains two Letters to the Corinthians. Paul's correspondence with this church, however, was considerably more extensive. It involved five letters, possibly more: (1) Paul alludes in 1 Cor. 5:9 to an earlier letter, now either lost or, as some think, found in 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1. (2) In 1 Cor. 7:1, Paul refers to a letter full of questions written to him by the Corinthians. (3) He writes 1 Corinthians—the unity of this letter is sometimes questioned, though without cause—in response to their questions and other problems in the church. (4) Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 2:4 a "letter in tears," now either lost, found in 2 Corinthians 10–13, or simply to be identified with 1 Corinthians. (5) Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, which may be not a literary unity but an edited composite of several notes. The most significant aspect of this sequence is the testimony it offers—confirmed by the frequent personal visits of Paul and his delegates—to Paul's close and careful concern for his communities. It is no accident that

the Corinthian correspondence is extraordinarily lively, for the relationship that generated it was genuinely alive.

The First Letter to the Corinthians

After Paul left Corinth, problems developed concerning the maintenance of community boundaries: some in the church thought they could continue in their former associations and practices. Even after Paul wrote a first note warning them not to associate with immoral people (1 Cor. 5:9), the situation was not resolved. Relations within the community were strained because of the diverse approaches to moral behavior. At this point, some wanted to ask Paul's advice (see 7:1). This suggestion, however, did not meet with unanimous approval. Why should they turn to Paul? What authority did he possess? Was he an original apostle like Cephas (1:12; 9:5) or a great preacher like Apollos (1:12; 2:1)? Why not turn to them for guidance? The need for definitive advice brought already latent allegiances and disaffections into the open.

At least some in the community decided to send Paul a letter asking his advice on the disputed issues. It may have been delivered by Stephanus, Fortunatus, and Achaichus (16:17), or by the domestic servants of Chloe (1:11). "Chloe's people" in any case brought Paul news of further developments: how some were flagrantly sinning, some were initiating lawsuits against others in the community, and others questioning Paul's authority to teach them. So, if he hoped to instruct them and correct their distorted perceptions, Paul first had to reestablish his credibility as the father of this community.

The outline of the letter corresponds to this sequence of events. After the greeting (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9), Paul immediately turns to the divisions within the community, reminding its members forcefully of his own authority to teach them (chaps. 1–4). Next, he deals with the problems reported to him orally: sexual immorality and litigation in pagan courts (chaps. 5–6). Paul then treats the questions posed by their letter, dealing in turn with virginity and marriage (chap. 7), food offered to idols (chaps. 8–10), and problems in worship (chaps. 11–14). In chapter 15, he provides the theological teaching on the resurrection, which undergirds his treatment of specific issues. Finally, Paul raises his personal project, the collection of money for the saints in Jerusalem (16:1-4).

The Church of God (1 Corinthians 1–4)

Paul anticipates his basic message to the Corinthians already in the greeting: they are "sanctified in Christ Jesus [*hēgiasmenoi*]," but they are also "called to be saints *[klētoi hagioi*]" (1:2). Throughout the letter, Paul affirms their gifts but insists that these gifts

contain a mandate: the Holy Spirit, which enlivens the Corinthians, must also lead to their behavioral transformation. Likewise, in the thanksgiving, Paul acknowledges that they have been "enriched" with every spiritual mode of speech and knowledge. He then prays that the gift that has been made "secure" among them might remain protected and "blameless" until the end (or, until they become perfect) "in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:4-8).

The eschatological reference is deliberate: Because God's kingdom has not yet been fully achieved, they cannot yet be perfect. When Paul tells them in 4:8, "Already you have been filled, already you are rich, already apart from us you have come into your kingdom," he is being sarcastic—their "rule" is illusory. The last verse of the thanksgiving sets the proper perspective. They have been called into fellowship with Jesus, but neither the call nor the growth is their own doing. Both are the work of God, who is faithful (1:9). Fellowship with Jesus means conformity to his measure; and the place where this happens is the church of God.

Although they were called into a fellowship (*koinōnia*) with Jesus, they are in fact destroying that unity by their factiousness. Paul exhorts them therefore to have the same mind (*nous*) and judgment (*gnōmē*) among themselves (1:10). By this he means more than mere unanimity. The same mind they should have is that formed by the one with whom they have been joined: they should have the "mind of Christ" (2:16). Their party spirit has "divided Christ" (1:13). Factions and rivalries are characteristic of human gatherings in which people define themselves by their knowledge, power, or prestige. In God's church, such measurements do not apply.

Their calling is not an invitation to a club or a cultic association, which would demand of them allegiance to their patron or mystagogue (see 1:13-14). Those are the perceptions of the world and not of the gospel. The Corinthians have been called into God's convocation (*ekklēsia*), through an invitation and command apart from natural abilities or predilections. God's call transcends human status (1:26), exceeds human strength (1:25), and confounds human wisdom (1:18). It is a call that reverses all human norms, for it is based not on the persuasiveness of human rhetoric but on the preaching of the cross (1:17). The identity of the church is indelibly marked by the one who remains a scandal to the Jews and a fool to the Gentiles (1:18-23), Jesus Christ. To accept this invitation means to regard the measure of the world as an inadequate measure for one who is "the power of God, the wisdom of God" (1:24).

