

1 CORINTHIANS 7-11

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INTRODUCTION TO 1 COR 7-11:

LIVING FOR CHRIST IN A NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD

With a population of over half a million inhabitants, Corinth was the most important city in first century Greece. Athens may have still been the chief centre of Greek culture and philosophy, but when it came to commerce and to industry Corinth unquestionably took the lead. It was no accident that Corinth was the Roman capital of Achaia, nor that the Roman proconsul Gallio had his residence there (Acts 18.12). For cosmopolitan Corinth situated on the narrow isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the large peninsula of the Peloponnese was not just a place where routes from north and south met, it was above all the place where east and west met.

More than most sea-ports, Corinth had an infamous reputation for immorality. "To live like a Corinthian" had become a well-known Greek expression used to describe immorality in its broadest sense. In the temple dedicated to Aphrodite at Corinth a thousand prostitutes served the needs of "worshippers". As today, so then, society was permissive in the extreme.

In this city, once described as a compound of Newmarket, Chicago and Paris, Paul preached the Gospel. Miraculously people did respond to his preaching and a church came into being. Acts 18.1-17 tells the story. Not surprisingly considering the pressures imposed upon the church by the world in which it lived, from the very beginning there were difficulties, difficulties reflected not least in the passages we shall be studying over the next two weeks. To a large extent these pressures were caused by the members of the church being both Christians and Corinthians. Many of their problems and questions grew out of the tensions of trying to live for Christ in a non-Christian world.

Some of the questions Paul seeks to deal with in 1 Cor 7-11 had clearly been raised by the Corinthians in an earlier letter they had written to Paul. For example, 1 Cor 7.1 begins with the words: "Now for the matters you wrote about: It is good for a man not to marry". Almost certainly the phrase 'It is good for a man to marry' is lifted from their earlier letter, and on the basis of this quotation Paul then proceeded to elaborate on the issues of marriage and celibacy. A similar formula is found in 1 Cor 8.1: "Now about food sacrificed to idols. We know that we all possess knowledge". Again, almost certainly the phrase 'We know that we all possess knowledge' is a quotation from their earlier letter, which Paul used to then introduce his discussion on Christian freedom.

Not all the matters Paul deals with had been raised by the Corinthians in their letter.

Some of the matters had no doubt been drawn to his attention by Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus when they had visited Paul in Ephesus (1 Cor 16.8,17). Almost certainly it was they who had told him of the way in which the Lord's Table was being abused. Hence Paul writes: "I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you" (11.18)

1 Corinthians is therefore very much a letter addressed to a particular situation. It was written to a particular church undergoing a particular set of problems at a particular period of time. And yet, in spite of the letter's particularity, it still retains a general appeal. In a very real sense, in spite of the passing of over nineteen centuries, 1 Corinthians is a letter for the church today. For like the Corinthian Christians, we too are caught between the pressures of a permissive society and the demands of Christ. We too are often more shaped than we realise by our culture. We too therefore need to listen carefully to Paul's exposition of the way in which Christ expects us to live our life together.

For further reading:

1 Cor 7-11 is a fascinating section of 1 Corinthians. There are, however, a number of complex issues of exegesis, with which we are unable to deal with in these notes. For those wishing to read further we recommend two commentaries: **The Message of 1 Corinthians** (*The Bible Speaks Today*, IVP, Leicester 1985) by David Prior, is for the non-specialist; **The First Epistle to the Corinthians** (*The New International Commentary On The New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1987) by Gordon Fee is for those with some theological knowledge.

Wednesday 3 February

MARRIAGE MATTERS!

God intends marriages to be full-blooded affairs! How well do I handle my own sexuality?)

1 COR 7.1-11

Paul didn't encourage Christians at Corinth to get married (v8). In his view, if Christians could control their sex-drive and remain unmarried, then all to the good (9). However, this apparently negative approach was not because Paul had a jaundiced view of marriage 'per se'. Rather, it was because Paul expected the Lord to appear any moment (vv29-31). Like any good Jews, he would have seen marriage as a creation ordinance, and as such having nothing to do with a fallen world. Indeed, he later uses the marriage relationship as a picture of Christ's relationship with his church (see Eph 6.22-33).

But Paul's preference for celibacy must not be confused with a negative view of sex. For Paul sex was part and parcel of married life. A 'platonic' relationship in marriage would have been asking for trouble - and at Corinth would have encouraged husbands to go to the temple of Aphrodite where prostitutes abounded. Paul therefore weighed in against those who had adopted a 'spiritual' view of marriage and were not allowing their partners to have sex with them. Instead he encouraged full conjugal rights (3-5).

