

# Exploring the Word of God:

## The Corinthian Letters

Selected Chapters



Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION  
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*Living and Sharing the Gospel*

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# **The Corinthian Letters**

## **Selected Chapters**

By Michael D. Morrison

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**Introduction:** This project began in the mid 1990s. The first volume of *Exploring the Word of God* was published in 1995. We were not able to print any more volumes, but we continued to study and write articles about Scripture. We have gathered these articles and are publishing them as e-books. Some books of the Bible are more complete than others. As you can

see, this volume is woefully incomplete. But it is better to publish what we have than to wait (for an unknown length of time) until we have completed our study of the Corinthian letters. We hope you find these studies useful and encouraging.

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# The Wisdom of Weakness

## 1 Corinthians 1

The church in Corinth was beset by problems — divided into rich and poor, sophisticated and simple, the talented and the average. Some members claimed to have special knowledge that Paul did not have. They began to look down on his simple message about a man who was killed by the Romans. They wrote him a letter asking for more information on several topics, and Paul learned even more about the church in Corinth from people who had been there.

### Greetings

Paul's reply is now known as 1 Corinthians. He begins, as ancient letters normally did, by saying who he was and naming the people he was writing to: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth" (vv. 1-2, New Revised Standard Version in this chapter).

He then reminds them of who they are: "To those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (verse 2). They are called to be holy, but they are also called to be part of a larger group. That will be important later in the letter.

Greek letters usually began with *chara*, greetings, but Paul modifies this to *charis* (grace) and peace (the typical Jewish greeting): "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

Greek orators would often begin a speech by praising the audience, but Paul modifies this to praise God for what he is doing in the readers: "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in

speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you” (vv. 3-6).

The Corinthian Christians prided themselves on their speaking and their knowledge. Paul acknowledges these as blessings from God, and as evidence in support of the gospel of Christ. He will address the misuse of these gifts later in the letter.

Since God has been generous to them, he writes: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (vv. 7-8). Paul here subtly reminds them to stick firmly to their original faith, rather than accepting odd new doctrines. Don’t forget that salvation depends on Christ!

### **A divided congregation**

He begins with a plea for unity: “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (verse 10). Perfect agreement is pointless if it means that everyone believes the same heresy. So in this letter Paul will try to set them on the right track.

Paul had heard that the congregation was divided into different groups, some claiming to follow one leader, and some another (vv. 11-12). But Paul didn’t want even his own name to be an excuse for division: “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name” (vv. 13-15).

But then Paul stops to correct himself: “(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else)” (verse 16). Paul could have edited his original mistake out, but he left it in as

an illustration of how unimportant it was to keep track of who did the actual baptism.

“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power” (verse 17). Paul baptized people — and he assumed that all the readers had been baptized — but the gospel was his priority. The message centered on Christ, not on a ritual. Paul wanted to persuade people with the facts, not with the flowery oratory that some Greek philosophers used to attract a following.

### **God’s power and wisdom**

The message about a crucified Messiah might seem preposterous to some people, but God uses that message to bring salvation to those who believe. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (verse 18). Paul then quotes [Isa. 29:14](#): “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” God works in unexpected ways — some people might say that the gospel of grace is a message of weakness, but Paul says it is a message of power ([Rom. 1:16](#)).

“Where is the one who is wise?” Paul asks. Most are not in the church. Where is the teacher of the law? Most are not accepting the message of salvation. Where are the philosophers? Not here. “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20).

Humans value education, but God’s message does not depend on human approval. People cannot know God through their own intelligence, and they cannot save themselves by any amount of philosophy or study. Instead, God decided to save people who believed the gospel (verse 21).

“Jews demand signs [miracles] and Greeks desire wisdom [philosophy], but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness



to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (vv. 22-24). The message is too simple for some people, but God uses it to save his people.

The crucified Christ may look weak and foolish, but this is the power and wisdom of God. “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength” (verse 25). This is the basis of unity in the church: accepting the gospel of Christ crucified — people being saved by the shameful death of Christ.

### **The wisdom of God**

Remember that you were ordinary people when you heard the gospel, Paul says. You were not the movers and shakers of Corinth. “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (vv. 27-29).

If people could save themselves through their own intelligence, then the kingdom of God would be filled with people who were proud of their own accomplishments. If people could get in through their own abilities, they would think that they were just as good as God.

So God decided to call the nobodies of this world, those who were willing to admit their need, those who were willing to accept the gift of salvation. And this plan will eventually shame the wise and humiliate the proud, who will then be able to realize that their own strength, no matter how good it was, was not good enough.

Because of God’s plan, Paul writes, “He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (vv. 30-31, quoting from [Jer. 9:24](#)). Jesus is our

righteousness — it is in him, and only in him, that we can be righteous and holy. Only when we are in Christ, united with him by faith, can we be redeemed. We cannot boast about anything we did — our only boast is in what Christ does for us. He gets the credit and the praise.

### **Things to think about**

In what way has God enriched you? (verse 5).

How can people be perfectly united in mind and thought? (verse 10)

Is v. 14 an inspired mistake?

Can the wise and wealthy accept the unexpected wisdom of God? (verse 20)

If Christ is our righteousness, do we need any of our own? (verse 30)

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# **A Command Paul Did Not Obey**

## **1 Corinthians 9**

In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul deals with a number of questions the Corinthian Christians had. Some of them felt free to eat meat in pagan temples; others thought that would be sinful.

Paul explains that Christian liberty must be voluntarily limited, and in this case the “free” Christians should stay out of pagan temples so they would not hurt the faith of weak Christians. He illustrates his conclusion by saying that he would not eat meat at all, if eating would cause someone to fall into sin (8:13).

What? Doesn't Paul have the right to do what he wants? Why should his freedom be limited by other people's immaturity?

Paul explains that love requires self-sacrifice, and he gives an example from his own ministry. In this example, the Corinthian church is “weak,” and Paul is giving up his rights to avoid offending them. Though he is free, he chooses to be a slave for the sake of the gospel.

### **The rights of an apostle**

“Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (9:1-2).

Apparently some people in the Corinthian church did not respect Paul, did not accept him as a genuine apostle and were refusing to give him any support. Paul replies that he has full apostolic credentials, but even by a lesser definition, they should accept him as an apostle because he is the one who brought the gospel to them. And because of that, he has certain rights.

“This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. Don't we have

the right to food and drink? Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?" (9:3-6).

Other apostles are being given support — enough to support their wives, too. The Corinthians apparently agree that those apostles have a right to financial support, but they deny it for Paul. (The other apostles were conveniently far away, barely aware of the Corinthians and unlikely to ask them for support.)

This is not fair, says Paul. Barnabas and I are doing the same kind of work, and we should be able to have the same kind of support. Paul gives some examples from secular society: "Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?" (9:7).

"Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? For it is written in the Law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain'" (9:8, quoting from [Deut. 25:4](#)).