Life in the church therefore demands measuring all of reality in a new way: not by the "wisdom of this age" (2:6) but by the "secret and hidden wisdom of God" (2:7). This wisdom is not the revelation of esoteric cosmic realities but a profound initiation into the ways of the Spirit's working among the people (2:12). Those who use spiritual realities as a means of self-aggrandizement are not really spiritual people but immature (3:1). Those who truly have "the mind of Christ" (2:16) and know the depths of God (2:10) have learned to use these gifts appropriately for the building up of God's community in the world.

So, far from being rivals, Paul and Apollos together provide an example of the attitudes the Corinthians should have toward their own community (4:6). Paul and Apollos have each been given a separate function by the Lord, but both regard themselves as servants (3:5) and fellow workers (3:9) who cooperate in their efforts, knowing that "God gives the growth" (3:6). The Corinthians, too, should not "be puffed up in favor of one against another" (4:6) lest they forget that everything they have comes as a gift (4:7). If they treat the church as though it were simply a human institution, they profane and destroy the temple of God, because this community lives not by mutual contract but by the life-breath of the Holy Spirit (3:16-17). Paul therefore concludes (3:21-23):

> Let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world, or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

Although Paul is only a servant and worker, he has been given a special role in the Corinthian community: it was his task to "plant" (3:6) and to "lay the foundation" (3:10). He is more than a pedagogue, since he gave this community its birth through the preaching of the gospel, and thus deserves to be regarded as its father (4:15). And as a father, it is his responsibility to instruct the community in morals. He will therefore, despite the Corinthians' reluctance, teach them both by his words and by his deeds: "I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (4:16).

The Church in the World (1 Corinthians 5–10)

The "mind of Christ" must be applied to the very real problems of life in a pluralistic society. Like Jews of the Diaspora, the Corinthians are pulled between the movements of separation and assimilation. Paul insists on the need for separation from the world's values; there must be real boundaries between the inside and the outside. But he denies the need to withdraw from society altogether, a lesson he had previously to teach the Thessalonian church. The church is to be holy, otherwise it is not God's people but just another part of the world. The church's holiness, however, is found not in flight from, but rather in a quality of life within, the structures of the world. Paul leaves much ambiguous at the level of directive, for he wants the Corinthians to learn to think for themselves; they must "understand their gifts" (2:12) within the context of their society and their community.

Paul's advice must move in a delicate space between two extremes in the congregation. Both extremes wanted to avoid ambiguity by reducing norms to slogans. Some pushed Paul's gospel of freedom to a virtual antinomianism: "All things are lawful for me" (6:12). For them, spiritual identity is secure and unassailable; material and social realities are strictly irrelevant: "Food for the stomach, the stomach for food" (6:13).

They place great store in their knowledge—"All of us possess knowledge" (8:1)—and consider their spiritual state to be sufficiently secure to enable them to engage the world indiscriminately. Paul calls them "the strong" (4:10; 10:22); they tended to be arrogant and contemptuous of those who worried about behavioral norms as a safeguard for identity, namely the people Paul calls "the weak" (8:7-10). "The weak" were convinced that Christian identity was fragile, requiring definite social practices different from those of society. Sexual activity should be distinctive and radical: "It is good not to touch a woman" (7:1). Food and drink could contaminate; thus it was better to maintain a more rigid diet, avoiding contact with pagan practices (10:28).

Paul agrees intellectually with the position of the strong; his bias is always for freedom. But his understanding of this freedom or power (*exousia*) is different. If one's identity is secure, it is because it is based in God (1:6), not in one's own accomplishments. It is not that the Christians have come to know God but that God has known them, and this is what has given them freedom (8:1-3; 13:12). In that sense, "food will not commend us to God" (8:8). But the strong are naive about the social dimensions of human existence; spiritual life does involve physical entanglements. In fact, their vaunted freedom and knowledge have led to a neglect of others. They have become spiritual solipsists, forgetting they are part of a community. And Paul's focus is always the community: the primary gift of the Spirit is love (13:1-13); its main manifestation is the building up (*oikodomē*) of others in faith and understanding (8:1, 10; 10:23; 14:3, 12). Therefore, rather than boast of their superiority, "the strong" should build up "the weak."

THE HOLINESS OF THE CHURCH (5:1—6:20)

When Paul turns to the problems reported by Chloe's people, his basic principle is clear: the church must maintain its integrity. Since the people have been "washed . . . sanctified . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God" (6:11b), they can no longer live by their former standards (6:9-11a). But unless they are to go out of the world altogether—an option Paul does not recommend—they must continue to associate with those who do not share their perceptions (5:9-10). The community must therefore exercise discernment in its internal life. Its task is not judging apostles (4:3-5) or outsiders; that sort of judgment is God's work (5:13). They must judge themselves and the quality of their life together (5:12). While they had been evaluating everyone else, they had let slide their own critical awareness of themselves as a community (6:2-5).