Importantly, Paul speaks of women having as much a right to sex as husbands. At a time when , when women had no rights at all, this must have been revolutionary stuff! Having said that, Paul's emphasis is not so much on 'rights' as on mutual obligation. In a marriage husbands and wives may not say, as it were, "you owe me", but rather "I owe you".

Sadly down through the centuries there have been Christian who have had all sorts of sexual hang-ups, and who have regarded sex as an invention of the Devil. But not Paul. Notice that procreation doesn't get a mention here. Paul advocated a regular and enthusiastic sex life for the sheer joy it brings a husband and a wife.

Pray for newly married couples that they may experience much joy as they develop in their life together.

Thursday 4 February

WHEN DIFFICULTIES ARISE IN MARRIAGE

God intends marriage to be for life. But how are we react when major difficulties arise?

1 COR 7.12-24

Paul was only following Jesus (Matt 19.6), who in turn was simply re-affirming the teaching of Genesis (Gen 2.24) that marriage is a binding contract (12). In spite of the importance Paul attached to sex, it is not love in the form of sexual passion which sustains a marriage, but rather love within the form of commitment. However, as Paul himself recognised, not all marriages work out. Not even all marriages involving Christians. There are times when separation, if not divorce, is inevitable. In the Gospels the one ground Jesus mentions for divorce is "marital unfaithfulness" (Matt 19.9). Here Paul mentions another ground, desertion. The particular case Paul has in mind is where the Christian partner is deserted by their unbelieving partner (15). Whether or not these are the only two grounds for a Christian to engage in divorce proceedings, is one of those matters where Christians disagree. It may well be that the guiding rule in these matters is a total absence of "peace" in a marriage (v15).

Although Paul believed that a Christian should only marry a Christian (39), he was quite clear that the lack of a common faith was no ground for divorce. Rather, the Christian spouse should remain with their non-Christian husband or wife (v12). Indeed, Paul could even see a positive advantage in such a union. The very presence of a Christian within such a mixed marriage offered would give an opportunity for the grace of God to touch both the unbelieving spouse as also the children (14). For "holiness" can be contagious - it can be like leaven in the dough (Rom 11.16) and in this way affect the family as a whole. The result of a Christian remaining in such a marriage might be the salvation of the non-Christian partner (v16).

Pray for couples experiencing difficulties in their marriages. Pray too for marriages where only one partner is a believer

Friday 5 February
SINGLES COUNT!

Many churches suffer from "single-blindness". Does yours?

1 COR 7.25-40

There are more single adults in Western society than ever before. Yet, in spite of this in many evangelical churches there is almost a prejudice against singles. Most churches, for instance, do not want their pastor to be single. Paul, however, saw things very differently. He strongly advocated singleness on the grounds that it brings freedom from anxiety and freedom from distraction (7.2-35). He reassured his readers that there was nothing inherently sinful about marriage (36). However, in view of the shortness of time, he was convinced that the single state was preferable (29).

Many Christians have difficulty in accepting Paul's teaching here. Fortunately, even Paul himself recognised that he had no direct word from the Lord to pass on (25). Perhaps, with the benefit of hindsight Paul might have expressed himself differently. For what we have here is what we may call 'crisis legislation' or 'interim ethics'. There is an intensity present caused by Paul's conviction that the Lord was about to return any moment. This explains why there is no reference to children. The time appeared so "short" (29) that there was no point in giving advice about raising children. If Paul had more fully grasped the truth that "with the Lord a day is like a thousand years" (2 Peter 3.8), he might well have written differently. As it was, in his personal opinion (v25) the single life was preferable.

Yet, although our perspective on time may be different, it has to be acknowledged that Paul has a valid point. Family life inevitably limits the time and the money people can give to Christ; it also imposes restrictions on mobility and availability. Singles have a freedom to serve the Lord in which married couples often do not. As Jesus indicated, some may well choose singleness "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19.12)

Pray for those who long to be married, but who for reasons of circumstance (divorce, death, obligation to care for elderly parents, lack of a suitable partner) remain single.

Saturday 6 February

FREEDOM IS NOT LICENSE

How sensitive am I to the needs of others?