This law is not simply about animals, Paul says. It is a principle that applies to people, too. "Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest" (9:9-10). Yes, people should be paid for the work they do.

### **The Lord's command**

Paul then applies the principle to his own situation: "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?" (9:11-12) In other words: If I have given you the gospel, you should be willing to support me as I preach the gospel. If I have given you

something of eternal value, surely you should be willing to give me things of temporary value.

We have this right, Paul says, “but we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ” (9:12). Paul is willing to set aside his rights — the gospel is more important to him than his own privileges. Paul’s example is relevant for many modern situations, and his comments challenge those who receive money as well as those who should give. All sides are called to self-sacrifice for the sake of the gospel.

This is common sense, Paul seems to say. The principle is true for oxen, soldiers, farmers and shepherds. If the work is worth doing, it is worth supporting, and this is true in religion, too: “Don’t you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar?” (9:13).

To clinch the argument, Paul quotes Jesus: “In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (9:14, perhaps alluding to [Luke 10:7](#)). But then Paul again notes, “I have not used any of these rights” (9:15).

Paul clearly calls this a command of the Lord, and just as clearly says he does not obey the command. He makes his living by making tents — he understands the Lord’s command more as a command for giving than for receiving. The focus is on the responsibility of believers to support the work of the gospel.

The priority for Paul is not money, but the gospel. He willingly sets aside his right to financial support so that people will not think his message is just a speech designed to get money. Some Greek orators made their living by traveling and entertaining audiences with speeches. Others formed schools and charged students for lectures. Paul does not want anyone to think his

message is motivated by selfish concerns.

But Paul's willingness to support himself does not change the Lord's command. Ministers of the gospel have a right to financial support, and believers have an obligation to provide support. But Paul is not asking for his own support. "I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast" (9:15).

Even in this letter, Paul is not asking the Corinthians to support him. His request may have been for the collection he was coordinating for the believers in Jerusalem (16:1-4). He wants to make it clear that he does not preach for his own benefit. Rather, he preaches because the Lord commanded him to preach. The gospel is his priority: "When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me" (9:16-17). Paul feels compelled, not quite sure whether he is a volunteer or a slave. As he does his duty, he also feels rewarded.

"What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel" (9:18). Paul felt good in being able to preach without asking for money. That approach may be good when preaching to unbelievers, but eventually the time comes, as it has here for Paul, when believers must be taught about the Lord's command. Those who accept the gospel of grace must become gracious.

### **A slave of everyone**

Paul again uses himself as an illustration of how believers should respond to the gospel with self-sacrifice: "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible" (9:19).

His goal is the gospel, not himself. He sets aside his rights, gives up his freedom, to do the work Jesus has given him.

“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law” (9:20). Jesus, as a Jew, was born “under the law” ([Gal. 4:4](#)). Jews were under the law, and Paul obeyed the law when he was with Jews. Why? To win the Jews, to help them accept the gospel.

But Paul also notes that he is not under the law. Rather, he is free to live like a gentile ([Gal. 2:14](#)), to live as though he does not have the law, as we see in verse 21: “To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law.”

Paul’s priority is to win people, to make the gospel attractive. He is obligated by the law of Christ to set aside his personal preferences so that he can serve others. He uses his freedom in Christ to be a slave, to adapt his behavior to the situation. His main goal is not to uphold tradition or to fight tradition, nor to side with one ethnic group or another, but to preach Christ.

“To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (9:22-23).

Paul does not want to disqualify himself (9:27) by living a self-centered life. He goes out of his way to serve others, to serve the gospel. His example is consistent with his message: the message that God loved the world so much that he sent Jesus to die for us. Although we were enemies, Jesus gave up his rights and gave up his life as a ransom for us.

The example Jesus set includes a command for all of us: Those who receive spiritual blessings must be willing to share material things.

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# Diversity and Unity in Spiritual Gifts

## 1 Corinthians 12

The church members in Corinth asked Paul a number of questions, and Paul responded in the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. One of the topics he addresses is “spiritual gifts.” Paul’s explanation begins in chapter 12; we’ll begin in verse 3.

### **Same source, but different results (verses 3-7)**

Paul comments on how God works in different ways in different people: “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.”

Paul uses “gifts,” “service,” and “working” as roughly equivalent (just as Spirit, Lord and God are equivalent). The three terms are not distinct categories, but they highlight different aspects of the same phenomena: 1) that the abilities are given, not something we can take credit for ourselves, 2) they are given for service, to help other people, and 3) they work; they produce results in our lives. The main point is that God works in different ways in different people.

Paul summarizes the purpose: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” Spiritual gifts are not for a person’s private benefit—they are to help the church as a whole.

### **Various gifts (verses 8-11)**

Paul lists some of the gifts: “To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit.” Generally speaking, knowledge refers to awareness of facts; wisdom refers to the ability to apply facts to the right situation. The Corinthian believers seem to be interested in knowledge and wisdom, and

that may be why Paul begins with these two gifts.

He lists more: “to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits.” All believers have faith, but some have stronger faith than others. Presumably someone who has a gift of miraculous healing also has stronger faith than most people. These gifts overlap; Paul is giving examples, not creating totally distinct categories. He will have more to say about prophecy in chapter 14.

Paul ends with the gift that was causing the most problems in Corinth, and its solution; “to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues.” No matter what the “tongues” were, no one in Corinth understood them, except people who had the special gift of interpretation.

The main point for Paul here is that “all these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.” Not everyone is given the same abilities; the Spirit purposely distributes different skills to different people.

Why?

As verse 7 says, it is for the common good. When we have different gifts, when no one has all the abilities, then we need to work together, and that in itself is good for us.

### **One body with many parts (verses 12-16)**

Paul compares the church to a human body: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ”—that is, with the body of Christ, the church. Paul is still stressing diversity within one body. The Corinthians needed to know about that diversity, because some of them said that everyone should have one gift in particular—tongues—and they looked down on people who did not have that gift.

Paul explains the body analogy: “For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” The Spirit places people of all ethnic and social groups together. We have a common origin and a common purpose, but (Paul reminds us again) we are not identical: “Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.”

Paul insists that all the parts are needed: “Now if the foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” Similarly, if a person who did not speak in tongues should say, “Because I do not speak in tongues, I do not belong here,” Paul would respond: “That does not disqualify you—you are still part of the body.”

Similarly, “And if the ear should say, ‘Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,’ it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.” If someone thinks that they don’t belong because they lack the gift of miracles, then Paul says: “You are part of the body anyway; that is no reason to drop out.”

### **Variety is necessary (verses 17-20)**

Paul develops the analogy further: “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?” He is saying, in effect, “If everyone in the church had the gift of tongues, who would be doing the prophecy? If everyone had the gift of miracles, who would have the wisdom?”