According to Paul, the community was failing precisely because boundaries between the world and the church were collapsing. For instance, members sued each other in pagan courts (6:1-5). Such litigiousness was not only contrary to community spirit—better to suffer fraud than to defraud others (6:1-7)—it also indicated an abdication of responsibility for judging within the community. Such matters should be settled among themselves (6:2). Another instance involved an acceptance of sexual

immorality. Boundaries had been virtually destroyed by the community's willingness to allow a man committing incest to remain in communion (5:1-2). The Corinthian church allowed behavior even pagans detested (5:1). Since the community failed to exercise even a rudimentary self-discipline, Paul orders it to excommunicate the wrongdoer (5:2), both for his own sake (5:5) and for the sake of the community's integrity: "Cleanse out the old leaven" (5:7). A church that so ill-maintained its separation from the world's standards, Paul says, is indeed presumptuous and arrogant when it judges apostles (5:2).

Freedom within the Christian church is therefore limited in several ways. The first limit regards the appropriateness of the exercise of freedom. Freedom that leads to the slavery of sin is not from the Lord (6:12). Another limitation is placed on freedom by particular features of bodily existence. The disposition of the body creates new spiritual combinations that must be taken seriously. Sex is not like food, for it demands a deeper level of human intentionality. Sexual intercourse with a prostitute, therefore, is wrong not because it is physically contaminating but because by it one becomes "one flesh" without the commitment of the spirit, counterfeiting the physical and spiritual exchange that is at the heart of the sexual relationship.

For Paul, Christian freedom is determined most of all by relationship to the Lord. Christians are already united to the Lord through the Spirit (6:17), therefore they must orient their bodies in a manner fitting to that relationship. They are not "their own" but live by the gift of another (6:20). When Paul tells them that their bodies are "the temple of the Holy Spirit," he establishes the two fundamental coordinates for Christian behavior: the primary relationship with the Lord, by whom the Christian lives by the gift of the Spirit, and the network of relationships that constitutes the community (6:19). Far from regarding physical existence as irrelevant for the spiritual life, Paul gives it a positive function: "Glorify God in your body" (6:20). This can be understood in two ways, which are mutually reinforcing: "Glorify God in your individual bodily lives," and "Glorify God within this body that is your community."

MARRIAGE AND CELIBACY AS GOD'S GIFTS (7:1-40)

In Paul's treatment of the community's questions, he must do what those who formulated the slogans probably least want: he must make distinctions. He starts with their slogan "It is good not to touch a woman (7:1). He agrees with it at one level, but for reasons other than those of the Corinthians: to express separation by a celibate lifestyle. Paul's partial agreement derives from the eschatological perspective he gives to the entire discussion. When he says that "the frame of this world is passing away" (7:31), he is making a temporal statement that the end is coming soon, and establishing a axiom that all created things are contingent and therefore transitory. Christians must live as people both engaged with, and detached from, worldly structures. They cannot flee from them, but neither can they treat them as though they were permanent or ultimate. They are to live within them "as though not" (7:29-31), a difficult feat for

anyone, and particularly for people attracted to simple solutions. But Paul refuses simple answers. He forces his readers to move through a serious reflection on the meaning of sexual existence in the kingdom of God.

His first and most important step is to distinguish between the call of God and different states of life (7:17-24). Since all human beings are called by God, no station in life can either impede or aid one's response. Male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free, all are called to a life of righteousness. Therefore, neither sexual, social, nor ethnic divisions matter before God. In the church, then, stations in life are properly *adiaphora*—that is, they are not essential and can be understood as matters of free choice. Paul thinks of them as gifts consonant with each one's dispositions and capacities. Like all gifts, they are intended not for self-gratification but for the good of the entire community. Marriage and celibacy are both such gifts from God, contributing to the common welfare: "Each one has his special gift from the Lord, one of one kind, and one of another" (7:7).

Paul's personal preference for celibacy does not reflect a dualistic distaste for the physical or procreation. Celibacy is not advanced as an intrinsically superior mode of life. It is appropriate because of the situation of the church in the world. In a period of tribulation and the anxiety that results, Paul considers married people to be torn between their legitimate care for spouses and children and their service for the Lord in mission. In such a setting, celibacy has a functional superiority: it frees a person for the service of the whole community.

But not everyone has the gift of celibacy, so marriage is to be valued equally. In particular, Paul suggests that two types of people are helped by marriage: those celibate people who are susceptible to sexual immorality (7:2) and those Christians who, because of a lack of self-control, are so preoccupied with the opposite sex that they are "aflame with passion" (7:9). For these, celibacy has lost its purpose. Alongside this rather negative construal, Paul also takes time to portray the marriage relationship more positively. The bodies of husband and wife belong to each other (see 6:19; 7:4), and abstinence should be only temporary in order to give one's attention to prayer (7:5). Just as sexual relations with a prostitute had negative spiritual implications (6:16), the sexual bonding of husband and wife has positive spiritual implications: they can sanctify each other and their children (7:14). Marriage is a covenant; there is no divorce (7:10). The only exception is the separation—with freedom—that results from a fundamental spiritual estrangement when one is a Christian and the other a pagan, making it impossible for a man and woman to live at peace (7:15).