1 COR 8.1-13

True freedom is always limited by the rights and needs of others. What is true of society in general, is also true of the church. At Corinth the issue of freedom centered around "food sacrificed to idols" (8.1). In this respect we need to understand that in pagan worship normally only a small portion of the animal was actually sacrificed. Some of the meat was eaten by the temple priests. The rest of it might be taken home

by the worshipper, or be sold in the market-place, or indeed be eaten in the course of a temple feast. Christians at Corinth were divided over whether eating such meat was a moral issue. Paul, it would appear, sided in principle with those who believed that there was nothing wrong to eat such food in so far as the idols to whom such food had been offered had no real existence (4,8). However, in practice Paul was not in complete sympathy with some holding this position. In the first place, because these 'strong' Christians looked down with pride on those with scruples (2). In the second place, because their 'liberal' views were causing some of the 'weak' to stumble (9). Paul was concerned for the pastoral difficulties that would arise if the 'weak' began to go against their conscience (7)

The original issue may be remote to us today, and yet the principle behind it is very relevant. As Christians we must ask ourselves not only 'What effect will this course of action have on me?', but also 'What effect will this course of action have on others?'. For example, in the context of a meeting where sensitive issues relating to church life are being discussed, people need to think of the effect their contributions might have on others - the demands of love, particularly for the young in Christ, put constraints on the way in we may express ourselves.

Pray especially for the weaker and more vulnerable members of your church.

Sunday 7 February

PAYING THE PREACHER

If generosity be a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5.22), then a Spirit-filled church must be a generous church

1 COR 9.1-14

Paying for ministry is not a modern development. From its earliest beginnings the Christian church had the practice of paying some of its leaders. For much of this chapter Paul elaborates on the right of a full-time Christian leader or 'minister' to expect financial support from a congregation. Indeed, the thrust of the passage is not just that Christian workers have a right to be paid, but also a right to be paid well, as distinct from simply paid a nominal sum (see Gal 6.6; 1 Tim 5.17,18). In supporting his argument Paul draws on a variety of human analogies (7), the Old Testament law (8-10), current temple practice (13), as also the teaching of Jesus himself (14: see Lk 10.7// Matt 10.10). There is nothing here to support the old maxim that ministers should be kept humble by being kept poor. Indeed, to keep the preacher poor is to go directly contrary to Scripture. Churches have an obligation to care for the practical needs of their pastors - and this includes a fair remuneration for their efforts.

Somewhat exceptionally, however, Paul himself did not take any pay for his work in Corinth. The precise reason for this is a little unclear: it would appear that in the Corinthian situation Paul felt that his motives might have been misunderstood and in this way the effectiveness of his preaching might have been hindered (12). Far from hindering the work of the Gospel, Paul wanted to advance the Gospel. Unfortunately, his refusal to take any money also led to misunderstanding: some of the Corinthians assumed that this was an indirect admission by Paul that he was not a real apostle (1)!

Is the handling of money ever a straightforward issue in the church?

Pray for all full-time Christian workers. Remember before God their practical needs. Pray too for Christian workers who have chosen to combine ministry with 'tent-making'.

Monday 8 February

GOOD NEWS MUST BE SHARED!

To whom have I spoken of Jesus this week?

1 COR 9.15-27

It was the custom of Bishop Azariah, the first Indian Bishop of the Church of South India, to get his baptismal candidates to stand by the river, with their hands on their head, and echo the words of Paul (16) by saying: 'I am a baptised Christian - woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!'. How right he was. A silent saint is a contradiction. Good news must be shared (2 Kings 7.9).

In our culture the term 'preaching' conjures up a pulpit. However, the Apostle Paul didn't limit his preaching to the synagogues of his day - rather he took the message of Jesus (i.e. 'proclaimed' Jesus) to such places as the market place (Acts 17.17) and the lecture hall (Acts 19.9). The fact is that if preaching is limited to the Christian pulpit, then it is limited indeed. The message needs to be taken to where people are. By and large church is not the place where non-Christians are to be found.

Today's passage reminds us that there is more than one way of presenting the good news (19). Indeed, if the good news is only presented in one way, then only one kind of person will probably respond to our preaching. Different strategies need to be adopted to reach different groups of people. An approach which may be appropriate for those on the near fringe of the church will be different for those on the far fringe, let alone for those beyond the fringe. These different approaches involve more than verbal differences - they involve moving out of our Christian ghettos and becoming part of other people's world. Like Paul we should be prepared to accommodate ourselves to the ways of others and only then share the good news (20-22). To be effective 'preaching' must avoid the extremes of narrow-minded dogmatism and broad-minded compromise.

How can I get out of my Christian ghetto? How can I meaningfully build bridges of friendship to my colleagues and neighbours?

Tuesday 9 February

SALVATION IS NOT GUARANTEED!

"We must pay more careful attention... to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away" (Hebs 2.1)

1 COR 10.1-13

Some Christians at Corinth were over-confident. They thought that because they had been baptised and had eaten at the Lord's Table, they could get away with anything. But the history of the Exodus teaches that it is possible to have all kinds of great religious experiences, and yet not to make it to the promised land (1-5). Neither a conversion experience nor participation in the sacramental life of the church guarantees salvation. Salvation is, in fact, an ongoing process which demands a daily conversion toward God.