Paul stresses diversity: “But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.” We cannot turn a gift into a requirement for acceptance, because God has distributed different roles to different people. There are many parts to play

within the body of Christ.

### **All parts are needed (verses 21-27)**

Earlier, Paul encouraged the people who felt left out. Now he addresses those who look down on others: “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’” People who speak in tongues should not think that they have everything they need.

One person might say, “I don’t need prophecy, because I have tongues. I don’t need discernment, because the only gift that counts is the one that I have.” But Paul says, “We need every part, and every person.” God puts his people into a body, into a community of people in which we need to work together to help each other.

“On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor.” Is this true in the church today? Do we give special honor to people who are weak, who are not in the limelight?

“And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment.” Do we take special efforts for church members who are less glamorous in the eyes of the world? Paul wants us to make sure we include everyone, and to make everyone feel an important part of the body—because everyone *is* important.

“But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.” God wants his children to love one another, no matter which gifts they have or lack. We should not separate into the haves and the have-nots; we are all in this together, and we are to help one another and learn from one another.

What does “equal concern” look like? Paul will say more about that in the next chapter. Here he gives one example: “If one part suffers, every part

suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” Our sorrows and our successes are shared; we support those who suffer, and congratulate those who have blessings. Someday the tide will turn, so everything will work best if we stick together, each doing the part God has given us to do.

Paul summarizes it: “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.” Everyone belongs, and all the parts need to work together.

### **The Greeks had a word for it: χάρισμα**

In English, a person who has “charisma” has a personality that seems to attract followers. But for Paul, everyone has been given a *charisma*, because for him the word meant a gift, something given by the grace (*charis*) of God. When God delivered Paul from danger, it was a *charisma* ([2 Cor. 1:11](#)). His ability to be celibate was another *charisma* from God ([1 Cor. 7:7](#)).

But *charismata* (the plural form of *charisma*) are best known as the special abilities God’s Spirit distributes to his people ([Rom. 12:6](#); [1 Cor. 12:4](#); [1 Pet. 4:10](#)). Churches that emphasize these gifts are often called *charismatic* churches.

But actually, all Christians can be called charismatic, because we all believe that “the gift [*charisma*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” ([Rom. 6:23](#)). Salvation is the greatest gift, given to all.

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# Exegetical Notes on 1 Corinthians 12

## Features of the literary structure

Paul writes, I don't want you to be ignorant about the spiritual things (verse 1). This is similar to 7:1, so Paul may be addressing the topic of spiritual things at the request of the Corinthians. Fee notes that "this is a nearly universal conviction" (570n), but notes that Paul's corrective comments imply that the Corinthians were not simply asking for information. I suspect that they did not admit any ignorance about this topic, so 12:1b may indicate that Paul is initiating the topic (cf. 11:18). His comments in chapter 14 suggest that he would have addressed the topic of spiritual gifts whether the Corinthians had asked or not.

Verse 2 refers to voiceless idols, and v. 3 to speaking. Chapter 14 makes it clear that the spiritual gifts of greatest interest to the Corinthians and to Paul involved speaking.

Verse 3 contains Trinitarian words, but not in formula. Verses 4-6 mention Spirit, Lord, and God, but "God" here does not seem to be the Father, as distinct from Spirit and Lord. Rather, "God" encompasses both. No matter what kind of gift, no matter who has it, God, by means of either the Spirit or the Lord, is the one working in the person.

The parallels of verses 4-6 at first suggest that *charismata*, *diakonia* and *energumata* are three types of *pneumatika* (=manifestations of the Spirit). Martin seems to follow this view, saying that Paul sets the *pneumatika* "within a larger framework of God's *charismata*, a broader term referring to all manifestations of God's favor" (1016). However, Paul seems to vary his terms without necessarily implying distinct categories (Barrett 285, Fee 585-6n12). Paul seems to use *charismata* and *pneumatika* interchangeably (cf. v.31a and 14:1; cf. Fee 576).

The list of gifts does not seem to be in any well-defined order. (Other lists are in different orders — cf. vs. 28-30 and Rom. 12:6-8.) In 1 Cor. 12:8-10, Paul begins with two gifts of words, perhaps due to the interest in gifts of speaking, or perhaps due to the Corinthians' interest in wisdom and knowledge. Faith, healing and miracles may form a group. He ends with two gifts of tongues, putting the gift causing the most problems last (Fee 591, 619). But the gifts of prophecy and discerning spirits don't seem to be in any particular order or logical connection. None of the lists is exhaustive. "Paul's concern here is to offer a *considerable* list so that they will stop being singular in their own emphasis [i.e., expecting all Christians to speak in tongues]" (Fee 585).

Paul does not *prove* that the diverse gifts are all inspired by the same Spirit. He simply repeats this truth in various ways. His analogy shows that it is possible, but doesn't prove that this is the only possible explanation for diverse gifts.

Did Paul emphasize diversity, or unity? Fee argues for diversity, but I think Paul was keeping both in balance. As Fee points out, there doesn't seem to be factions due to charismata, but there were factions over leadership (1:10-12) and social status (11:17-34). Paul is encouraging them to have greater diversity in charismata and less diversity in factions; thus he has to keep balancing unity and diversity. The principle of love and mutual benefit achieves both of Paul's interests.

Paul argues that the diversity originates from a common source, and he develops that thought into the fact that God's gifts are *distributed* (vs.11, 28). This seems to be important, because from the concept of distribution comes several important corollaries: 1) Gifts are given for a good purpose. 2) God designs the distribution of gifts. 3) Not every member has every gift. 4) All gifts are important. 5) Gifts are for the benefit of the community.

Verse 31a is interpreted as an imperative in the RSV and NIV; the indicative has the same form. The Corinthians seem to have been eagerly desiring a particular spiritual gift; why would Paul command them to continue? The answer is in v.31b: Paul is going to clarify for them what the best spiritual way is, laying the foundation for chapter 14, in which he encourages them to seek a spiritual gift that is more helpful.

## **Outline**

1. Introduction to the topic of spiritual gifts. vv. 1-3
2. One Spirit inspires a variety of divine gifts — vv. 4-11
3. Analogy of the human body to show how diversities work together
4. God distributes his gifts — vv.28-31

## **Cultural and contextual background**

This chapter has numerous interesting words. Some are not found elsewhere in the New Testament, because few passages discuss the topic of spiritual gifts. Interest is increased, and opinions multiply, because of current controversies about charismata.

Verses 4-6: varieties (*diareseis*) may imply distribution, rather than simple variety. The related verb in v. 11 clearly means distribution (Earle 234-5, Barrett 283). Although *diareseis* might have been ambiguous on first occurrence (Fee 586n13), Paul's later use of the verb would make the meaning more clear on subsequent readings of the letter.