Paul carefully notes the authority he invokes for each stage of his discussion. The prohibition against divorce in 7:10, for example, is backed by a command of the Lord (Mark 10:11; Matt. 5:32; 19:9; Luke 16:18), whereas the questions pertaining to mixed marriages are answered with Paul's own counsel (7:12). Paul has no command for the unmarried, only counsel (7:25). And for the widows he offers no command, only the advice of one who also has "the Spirit of God" (7:39-40).

CONSCIENCE AND FREEDOM: THE ISSUE OF IDOL FOOD (8:1—11:1)

Meat was not a staple in the diet of ordinary first-century people. For those who could afford it, the most accessible source was the meat market connected to pagan temples. In idol shrines, one could also enjoy a festive meal involving meat dishes. But the Christian conversion was from "idols to the living and true God" (see 1 Thess. 1:9). How could the Corinthians have any further contact with idolatry? On the other hand, how could they avoid it? For the wealthier and more socially active members of the congregation, there could be serious disadvantages if they avoided shrine meals, since these often had much more serious civic rather than sacred connotations. Here we meet again the problem of separation and assimilation. Must Christians abstain from meat to the same rigorous degree that they abstain from immorality? Or must they operate their own meat markets to ensure purity from idolatrous contaminations?

Some of the "strong" Corinthians claim that since idols were not real, no harm was done by participation in these purely social contacts. But the "weak" are not convinced that the contacts are innocuous. They see them as collusion in idolatry. Beneath this conflict lies the issue of the legitimacy of plurality in Christian community practice and the relative importance of right knowledge and love. There are four major stages to Paul's argument.

Stage One: Initial Distinctions (8:1-13). Paul distinguishes immediately between a knowledge that "puffs up" (synonymous with "boasts"; see 4:6, 18, 19; 5:2; 13:4) and a love that "builds up" (8:1). This distinction controls his whole argument. For Paul, being theoretically correct without community sensitivity is useless. Conceptually, he agrees with "the strong": there is no ultimate power in the world but the one God (8:4-6); idols are nothing but human projections. This knowledge, however, is of no value to the one who cannot be convinced of it. Thus, Paul insists on the primacy of the individual conscience in moral choice. If some in the church think that idols are real and that eating idol meat acknowledges this reality, then for them, such eating is wrong. Their conscience is defiled if they act on what they truly consider wrong.

What obligation does this place on "the strong"? Paul again agrees with their basic understanding: eating and drinking are not by themselves determinative of our relation with God (8:8)—even though this position was distorted by some (see 6:13). But the liberty (or, power: *exousia*) this knowledge grants must not be used in a way that is a "stumbling block" (1:23) to "the weak" (8:9). Christ identified himself with strong and weak alike (8:11-12); "the strong", therefore, must limit their freedom for the sake of others. Willingly giving up a position of strength for one of weakness is the pattern of exchange that becomes shorthand for the gospel of the crucified Messiah (see 1:17-25), a pattern Paul himself exemplifies (8:13).

Stage Two: The Apostolic Example (9:1-27). Paul shows how the pattern is operative in his apostolic style. He, too, has *exousia*: he has seen Jesus; he is an apostle (9:1-2). He has a "right" to be supplied food and drink, a wife as a companion, and support for his ministry (9:3-7). Such rights are specified by Torah (9:8-11), the custom of Israel

(9:13), and Jesus himself: "Those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel" (9:14; cf. Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7; 1 Tim. 5:18). But Paul does not use this *exousia*, lest he place an obstacle to the proclamation of the "good news" (9:12-18). His freedom will not become a stumbling block (*scandalon*) to others. He is an example of power emptied out in service to others. He extends this to being available to all people, "that I might by all means save some" (9:22). He views his ministry as a "life for others," and therefore their life together should be one of mutual service rather than of competition and dissension. Paul teaches them by example (see 4:16).

Stage Three: The Warning of Torah (10:1-13). The Corinthians should consider another example, one pertinent to more than this single issue. In a midrash on the exodus and wilderness narratives from Torah (see Exodus 14–34; Numbers 11–20), Paul compares the Christians in Corinth to Israel in the desert. He wants them to consider the earlier story as part of their own. That earlier generation had also been gifted by God (10:1-5) just like the Corinthians (cf. 1:5-7). In spite of its great gifts, however, the desert generation was overthrown (10:5). Paul says they are a warning: what happened to them is a *type* (10:6) of the dangers facing the present Corinthian generation. The stories were written, indeed, to provide such examples (10:11). Israel fell from God's favor despite its gifts precisely because it was not faithful to its call; it did not live appropriately to its identity. Those people were idolaters (Exod. 32:6) and sexually immoral (Num. 25:1-3). They tested the Lord (Num. 21:5) and grumbled (Num. 14:2). There is a lesson here for both strong and weak. To "the strong", a warning: "Let anyone who thinks he stands take warning, lest he fall" (10:12). To "the weak", a consolation: "With the temptation [God] will also provide the way of escape" (10:13).