Paul lists four ways in particular in which God's people can lose their salvation (6-10). Significantly these examples are as much a temptation today as they were centuries ago. For instance, we may no longer worship idols of wood and stone, but even as Christians we can be tempted to make an idol of our bank balance or of our quality of life. In today's society where teenage virginity is regarded as an oddity and extra-marital affairs are commonplace, the temptation to sexual immorality is very real for Christians young and old. 'Putting the Lord to the test' is a religious sin. It is the attitude which says that 'It doesn't really matter what I do - whether, for example, I cheat on my wife or go too far with my boyfriend - God will forgive'. God does forgive, but he does not forgive those who presume that he will forgive. Grumbling - against God and against those whom God has called to lead his people - is likewise another peculiarly religious sin, which still afflicts many a church.

Temptations to sin - and thus to fall from grace - abound. We need to be constantly on the 'qui vive' (12). Thankfully even when the Devil does his best, God always provides a 'way-out' for those who are alert. Unfortunately people often fail to escape temptation because they are not really looking for a way out.

How aware am I of the tempter's power? Am I even more aware of the Saviour's power?

Wednesday 10 February

WHAT HAPPENS AT THE LORD'S SUPPER?

*"Jesus invites his saints
to meet around his board;
here pardoned rebels sit and hold
communion with their Lord" (Isaac Watts)*

1 COR 10.14-22

In the context of warning the Corinthians against the dangers of getting involved in idol feasts Paul touches on the Lord's Supper and in so doing gives some significant teaching about what it means to eat bread and drink wine.. In the first place, he

indirectly reminds us how the Lord's Supper is rooted in the Jewish Passover Meal. Indeed, the Last Supper was a Passover Meal. The "cup of thanksgiving" or "blessing" (16) was a technical term for the Passover cup drunk after the main meal and over which the head of the family thanked God for the wine by saying "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has created the fruit of the vine". Secondly, Paul points out that not only do we Christians give thanks for the wine which now symbolises the blood of Christ - hence the term "Eucharist" (thanksgiving), we also "participate" in the "blood" of Christ (16) - it is "the communion of the blood of Christ" (AV). In other words, in drinking from the cup we acknowledge our share in the death of Christ, and in so doing receive again the benefits won from the death of Christ. Thirdly, Paul makes it clear that the celebration of the Lord Supper is not only an intensely personal experience, it also has corporate overtones. The action of breaking bread is no individual action. For as we break bread, not only do we share in the body of Christ broken for us in the Cross, we also share in the body of Christ his church (16). The one loaf: points to our oneness in Christ. To share in Christ involves a sharing in his church. The fact is that Jesus cannot be separated from his church. It follows that at the Lord's Supper when we renew our vows of love and loyalty to our Lord, we also renew our vows of love and loyalty to one another.

How rich in meaning is the Lord's Supper to me?

Thursday 11 February

GENUINE IMITATION

Jesus said: "I have set you an example" (John 13.15)

1 COR 10.23-11.1

Somewhat shockingly Paul encouraged the Corinthians not to follow the example of Christ, but to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (11.1). Few of us would dare to do the same. Yet without the practice of the truth, evangelism is in danger of becoming a giant institutional mouth. In a very real sense, the salvation of others depends upon our living out the faith.

It is how we live and treat others, that people are won for Christ. In particular Paul encouraged the Corinthians to take care in how they treated three categories of people (10.32). First of all, they were to give no offense to the "Jews", who at that time tended to oppose the church and caused trouble to its members. To give no offense to them was tantamount to give no offense to one's enemies. Our enemies may hate us, but that does not mean we stop seeking their advantage and actively loving them. The "Greek" formed another category. On the whole they were indifferent to the Christian faith. They were used to people worshipping many gods, so talk of one more 'god' made no difference. By implication, therefore, Paul encourages us to give no offense to those who are indifferent to our message. We must love them, even if they show no interest at all. The final category is "the church of God". We are called to seek the advantage of our fellow Christians. For as we love one another, others will know that we are Christ's disciples. Love within the fellowship has an evangelistic edge. Nietzsche said that he would believe in the Redeemer if he saw more of the Redeemer in the redeemed! So much depends upon us - upon the degree to which we genuinely imitate Jesus.