Verse 9: Faith “is the only charisma listed in 1 Cor. 12 that is also listed as a ‘fruit of the spirit’ in Gal. 5:22.... Here, however, *pistis* seems to mean an unusual degree of faith” (Spittler 603). “*Faith* cannot be that faith by which alone the Christian life is begun and maintained, for this could not be spoken of as a gift enjoyed by some Christians but not others” (Barrett 285).

Verse 10: Discernment of spirits “refers to the ability to evaluate [1] either the spirits themselves [cf. 1 Jn 4:1] or [2] spirit-inspired utterances [cf.



14:29]” (Spittler 603-4). “It was necessary (and it required another gift) to know whether the inspired speaker...was actuated by the Spirit of God, or by some demonic agency” (Barrett 286; he should have added as a third option that the person could be speaking of his own spirit).

Verse 10: Tongues. Fee lists the following as certain: It is an unintelligible Spirit-inspired utterance, directed to God and under the control of the speaker. “What is less certain is whether Paul also understood the phenomenon to be an actual language” (Fee 598). Fee gives evidence against glossolalia being a human language, but he also says the question is irrelevant.

Verse 11: “as he wills.” The Greek verb *bouletai* implies “the deliberate exercise of volition” (Earle 235, citing Abbott-Smith).

### **The message and application**

When discussing spiritual gifts, the best starting point is the realization that we cannot naïvely accept all impressive gifts as having divine origin. Non-Christian religions have some dramatic phenomena, but such phenomena are not evidence of value or authenticity. Rather, value is seen in relationship to Jesus Christ our Lord. If phenomena (including supernatural, seemingly miraculous powers) work against Jesus, they are not inspired by God. That is a reliable criterion. If miracles are used in association with a false gospel or a misleading message, we must not be misled by the display but rather judge the truthfulness of the message. If the phenomena are used to promote the Lordship of Jesus Christ, they are good, and the message of Lordship is inspired.

Next, we should realize that spiritual gifts come in great variety. Even though there is only one Lord and only one Spirit, God works in every Christian, using every variety of spiritual gift. We must not expect uniformity or be misled by the diversity. Spiritual gifts are distributed with purpose and

thought, according to the divine will, therefore for our good, and we are likewise to use them to serve one another.<sup>1</sup>

God inspires a large variety of abilities. We cannot expect any person to have them all, or any of them to be experienced by all Christians, because God purposely distributes them. By dividing the skills, God encourages members to work with and help one another. The human body is an apt illustration, since it contains many types of organs. This analogy helps us see how foolish it would be to conclude that we must have one particular ability or else we don't belong. Because if the entire body were only one type of tissue, it couldn't function. Rather, the organs are interdependent, by divine design.

Just as we shouldn't lament our *lack* of a particular ability, we shouldn't disown or exclude those who have a different ability. That's because we are often unable to correctly judge the usefulness of various abilities. Our internal organs may be weak in some respects, but they are nevertheless essential. The point is that we can't judge value the way God does, so we must tolerate and try to understand differences within the church. God is the author of the variety, even though he isn't a creator of confusion. Rather, he wants the variety to have harmony and unity, not discord and schism. Members of the church need to care about one another, without haughtiness or envy. The haves and the have-nots must remember that they are part of the same body.

God has distributed within the church gifts of leadership, miracles and service. None of these gifts are universal — God distributes them as he wishes. We should seek not for the gifts of our own choosing, not for the gifts we perceive to have honor,<sup>2</sup> but we should seek to allow God to give us greater gifts, which operate within the parameters of love and humility rather than schism.

## Endnotes

1 “One of the great tragedies of history is that many people have thought that salvation comes by being a ‘member’ of some church” (Earle 235). Membership isn’t enough; we must become involved with one another.

2 It is not for Christians to dictate to the Spirit what gifts they (or others) should have, though they should strive for the greater (and perhaps less spontaneous) gifts (verse 31). The Spirit chooses what gift shall be given to each Christian, so that none has occasion for boasting, or for a sense of inferiority” (Barrett 286).

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# The Most Excellent Way

## 1 Corinthians 13

The church in first-century Corinth was plagued with social divisions and rivalries. Paul explained to them that God gives different people different abilities—not so that some people can exalt themselves over others, but so that everyone will work together for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7). No one is self-sufficient, and no one is unnecessary.

Near the end of chapter 12, he again explains that God appoints different roles in the church. He asks, Is everyone in the church an apostle? Of course not, he implies. It's silly to expect everyone to have the same role (vv. 28-30).

Nevertheless, some gifts are better than others, and Paul encourages the Corinthians to “eagerly desire the greater gifts” (verse 31). But even if they get better gifts, how are they to use them? He explains: “And now I will show you the most excellent way.”

This superior pathway, he says in chapter 13, is the way of love. Love is not a gift that some people have and others don't—it is the way in which *all* gifts should be used. This is what the Corinthians needed most. Indeed, without love, all the other gifts were pointless.

### **Without love, we are nothing (verses 1-3)**

Paul begins with the spiritual gift that the Corinthians valued the most: “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.” No matter how special the words are, if they aren't helping anyone, they are just noise.

“If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.” Eloquent preaching, deep wisdom and strong faith are all

wasted if they are not being used to help others.

“If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.” Even great sacrifices, if done for selfish purposes, fail to do anything for us. Selfish actions, no matter how good they appear on the outside, do not improve our standing in the eyes of God.

### **A description of love (verses 4-8)**

Real love is not proven through spectacular performances. Rather, it is demonstrated in much smaller things we do in everyday life: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.”

This is a description of God himself, and this is the life that the Father, Son, and Spirit enjoy with one another. This is the life God wants us to enjoy forever—and the life he wants us to have now, as well.

Love “does not dishonor others,” Paul says. “It is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” God encourages us to participate in this life now: freed of selfishness, fits of anger and grudges.

The reason that God wants us to live this way is because this is the way God already is. He does not keep a record of wrongs—he has already forgiven us for everything we’ve done. He does not tell us to do something he has not already done himself.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” Unfortunately, *we* often fail. Paul is describing a way that *we*, of ourselves, cannot achieve. But Christ in us has already achieved it, and God wants us to participate with Christ in his perfect life by trusting him and letting him live in us.

### **Love is eternal (verses 9-13)**

Paul makes a quick comparison between love, which is eternal, and the

spiritual gifts favored by the Corinthians: “But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.”

After the return of Christ and everything is made right, love will still be an essential part of life. But in that perfect age, there will be no need for prophecies or tongues. When we all have knowledge, there is no need for a “gift of knowledge.” Those things will pass away; they are temporary.

Paul then compares this to stages in human development that we are already familiar with: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.” Prophecy, tongues, and other gifts are designed for the immature, for those who live in this age; they (unlike love) are not part of mature life in the kingdom of God.

“For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” Our life, even the best spiritual life, is on a far lower level than what we will later enjoy. We know only a fraction of what that future life will be like, but God knows exactly what we are now, and what we need to be; we can trust him to work it out for our good.