Stage Four: Freedom Is for Edification (10:14—11:1). Paul now turns to the subject of fellowship meals at idol shrines. Those having knowledge are warned to "shun the worship of idols" (10:14), since they may be involving themselves in ways they cannot anticipate or control. Paul insists that even mere bodily participation can lead to spiritual entanglement. His argument runs thus: just as sharing in the Eucharist involves a participation in the body and blood of Jesus (10:16-17), so consuming food at the table of idols can involve participation in those malevolent spiritual forces associated with pagan practices. Idols may not be real, but the spiritual atmosphere of distortion characteristic of idolatry (cf. Rom. 1:18-32) is real and dangerous. Participants in fellowship meals at idol shrines may thus find themselves unwittingly the partner of demons (10:20-21).

Paul again asserts the essential freedom of "the strong" conscience: no one should be governed utterly by another's perceptions, but one should be governed by one's own informed judgment (10:25-27, 29-30). And if circumstances allow, one must act on that judgment. But if the good of a neighbor is involved, one's freedom is conditioned: "Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor" (10:24). Such service is not a denial of one's rights, but a self-emptying for the sake of a weak brother or sister (10:28-29) in order to "build them up" (10:23). Paul closes his argument with

the simple exhortation to do all for the glory of God (10:31; cf. 6:20), which is shown most clearly by seeking the advantage of others rather than oneself. In Paul, the Corinthians can find both an example of this and a pointer toward a still more fundamental model: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1).

The World in the Church (1 Corinthians 11–14)

The attitudes that divide the Corinthians in their dealings with the world also affect their common worship when the members "come together as church" (11:18). A community's identity is expressed by its communal activities. In the worship of the spiritual (*pneumatikoi*), their fleshly (*sarkikoi*) attitudes are revealed (see 3:1-3).

The structure and circumstances of the Corinthian assemblies are difficult to reconstruct. We know that the Corinthian Christians came together at least on the first day of the week (16:2), probably in a large room of a household (see 11:22, 34). They celebrated a ritual meal called the Lord's Supper (*kyriakon deipnon*; 11:20). Its cup of blessing and bread of breaking were regarded as a participation (*koinōnia*) in the body and blood of the Messiah (10:16). The meal contained a recital of Jesus' words at the last supper (11:23-25). We don't know how this cultic action was connected to the meals that provided the occasion for abuse (11:21, 33-34). Still less are we able to determine the circumstances of other liturgical activities involving various forms of speech: teaching (14:26), prophesying (14:1), speaking in tongues (14:2), interpretation of tongues (14:13), hymns, revelations, and prayers (14:14, 26).

It is obvious that the congregation was extraordinarily active and perhaps even spectacularly successful in its cultivation of spiritual utterances. Paul admits that it lacks no gift of knowledge or speech (1:5-7). The Corinthians' use of the gifts, however, is as a means of self-aggrandizement rather than as a means of building up (*oikodomē*) community identity. The attitudes of the world have infected the assembly of God. Its members have "gifts of the spirit" but they do not show the deeper wisdom of the "mind of Christ" (2:12-16), which teaches that gifts are for sharing.

They act as though they are blind to the implications of their liturgical behavior for others in the community, for outsiders, and for the identity of the church as a whole. We find in these discussions a tension between individualism and community consciousness, and between enthusiasm and tradition. Paul invokes the tradition of the churches four times in order to correct the Corinthians (11:16, 23; 14:33-36; 15:1-3). His appeal to tradition is especially striking because some of the Corinthians' perceptions undoubtedly came from him. Once again, he must assert the intrinsic value of an activity (e.g., the speaking in tongues, 14:18) while shifting the perception of it from an individual to a communal level. Not the prestige of this person or that but the health of the whole body is Paul's preoccupation. The integrity of the church as church is his concern. This also accounts for his attention to the impression outsiders have of the community (14:20-25; cf. 1 Thess. 4:12). Good order in the assembly is important

because the continued stability of the community depends on it, and an untrammeled spontaneity can lead to the subtle enslavement of spiritual manipulation. But it is even more important because the source of all the spiritual gifts is "not a God of confusion, but of peace" (14:33).

THE PRAYER AND PROPHECY OF WOMEN (11:2-16)

The extraordinary complexity and confusion of this passage is itself the most important clue to its interpretation. Paul begins to commend the Corinthians for holding to traditions (11:2) but then launches into ways they do not, beginning with one that apparently bothered him emotionally: the way women were prophesying and praying in the assembly. This is obviously something that is happening, for no one would struggle as grimly as Paul does here against a mere hypothesis. Nor is there any doubt that ecstatic utterance is at issue. In 14:34-36, Paul says that women are to be silent in the assembly, but that passage suggests a context of teaching, an activity culturally associated with males, particularly in Judaism. Here, it is not teaching but the charismatic gifts of prayer and prophecy that are at issue. Paul has no problem with women doing these things; the gifts, after all, come from the Spirit. But the manner of their performance upsets him.