*"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, that you love one another"
(John 13.35):. True or false?*

Friday 12 February

WOMEN IN CHURCH

"God created man in his own image... male and female, he created them" (Gen 1.27)

1 COR 11.2-16

Wearing a veil in church was considered proper because of the social customs of ancient society. Only prostitutes and the like appeared unveiled in public. This is what Paul had in mind when he said that an unveiled woman might as well have her hair cut or shaved off (6) - for this too was a sign of an immoral woman. For reasons which are not clear some of the women in the church at Corinth came to worship dressed more like men than women. Were they seeking to assert the truth that in Christ's new order "there is neither... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3.28)? We don't know. Indeed, there is much here which is obscure and uncertain. What this passage does, however, illustrate is that there are parts of Scripture which deal with a specific situation rather than teach universal principles.

Nonetheless, two points of particular interest emerge: the first is that the right of women to share in public worship was not at issue. Paul does not dispute here that women might pray or prophesy within the context of public worship. Already at this very early stage in the history of the church, women were making a significant contribution to the life of the church. The second is that Paul asserts the interdependence of men and women (11), which in turn must imply some degree of equality. Unfortunately the equality of men and women is often obscured by a misinterpretation of Paul's description of man as being the 'head' of the woman (3), an allusion to the story of Eve created out of Adam's rib (Gen 2.21-23): Paul is not talking about 'headship' but uses the term 'head' in its normal Hebrew & Greek sense of 'source' or 'origin'. Women are not second-class citizens of the Kingdom!

Is it theological principle or is it blind prejudice which hinders the ministry of women in churches known to me?

Saturday 13 February

EATING AND DRINKING UNWORTHILY

Do you despise the church of God? (1 Cor 11.22)

1 COR 11.17-34

If ever there is a text to strike terror into the heart of a Christian it is 1 Cor 11.29, where to eat & drink unworthily is to invite "judgment" on oneself! What does Paul mean? The key to understanding this passage is to realise that the "body" which we need to "recognise" (29) is not the body of Jesus as represented in the bread, but rather the body

of Jesus as represented by his people (see 1 Cor 12). Not to discern the body is to fail to acknowledge our brothers and sisters in Christ.

At Corinth the Lord's Supper, like the Last Supper, was a proper meal. It was like a modern pot-luck supper, where everybody brought a plate of food to share with others. Bread was broken and wine was poured in the context of that evening meal. Unfortunately at Corinth things went badly wrong. The richer members of the fellowship gave up on sharing their food with the poorer members. Indeed, they used to begin to tuck in long before the poorer folk had knocked off work and got to church (21) The Lord's Supper, far from obliterating differences, became an occasion when differences were highlighted. What was intended to be a fellowship meal degenerated into a gathering of cliques. For Paul this was tantamount to blasphemy (22). To eat and drink bread in such an unworthy manner was tantamount to crucifying Jesus all over again (27).

The implications are clear. Relationships in the church are paramount. Inevitably there are times when disagreement leads to breakdown in fellowship. But when they do, they need to be put right - immediately. To allow broken relationships to fester and at the same time to eat bread and drink wine is to eat and drink 'in an unworthy manner'.

Are there any broken relationship I need to put right? Is there a brother or a sister who feels out of sorts with me (see Matt 5.23-24)

REVIEW OF 1 COR 7-11

We have seen that, for the most part, the issues Paul deals with in this section of 1 Corinthians are also issues for us. True, some of the presenting problems at Corinth may not at first sight have appeared to be an issue to us, but on reflection we have discovered that very often the underlying issue is present in some of the problems we face today. For example:

- although few Christians today would adopt the view taken by some at Corinth that sex in any shape or form is evil (1 Cor 7.1), the question of sex and sexuality, both within and without marriage, is a very live issue in the church today.
- although the problem of eating food offered to idols (1 Cor 8) belongs to the first-century, the underlying question of the degree to which our freedom may be limited by the rights and needs of others remains a live issue.
- although few churches today have any problems in not paying for ministry, many churches - and even more so their pastors! - would benefit from taking seriously Paul's teaching on the rights full-time Christian workers have to be fairly remunerated (1 Cor 9.1-14).
- although the observance or non-observance of the Jewish law no longer affects how we evangelise today, we do well to reflect on what it means to ensure that our

Gospel presentation - as distinct from the Gospel itself - becomes an unnecessary barrier to faith, simply because we have failed to take culture seriously (1 Cor 9.19-23).

- although the wearing of veils in worship has long ceased to have any relevance in Christian worship (1 Cor 11.2-16), the ministry of women in the church is in some circles a hot potato
- although the format of the Lord's Supper has changed almost out of recognition, Paul's teaching on the corporate nature of this 'sacrament' (1 Cor 10.14-17; 11.27-32) continues to challenge today's innate individualism

1 Corinthians - and in particular 1 Cor 7-11 - is very much God's word for God's church today!