In the end, three virtues will still be needed: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” This is what we all need most, because it describes the life of God himself, the life he wants us to participate in now and forever.

### **The Greeks had a word for it: *agapē***

Ancient Greek had several words for love: *erōs* for erotic love, *philos* for love between equals, *storgē* for the love of parents and children, and *agapē*. Although the verb form of *agapē* was common, often as a synonym for other

types of love, the noun was rare.

This changed when Jews in Alexandria translated the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek. They preferred the word *agapē*, and by using it to describe God's love for his people, they gave it a more distinctive meaning. It was associated with the goodwill and generosity of a person in power toward one without power. It was a love that was freely given, without expecting things in return except for gratitude and loyalty.

When the New Testament was written, *agapē* was again chosen to describe the kind of love that God has for his people, and the kind of love that he wants his people to have toward one another: a love that is freely given, whether or not the other person is able to give any favors in return. Because it never keeps track of failures, it is a love that never ceases to be given.

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# **The Gift of Prophecy**

## **1 Corinthians 14:1-12**

The early Christians in Corinth were fascinated with spiritual gifts. After telling them to “desire the greater gifts” (12:31), Paul described to them “the most excellent way”—love (13:1-13). Paul then weighed the relative merits of two spiritual gifts—one the Corinthians had over-valued, and one that they did not value enough. This problem warranted considerable space in Paul’s letter.

### **Prophecy better than tongues (14:1-5)**

“Follow the way of love, he writes, “and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy.” What is this gift of prophecy? We will see more when Paul describes its benefits. The point is that the Corinthians should value it more highly.

Tongues is a valid gift. So why should anyone want a different gift? Paul explains: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.”

When people speak in tongues, they cannot be understood. What good does that do? Paul answers: “Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves.” There is a private benefit.

“But the one who prophesies edifies the church.” This is the contrast Paul is making: prophecy helps other people, but tongues do not. If believers love others and want to help others, they should value prophecy over tongues.

Prophecy strengthens, encourages and comforts people. It builds them up in the faith and teaches them. Many scholars conclude that it is what we now call preaching.



Tongues are good, but prophesying is much better. “I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would *rather* have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues...so that the church may be edified.” The entire worship service should focus on edification: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (14:26).

### **A clear message (verses 6-12)**

“If I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction?” Tongues would not be understood, but prophecy is given in language that people understand.

“In the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying?”

If no one understands the words, they might as well all be the same syllable: “da-da-da-da-da-da.” It might inspire the speaker, but it doesn’t do anything for anyone else. Paul wants them to speak words that can be understood.

“There are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. So it is with you.”

The much-vaunted gift of tongues wasn’t doing the Corinthian church any good. It had become a point of rivalry, pride and division. It was not helping the people join together as the family of God, the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

It's good to desire spiritual gifts, Paul concludes, but for the good of the church, believers need to focus on a different gift: "Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church." Seek to be a person who helps others understand the words of God.

### **The Greeks had a word for it: *prophēteuo***

The word *prophēteuo* is a combination of the prefix *pro-*, meaning "before" and the root *phe-*, referring to speech. *Prophēteuo* means to speak publicly, or to speak of something before it happens. Moses was a prophet (Deut. 34:10), and although he made some predictions, his greater role was to tell people about their current responsibilities.

The later Israelite prophets spoke about the future not as mere predictions, but as words of judgment about the behavior of the people in their own day. When Jonah warned Nineveh of impending destruction, the people repented, and the city survived (Jonah 3:10). As a prediction, the prophecy failed, but as a warning about the present, it achieved its purpose.

When soldiers asked Jesus to prophesy about who hit him (Luke 22:64), they were not asking for a prediction, but for evidence that showed he had supernatural knowledge. When Paul wrote about prophecy in Corinth, he referred to speech that was divinely inspired to instruct and strengthen others.

Spiros Zodhiates defines a prophet: "not primarily one who foretells things to come, but who (having been taught of God) speaks out of His will" (*The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, page 1244).

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# Are You Out of Your Mind?

## 1 Corinthians 14:13-25

The believers in Corinth liked to speak in tongues, but Paul encouraged them to focus instead on gifts that build up the church. He explains why the gift of prophesying is better than tongues for use in church meetings.

### **Does anyone understand? (verses 13-17)**

Believers meet together in order to build one another up (verse 26). But tongues are of private value; they do not help others. So Paul exhorts, “the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say.” If they speak in tongues, they should desire that their words be explained.

“For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.” People who speak in tongues edify themselves (verse 4), but their minds are not producing any other fruit, or any other results.

Paul asks, “So what shall I do?” What is the practical action in this situation? It is to pray *and* to be fruitful: “I will pray with my spirit, but I will *also* pray with my understanding.” Tongues edify the speaker in a non-cognitive way, but they do not help others understand.

“I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.” Will he alternate between tongues one minute and interpretation the next? Perhaps. But he can pray with his spirit or sing with his spirit *and* with understanding all at the same time, with normal words.

“Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit [in tongues], how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer, say ‘Amen’ to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?” If other people don’t know what the words mean, they cannot indicate agreement. They are like outsiders, excluded from the praise.

“You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.” Tongues are good for private use, but not for public praise and prayer.

### **Do people respond with belief? (verses 18-25)**

Paul knows both sides of the issue: “I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you.” Even though Paul spoke tongues privately, he says, “in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.” Church meetings are a place for instruction, not for using a gift that does not edify others.

He chides them, “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults.” When they use a spiritual gift for self-exaltation, they are being childish.

Tongues do not help other believers, but could they help unbelievers? To address that point, Paul quotes Isaiah 28:11-12: “With other tongues and through the lips of foreigners I will speak to this people, but even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord.”

Isaiah was talking about the Jews being conquered by enemy nations, and in that circumstance God used other languages to speak to the people, who were essentially unbelievers. But they did not respond to Babylonian words any better than they did to Hebrew words. Paul concludes: “Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers...”

“Prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.” When God inspires people to prophesy, he speaks to people who will respond. It is the same in the church, Paul implies. Prophecy, or inspired words of instruction, is the appropriate gift for speaking to believers.

“If the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” The visitors would hear many sounds, but would also see that no one understood anyone else. It would seem pointless, and it could repel them.

“But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare.” Prophecy helps people understand what sin is, and helps them admit they fall short and need a Savior.

So it leads to conversion and belief: “They will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you!’” Prophecy is the appropriate gift to help unbelievers, too.

### **The Greeks had a word for it: οικοδομή**

*Oikodomē* comes from Greek words for “house” and “build.” It may be used in its literal sense, for constructing a house, or repairing a building. But it is often used in a figurative way, as a metaphor for helping people. Paul uses it in 1 Cor. 14:26: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” He is not talking about constructing a building—he is referring to helping other people.