Unfortunately, like so much in this passage, the precise nature of their offense is not clear. Did they pray or prophesy without veils over their heads? Or did they, like mantic prophetesses, unbraid their hair and let it fly freely while they spoke? We cannot tell. In Paul's eyes, however, a fundamental line of social decency has been crossed. His position was difficult. He was convinced, as they were, that in Christ, there is neither female nor male (Gal. 3:28), and he was not eager to set external constraints on prophets (14:32). But whether or not the lack of a veil suggested insubordination, or the unbraiding of the hair implied pagan prophecy, Paul is disturbed.

Paul wants to establish order and decency in the liturgical assembly. Like everybody in his age, he understood social order as intimately connected to cosmic order. As a male in a hierarchically structured society, therefore, he invokes a series of arguments: the cosmic hierarchy of female-male-Christ (11:3); the order of creation, with male first and female second (11:7-8); an obscure reference to the angelic role in worship (11:10); and Hellenistic social sensitivities (11:5, 14-15).

The intrinsic weakness of Paul's position is indicated by the number of arguments he must invoke and his constant need to qualify them. He does not really believe, for example, that in Christ women are fundamentally subordinate to men (cf. 11:11). He is for once unable to argue from first principles to social behavior, for the very good reason in this case that the social norm has nothing to do with Christian first principles. It is just a matter of custom and customary perceptions. Paul at last recognizes that this is the only argument left to him: "If anyone is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God" (11:16).

ABUSES AT THE LORD'S SUPPER (11:17-34)

Once more, the exact nature of the problem is not completely clear. Because "each one goes ahead with his own meal," Paul says that some are filled while others go hungry (11:21). Are people bringing their own food and proceeding without waiting for the ritual actions that join them together? Are their uneven resources being selfishly and privately consumed, so that not everyone has enough? Or are those who provide the meal taking larger portions for themselves and their clients, like patrons of clubs and cults? We cannot be sure. This much, though, is clear: Paul perceives that the Christian sacred meal is being infiltrated by the attitudes of the world (11:20). Divisions between people on the basis of wealth or position threaten the common identity of the church. Paul berates those responsible for "humiliating those who have nothing," and by so doing, "despising the church of God" (11:22). Their party spirit is contrary to the very notion of church.

Paul responds with his most extensive and explicit citation of Jesus' words, introduced by the technical language of scribal tradition: "I received . . . what I also delivered to you" (11:23). The words are close to the Synoptic version of Jesus' last supper, providing an important clue to the development of the gospel traditions. Paul agrees with Luke 22:19 by including the command "Do this in memory of me," but he attaches it to both loaf and cup (11:24-25). He also makes explicit the connection of this broken bread to the crucifixion: "You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (11:26). By the words "until he comes," he reminds them that the ritual life of the church is framed by the "already" of the death and resurrection and the "not yet" of the Parousia. In such a context, the liturgical cry with which he ends the letter would have been most natural: "Lord, come [*maranatha*]" (16:22).

Paul draws a direct theological and behavioral inference from the tradition (11:27). By sharing loaf and cup Christians participate in the body and blood of the Lord; this is axiomatic (see 10:16). And if that sharing establishes them as "the body of the Lord" (10:17), those who are contemptuous of other members of the assembly also profane "the body and blood of the Lord" (11:27). Everyone, therefore, should "discern the body," lest eating and drinking lead to judgment (11:28-29). The consequences Paul draws for failure to do this are obscure (11:30-32), but his main point is clear: when the Corinthians "come together as church" they do not eat a worldly meal (they can eat that at home [11:22, 34]), but they enter into a ritual fellowship meal that establishes the community as "the body of the Lord." The worldly attitudes of self-aggrandizement and rivalry are not only inappropriate, they destroy the church and call down God's judgment upon the perpetrators (11:34).

THE SPIRITUAL GIFTS (12:1—14:40)

In the Corinthians' use of their gifts of speech, the attitudes of elitism, rivalry, and individualism are painfully present. To grasp Paul's concern and argument, it is necessary to appreciate how active the pneumatic phenomena were in the congregation,

as well as how highly esteemed such forms of ecstasy were in the Hellenistic world. The form of prophecy called mantic was particularly favored. It was thought to result from a direct inspiration, a virtual possession of the psyche by the divine Spirit, leading to *enthusiasmos*. Rapt in ecstasy, the prophetess or prophet cried out in unintelligible speech, which required translation and interpretation (see above, chap. 1).

Just this form of spiritual utterance seems to be what the Corinthians called "tongues." And consonant with the views of the ancient world, they considered such ecstatic babbling to be the highest manifestation of the Spirit. Teaching and the rational discourse Paul calls prophecy seem to have been regarded lightly by them. With their characteristic capacity for making gifts into badges of their own worth, the Corinthians ranked the gifts, declaring that the sign of a truly spiritual person (*pneumatikos*) was the manifestation of tongues (see 14:22). Paul does not challenge the divine origin of this gift, and claims to possess it himself (14:18). But he wants the Corinthians to begin to "understand the gifts given them by God" (2:12) within the context of their community function.

He warns them first that not all "spiritual powers" are necessarily good. When they had been pagans, they also had been caught up in rapture (*agomai*), but this had only resulted in their alienation (*apagomai*; 12:2). He wants them to understand, therefore, that he is not talking about spiritual realities (*ta pneumatika*; 12:1), but gifts from God (*ta charismata*; 12:4). The first work of God's Holy Spirit is to bring a human being into relationship with the Lord, enabling him or her to say, "Jesus is Lord." Any impulse that denies that relationship cannot be from God (12:3).

Since the Spirit they have received comes from the God who called them into community, the diverse manifestations of this Spirit serve functions within that community. Paul insists on two reciprocal aspects of this community context. First, since all the gifts come from the same God, there is a fundamental unity and equality between them (12:4-11). All the gifts have been given for the common good (12:7; cf. 6:12), not by the random selection of an impersonal force but by the direction of a personal spirit, the activity of the living God (12:11). Second, within this unity there is a proper diversity of function within the church, which Paul here explicitly identifies as the "body of Christ." As eating the same loaf and drinking the same cup made them "one body" (10:16-17), so here the drinking of one spirit in baptism makes them one body (12:13). The parts of a human body exist in mutual interdependence (12:14-26), and therefore so should the members of the church: "You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (12:27). All the functions are required for the body to be complete; there is no place for comparison or conflict among them.

Chapter 13 is not a digression but serves the parenetic function of presenting Paul as a model of "seeking the higher gifts" (12:31; cf. 9:1-27). The highest expression of the Spirit is self-sacrificing love (*agapē*). In contrast to passionate love (*erōs*), a drive that seeks the other in order to fulfill the self, this *agapē* means having the disposition toward others that God had first toward them. It transcends all differentiating gifts; they

represent the partial whereas it is the perfection (13:10). This is because *agapē* is the essential articulation of the life of the Spirit, which is to say, the life of God. The gifts of speech are transitory; only *agapē* will be the bond between God and humans in the life to come, when "we shall know even as we have been known" (13:12). Without *agapē*, the other gifts are meaningless (13:1-3). With it, the other gifts are ordered toward mutual edification, and life together can become "life for the other" (13:4-7). This is the "more excellent way" that Paul demonstrates in his apostolic ministry (13:1).

In Paul's discussion of the separate gifts, he concentrates only on tongues and prophecy. His preference for prophecy is plain. An utterance in tongues is ecstatic and unintelligible, requiring interpretation. As a mode of prayer, it can glorify God and "build up" the one who prays (14:4), but it can also become self-absorbing and meaningless: the church is not built up by it. Prophecy, in contrast, is a rational mode of speech that, even when a revelation, is intelligible to all by the way it addresses the community with the demands of the gospel. Paul prefers prophecy because it engages the mind (14:14) and edifies the community (14:4). In fact, he reverses the slogan of the elitists who had claimed tongues as a sign of believers. With a midrash on Isa. 28:11-12 ("By mean of foreign tongues and by the lips of foreigners will I speak to this people and even then they will not listen to me"), Paul shows that tongues can actually be a sign of unbelief (14:21-22). That such was the case with the Corinthian elitists is clearly implied.

Prophecy, however, is a sign that calls people to belief, and builds on the foundation of Christ first laid by the apostolic preaching (see 3:10-15; 12:28). If outsiders come to the assembly and hear only tongues they would naturally identify the church as one more form of a Hellenistic cult involving mantic prophecy; they would say, "You are raving [*mainesthe*]." But if they hear prophecy, they would be moved to say, "God is among you" (14:25). Paul therefore demands responsibility, maturity, and thought (14:20) from the Corinthians. Even in the context of spiritual worship, the whole community must exercise judgment: "Let all discern" (14:29). The prophets should control their utterances (14:32), speech should be orderly and in turn (14:26-31), and women should not teach publicly (14:34-36). Everything should be done with an eye to edification (14:26) but also "decently and in order" (14:40).

The Church and the Kingdom (1 Corinthians 15)

Paul's long and carefully constructed treatment of the resurrection is neither an afterthought nor unconnected to the Corinthian problems. In it, he provides the theological underpinning for his practical directions throughout the letter. The arrogance and self-aggrandizement of some of the Corinthians are based on the conviction that they are already in full possession of God's life. They know God (8:2; 13:12); they have all the spiritual gifts (1:5-7); they are mature (2:6; 14:20) and "spiritual people" (3:1); they are strong (10:12); they are already filled, rich, and reigning in the kingdom (4:8).

From that perception comes their contempt for others who appear to be less well endowed, and their neglect of their own human entanglements. Because they are already perfect, there is no need for discernment in their behavior.