But what does it mean to “build” another person? *The Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* gives this paraphrase: “to increase the potential of someone or something, with focus upon the process involved – ‘to strengthen, to make more able, to build up.’” In 2 Cor. 13:10, Paul refers to his God-given authority “for building you up, not for tearing you down.”

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# **One at a Time, Please**

## **1 Corinthians 14:26-39**

What did first-century believers do in their worship meetings? The Bible gives us only a few glimpses into the details. Paul gives a description in 1 Corinthians 14:26: “When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation.” Every believer had a part to play, each according to the way that God had gifted them.

### **Speaking in turn**

However, it seems that all the believers in Corinth wanted to use their gifts at the same time, and their meetings had become chaotic. One person was singing, another speaking in tongues, a third trying to deliver a message—but no one was listening to anyone else. Everyone was empowered to speak, and that was good. But when everyone spoke at once, the gifts were not producing the desired results.

So Paul gives them a basic principle: “Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.” Spiritual gifts are given for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), and they should strengthen the church. People should be taught, and a sense of community should grow.

Based on this foundational principle, Paul gives instructions: “If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God” (vv. 27-28).

When God inspires people to speak, he does not cause everyone to speak at once. Rather, he expects them to restrain themselves so that their gift is used at a time when it can be effective. It may mean waiting for someone else to finish, or until an interpreter is present.

Tongues are not appropriate in church, he says, unless someone is there to interpret the words. And do not expect everyone to speak in tongues—no more than three should speak at each meeting. If more people feel inspired to speak in tongues, then they can wait until the next week.

### **Not a God of disorder**

Paul gives similar guidelines for the gift of prophecy: “Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged” (vv. 29-31).

How do people “weigh carefully” what is said? The Greek word means to discern, to make a decision. People are to decide whether these are words of God, or not. Was this done by each person silently, or did it involve discussion? We do not know.

The first speaker must be willing to cut the message short if someone else is inspired to give an additional message. The meeting is not an oratory contest or an endurance contest, but a time for instruction and encouragement, a time to serve others rather than to seek attention for one’s self.

Paul gives another basic principle when he writes, “The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets” (verse 32). He has already implied that tongues-speakers should control their own gift; each person should use wisdom when using their gifts. Being “inspired” does not mean that everyone blurts out whatever they want, whenever they want. God gives gifts, but he also wants us to think about how and when we use those gifts.

“For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people” (verse 33). Paul’s other congregations were orderly, and he wanted Corinth to be orderly as well. He did not tell

people to stop using their gifts, but his guidelines would make their gifts more effective.

### **Women should (not) be silent**

Paul also calls for orderly worship among a third group—women—and these are among the most controversial words Paul ever wrote: “Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church” (vv. 34-35).

I cannot discuss all the details of the controversy here, but briefly, we may note that Paul already implied in chapter 11 that women were allowed to prophesy, presumably in public meetings. When he writes that women are to be *silent*, he did not mean a total and permanent prohibition, just as he did not mean a total prohibition when he used the same Greek word for tongues-speakers and prophets.

The problem in the Corinthian church meetings was not a problem of *who* was speaking, but of *when*. When everyone spoke at once, it was chaotic. Part of the problem was that women were talking. So Paul tells them to stop talking in church. He did not mean that they could not sing along with everyone else, or that they could not interpret tongues for someone else, or that they could not prophesy. Rather, just like everyone else, they were to cease all out-of-turn talking. (For more details, see our more detailed study of this passage, posted at <http://www.gci.org/church/ministry/women9>.)

Paul seems to express some frustration with the Corinthians when he asks, “Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?” (verse 36). The Corinthians claimed to be inspired, and acted as if they did not need any guidance from Paul or anyone else. They were using “inspiration” as an excuse for their own excesses.



Paul wants them to see the bigger picture, that they are not the only believers on the planet, and they do not have a perfect pipeline to God. Just as God can inspire the Corinthians, so he can also inspire Paul—but that does not mean that the Corinthians were responding to the Spirit just as accurately as Paul was. Paul had a special conversion, a special commission, and many more years of experience with the Spirit.

“If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command. But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored” (vv. 37-38). Paul is invoking his God-given authority over his churches.

Paul concludes the chapter: “Be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (vv. 39-40). We might summarize it this way:

- \* Be eager to speak words that instruct, encourage, and build people up.
- \* Tongues are not wrong in themselves, but they can (like most other gifts) be used wrongly.
- \* Meetings should be orderly, so they can strengthen the church.

### **The Greeks had a word for it: τάξις**

*Taxis* comes from *tassō*, which means “to arrange.” *Taxis* usually conveys the idea of a sequence. We get the English word *taxonomy* from this word.

In Luke 1:8, *taxis* is used to say that Zechariah’s division was “on duty.” It was the turn for his group to serve. *Taxis* is used more often in Hebrews, to say that Jesus is a priest in the “order” of Melchizedek.

Paul uses *taxis* in 1 Cor. 14:40 to say that worship meetings should be orderly. The context shows that Paul is concerned with sequence—that people speak one after another, each in their own turn.

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# **Will We Live Again?**

## **1 Corinthians 15:1-23**

Every spring, Easter reminds Christians that Jesus rose from the dead. His resurrection was certainly good news for him, and we rejoice that our Friend lives again. But Easter tells us more than that — it tells us something about our life, too.

### **A core component of the gospel**

Paul wrote his letter to the church at Corinth to address several problems and questions that the members had. In chapter 15, he responds to the idea that no one will be resurrected from the dead.

Paul begins with a teaching the people had already accepted: “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you” (verses 1-2).

Since Paul is focusing on the resurrection, he catalogs the eyewitness evidence: “He appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born” (vv. 5-8).

We have all seen him, Paul is saying, and you can verify that for yourself, because most of those witnesses are still alive. In verses 9-10 he digresses about his calling as an apostle; then he concludes: “This is what we preach, and this is what you believed” (verse 11).

### **All in vain?**

With this foundation, Paul begins to reason: “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is

no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (vv. 12-14).

The apostles are witnesses of the fact that Jesus was resurrected from the dead. It therefore makes no sense for anyone who believes the gospel to teach that there is no resurrection, because they have already accepted a message that proclaims a resurrection. If the message is defective at its core, it is pointless to preach it, and everyone ought to quit and go home.

And if the message is wrong, the apostles are liars: “We are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead” (verse 15).

But the problem becomes even greater than that. Paul points out another logical consequence: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (verse 17). The gospel message proclaims that Jesus died for our sins — but if the gospel message is wrong about his resurrection, then we have no reason to believe the other part of the message, that his death takes care of our sins. The message of resurrection is logically connected to the message of crucifixion. If one is false, the other is as well.

And if people die without any forgiveness, without any hope of living again, then it was pointless for them to accept the gospel: “Those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (vv. 18-19).