When Paul reminds them of the "fundamental" (15:3) message of the resurrection, he does more than recall historical facts. He reminds them of the structure of their existence "by which you are *being saved* if you hold it fast" (15:2), making that salvation both progressive and conditional. He needs to remind them of the pattern of the Spirit's work, which they see in Jesus. Jesus first died, then rose to a new life (15:3-4), becoming in fact "life-giving Spirit" (15:45). Just as with Jesus there was first the sowing of the mortal body, *then* the spiritual (*to pneumatikon*; 15:44), so with them: the full reality of the spiritual life is not now in the flesh but only in their resurrection.

More significant still, Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of his spirit are not yet the fulfillment of God's work. The Corinthians are still in the in-between period. Jesus is only the first fruits from the dead (15:20); death must still be overcome for all others (15:21). Everything has not yet been brought into subjection to the Lord (15:28), and therefore Jesus cannot at this time hand the kingdom over to the Father. Only then "comes the end" (15:24). The point of this is clear: the Corinthians cannot be now "ruling" (4:8), for there is as yet no kingdom of God. They are like fools sitting on fantasy thrones.

Paul orients them fully toward the future. If the present were already the fulfillment, then they would be the most miserable of creatures. Their grandeur is self-deceptive made possible only by ignoring the fact of death. Indeed, people in the community continue to die (11:30). If there is no future resurrection, if the present were all there was, then they would be fools to suffer for their faith (15:29-32). Paul now reverses the argument: if Jesus is the pattern of their life before God (2:16; 11:1) and if there is no final resurrection for all Christians, then, by implication Jesus did not rise from the dead (15:13-16). And if he did not rise, then he could not be the life-giving Spirit: all their gifts would be absent and their faith a delusion (15:14). And if that were so, then they would still be in their sins (15:17) and those who have already died would be utterly lost (15:18). There is a sharp point being made here: they have negated in their lives the very gospel they hold so dear in words. Paul suggests that precisely their neglect of the future and their selfish grasping after their present gifts leaves them open to such sin: "Come to your right mind, and sin no more. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame" (15:34).

When Paul speaks of the future life, he must shift to metaphor (15:35-49), since these matters are also unknown to him (cf. 13:12). His message is nevertheless clear: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (15:50). We are reminded of his other "kingdom" formulation: "The unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God" (6:9). For Paul, there is an infinite qualitative difference between the existence of all created beings, however sanctified, and the Holy God. Although the Corinthians share in the Spirit, they are still merely human. The kingdom, however, necessitates their

sharing in God's glory (15:42-43, 49), and for this they must be radically changed: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed" (15:51). The required transformation, furthermore, is not only metaphysical but moral as well (15:34, 58). The future kingdom will be glorious (15:51-58), but the Corinthians are not yet there. Indeed, this is precisely the function of the Spirit's work among them: to change them in preparation for their sharing in God's glory.

The Second Letter to the Corinthians

Second Corinthians has many major historical and literary problems, making the reconstruction of the situation faced by Paul more difficult than in the case of 1 Corinthians.

It is difficult, first of all, to piece together what transpired between the writing of the two letters. Although Paul's relations with the community were strained, he had planned to visit it after passing through Macedonia (1 Cor. 16:5), in order to pick up the collection on the way to Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:3). In the meantime, he had anticipated sending Timothy, expecting his early return (1 Cor. 16:10-11; cf. 4:17).

There is no lack of biographical data in 2 Corinthians, but the sequence of events remains elusive. In 1:8, Paul refers to an "affliction" he had experienced in Asia, which threatened his life (1:9). Was this in any way connected to his "fighting the beasts in Ephesus" (1 Cor. 15:32)? In 1:16, he speaks of a visit that he had planned to make to the Corinthians in connection with his trip to Macedonia (the same itinerary as in 1 Cor. 16:3-5) but that he had called off since he did not wish another "painful visit" (2:1). But what visit is this? He then speaks of a "letter written out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears" (2:4). Is this 1 Corinthians or another letter? It certainly caused considerable distress (2 Cor. 2:5-11; 7:8-13).

In 2 Cor. 2:12, Paul begins to relate his actual movements rather than his plans. He had gone to Macedonia not through Corinth but by way of Troas. Not finding his delegate Titus in Troas, he did not linger but went straight on to Macedonia. Here the travelogue stops momentarily. It is resumed in 7:5, where we find Paul recounting the comfort he had received in Macedonia by the arrival there of Titus, who bore Paul news of the Corinthians' zeal for him (7:7). At this point, therefore, he appears reconciled with them (7:6-16).

In 8:6, Paul says that Titus had already begun work for the collection among them, and in 8:16-18, he writes that he is about to send Titus and "another brother" to complete that work. There is, however, a slight but troubling shift in 9:3-5, where Paul indicates that he is sending "brethren" for the collection. Is he simply collapsing together Titus and the "brethren" (cf. 8:23)? Things get even murkier when we find in 12:18 that Paul had already sent Titus and "the brother" to Corinth to work for the collection. Is this a reference to the earlier (8:6) or the later (8:16-18) visit of the delegate? Finally,