In this life, we run the risk of being persecuted for Christ. We give up the temporary treasures and pleasures of this world, but if this life is all we get, why should we give anything up? If we gave it all up for a message that wasn’t even true, we would be rightly ridiculed.

### **Jesus the first of many**

But the gospel says that in Christ we do have hope for a future life, and it

hinges on the resurrection of Jesus. Easter commemorates not only the fact that Jesus came back to life — it becomes a promise to us that we will live again, too. If he did not rise again, we have no hope, either in this life or the next. But he did, and therefore we do have hope.

Paul reaffirms the good news: “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (verse 20). The word firstfruits is highly significant. In ancient Israel, the first grain to be harvested each year was carefully cut and offered in worship to God. Only then could the rest of the grain be eaten (Lev. 23:10-14). When they offered the firstfruits, they were acknowledging that all their grain was a gift of God; the firstfruits offering represented the entire harvest.

When Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits, he is saying that Jesus is a promise of a much greater harvest yet to come. He is the first to be resurrected, but he represents many more who will also be resurrected. Our future depends on his resurrection. Not only do we follow him in his sufferings, we also follow him into his glory (Rom. 8:17).

Paul does not see us as isolated individuals—he sees us as belonging to a group. But which group? Will we be people who follow Adam, or those who follow Jesus?

“Death came through a man,” Paul says, and in the same way, “the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (vv. 21-22). Adam was the firstfruits of death; Jesus was the firstfruits of resurrection. If we are in Adam, we share in his death. If we are in Christ, we share in his resurrection.

The gospel says that all believers will be made alive in Christ. That is not just a temporary benefit in this life—it is something we will enjoy in eternity. “But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (verse 23). Just as surely as Jesus rose from the grave, we will

as well, rising to a new and incredibly better life. Rejoice! Christ has risen, and so shall we!

### **Things to think about**

Everyone who saw the resurrected Christ is now dead. Is their eyewitness testimony still good? (vv. 5-8)

Why would anyone want to preach that there is no resurrection? (verse 12)

Does the Christian faith have any value for life before death? (verse 19)

Is it fair for Adam to determine the fate of all his descendants? (verse 22)

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# **The Resurrection Body**

## **1 Corinthians 15:35-58**

Ancient Greek philosophers believed that the world of spirit is perfect, whereas the world of matter is bad. The human soul is good, but it is trapped in the physical world. The body is a like a tomb, and the soul needs to escape.

These beliefs affected the congregation in Corinth. Some church members thought that the body is bad, so they denied all bodily pleasures, even in marriage. Others went to the opposite extreme: since the body will eventually be discarded, it doesn't matter what a person does in the body.

The apostle Paul said there would be a resurrection of the body, but to Greeks steeped in ancient philosophy, this made no sense. Why would God mess up the afterlife by putting people back into their defective bodies?

Paul responds in 1 Corinthians 15. He begins by saying that Jesus was raised from the dead — with a body — and this is not only part of the gospel, it also shows that God will resurrect all who are in Christ.<sup>1</sup>

### **Different kinds of bodies (verses 35-43)**

Paul addresses the questions starting in verse 35: “But someone will ask, ‘How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?’” He responds, “How foolish!” It is foolish to reject the idea of a resurrection just because you have questions about how it works.

He uses an example from agriculture to illustrate: “What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.” The seed ceases to exist, and something quite different comes up.

“But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.” Each kind of seed produces a different kind of plant, and it is difficult to predict the size or shape of the plant just from the shape

of the seed.

Paul offers other living things as examples: “Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.” These creatures all have bodies, but they are not the same.

It’s true in astronomy, too: “There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another.” The stars are glorious in one way; geological features in a different way.

“The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.” So with all this variety, he seems to imply, why do you think that the spiritual world cannot have shape or body?

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power.” Our bodies are defective, perishable, lacking honor, and weak. But the resurrection will not be an exact restoration — it will be a lot better.

### **A spiritual body (verses 44-49)**

The old body will die, like a seed; a new body will live. “It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.” The old body has life similar to an animal; the new body will be energized by spirit.

“If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” Biology and astronomy show that there are different kinds of bodies; there is variety in the spiritual realm, too. “So it is written: ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.”

Genesis 2:7 says that Adam became a living soul. He had a mortal life. But the resurrected Jesus revealed a new kind of life: spiritual, and yet with a body.



“The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.” Adam came first; Jesus came later. “The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.” Adam started as dust; Jesus started in the spiritual realm and became flesh.

“As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven.” All humans followed the path of Adam. But Jesus brought something better.

So if we are in Christ, we will be resurrected in his mode, not in the Adamic mode. “And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.”

Our mortal flesh is the seed of something far more spectacular than we can imagine. We look like Adam now, but in the resurrection, we will look like Christ.

### **A dramatic change (verses 50-53)**

The human body as we know it now is absolutely inadequate for the life we will have. “I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.”

In eternity, we will not need blood to circulate oxygen to our muscles. Flesh and blood is rooted in the biochemical world, where nothing lasts forever. Life based in chemical reactions cannot be eternal. The kind of flesh that decays cannot inherit the eternal realm.

There must be a radical change, and *change* is exactly what the gospel promises. “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”

At the return of Christ (verse 23), we will all be made alive. We will rise

to meet him, and we will be with him forever (1 Thessalonians 4:14-17).

Paul uses one more metaphor: “For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” We will not be a soul clothed with a perishable body — we will have a body that never decays. The resurrection body will never die, never grow weary, never wear out.

### **The great victory (verses 54-58)**

“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (Isaiah 25:8). In the resurrection, death will have been defeated.

Paul mocks his enemy with words similar to Hosea 13:14: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Where is your power now? All your work has been undone.

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law,” and these three worked against us: the flesh led us into sin, and the law condemned us to die. But it has all been reversed in Jesus, who conquered sin in the flesh, and conquered death on behalf of us all.

Our enemies have been defeated, as Paul exclaims: “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The resurrection of Jesus is not just good news for him — it is also wonderful news for us, because the reason that he went through his ordeal is to rescue us from our enemies. He gives the victory to *us!*

Paul concludes: “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.” No good deed will be forgotten. There are eternal consequences for all our work — even actions as small as giving water to a thirsty person.

There is a resurrection, and there is an afterlife — and that gives

tremendous meaning to this life as well.

### **Things to think about**

If I am “changed” as much as a seed changes into a tree, how will anyone recognize me? (verse 37)

Would I describe my current body as dishonorable? (verse 43)

What are the advantages of an imperishable body?

Why does Paul say that the power of sin is the law? (verse 56)

### **The Greeks had a word for it: ψυχικός**

The Greek word *psychē* means “soul”; the word *psychikos* means “pertaining to the soul.” Since animals have souls, *psychikos* (even when referring to humans) may refer to an animal sort of life — the biochemistry and brain function of an animal. Paul uses the word to refer to the type of body we now have (1 Cor. 15:44-46), as opposed to a body animated by spirit.

In 1 Cor. 2:14, Paul says that the *psychikos* person cannot understand spiritual things. A horse may be spirited, but it does not understand spiritual realities. James 3:15 refers to *psychikos* wisdom; it is the sort of wisdom that an animal might have. Jude 19 uses the word to say that *psychikos* people follow their instincts; they do not have the Spirit.

Since the word is often used in opposition to “spiritual,” some scholars translate the word as “unspiritual.”

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# What Paul Wished Members Knew About Ministers

By Neil Earle

Second Corinthians is a highly personal piece of writing in which the apostle Paul strips himself bare. Throughout this letter, Paul is on the defensive. As New Testament scholar Ralph Martin explains, Paul is here dealing with severe criticisms of himself and his ministry:

The first part of the letter reflects what must have been one of the most distressing experiences of Paul's life. He had personally been opposed and insulted by an individual or a group in the church at Corinth, which taunted him with insincerity and duplicity.... He was accused of vacillation (1:17), pride and boasting (3:1), lack of success in preaching (4:3), physical weakness (10:10), "rudeness" of speech, deficiency in rhetorical skill (11:6), being an ungifted person (4:7-10), dishonesty (12:16-19), posing as a "fool" (5:13), and lack of apostolic standing (11:5). Above all he is held to be a deceiver (4:8) and a charlatan (10:1), a blatant denial of the power of the Christian message (13:2-9). (*Second Corinthians*, pages lxi-lxii)

Wow! That's some ministerial evaluation!

## **The God of comfort**

Yet perhaps because Paul is passing through the crucible with those pesky Corinthians, this letter also contains some of the richest spiritual teaching Paul ever penned. It is in this letter that we read of the God of all comfort, believers as the fragrance of Christ, the spirit of liberty, a new creation, faith — not sight, ambassadors for Christ, the ministry of reconciliation, God's indescribable gift, power perfected through weakness.

A powerful two-beat rhythm persists throughout as Paul contrasts vital

principles — death/life, distress/consolation, present affliction/future glory, weakness/strength, sow abundantly/reap abundantly. In short, 2 Corinthians is what we could call today, an emotional roller-coaster. Why this emotion-etched epistle? Scholar James Dunn put it succinctly: “[Paul] experiences Christ as the Crucified as well as the Exalted; indeed it is only when he experiences Christ as crucified that it is possible for him to experience Christ as exalted, that it is possible to experience the risen life of Christ” (*Jesus and the Spirit*, 334).

In this epistle, Paul gives the New Testament’s best expose of life as a minister, a candid and personal revelation that Paul wanted members to know about.

### **The perils of Paul**

Paul knew this: Millions want Christ’s crown, but few want his cross. It grieved Paul that his beloved Corinthians (he planted the church there, after all) couldn’t see that some were out for advantage, building themselves up at the expense of Paul’s concern for his flock (2 Corinthians 11:18-19).

It is a familiar pattern. Would-be pastors crave power over people to make up for their own shortcomings. The self-anointed (who often get their way, incidentally) want prestige, forgetting the call to duty, to faithfulness unto death. Paul was richly experienced with those who enter ministry to manipulate men and women or as mere hirelings (11:20-21).

But Paul had been through this before. The slings and arrows of criticism, blame placing, negative projection, misunderstanding and willful misinterpretation that are often the minister’s lot soon drive the ministerial wannabes away, sometimes, however, only after much damage has been done to the flock.

Formal, full-time service in ministry, Paul knew, is no place to build wounded self-esteem or release frustrated power urges. That’s why his words

inspire today's pastors. His catalogue of battle scars in 11:23-29 have their modern parallels. G. Lloyd Rediger writes:

Abuse of pastors by congregations and the breakdown of pastors due to inadequate support are now tragic realities. This worst-case scenario, one that is increasing in epidemic proportions, is not a misinterpretation by a few discontented clergy. Rather, it is a phenomenon that is verified by both research and experience.... Pastors have become more vulnerable, parishioners more confused and less courageous, denominational offices more political, and our whole society more numb to abuse and conflict. Together these factors create opportunity for abuse of spiritual leaders and even encourage its development. (*Clergy Killers*, 1)

There was a time in America, especially small-town America, that if a person needed a loan from a bank, the financial officers would often check with a pastor or a teacher to "verify a person's good character." No more. As Rediger points out, today the expectations for pastors are far higher. "Megapastoring" is the measure of all things:

This is the expectation on the part of both the congregation and the pastor that the pastor must be a charismatic personality who can be up front at all church activities, make them successful, and continually draw new members. The goal, of course, is for the congregation to become a megachurch, with hundreds of enthusiastic members, dozens of thriving programs and an expanding budget that allows for regular additions to building facilities.... The congregation and pastor who do not function like a megachurch are suspected of being in decline. The pastor, of course, is blamed and punished. (23)

These realities help explain why so many pastors find great comfort in 2 Corinthians. From the opening chapter we sense it will be a barnburner. "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of

death. ” (1:8-9). It is full of candid disclosures: “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (5:8). The last verses contain a heartfelt plea: “Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong” (13:7).

Yet the dominant note throughout is one of triumphantly holding fast to a ministerial calling in the face of great pressure and misunderstandings. Paul has confidence that the spiritually mature in Christ have already accepted the correction he doled out in 1 Corinthians and that the church there is, on the whole, on the rebound.

Paul loves these troublesome members as only a pastor could! He values their good opinion. Yet he knows that in this letter he must not be afraid to lay some things on the line. “We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us” (2 Corinthians 6:12).

He is not hesitant about being autobiographical in defending his call to ministry. Paul knew that Christ gives ministers authority without expecting them to turn into authoritarians (10:8-11). Yet the pastoral office was given to keep order in the church.

“It must be emphasized that Paul is not moved by self-concern,” writes Philip E. Hughes. “He willingly endures for Christ’s sake any number of affronts and indignities to his own person. But when the genuineness of his apostleship is called into question that is something he dare not endure in silence, for it is no less a challenge to the authority of Christ himself” (*Second Corinthians*, page 477).

Hence Paul’s references to being flogged more severely, imprisoned more frequently and exposed to death more often (11:24). Such personal declarations work both ways. Even today it is hard for ministers and pastors who feel like singing the blues not to feel a little embarrassed in reading about the perils of Paul. They help give perspective to the peculiar ministerial

trials of life in the goldfish bowl.

## **Fools for Christ?**

So, what keeps ministers going? What kept Paul going? Really, it is something other-worldly, beautiful and even slightly mystical, this sense of calling that ministers have for ministry. Ask them about it sometime. One pastor I know was told by a particularly difficult and recalcitrant parishioner: “You seem like a fool to me, hopelessly trying to persuade me to do something you know I will never do.”

Yes, what ministers attempt to do often seems, by worldly measurements, foolish. But if it is in a good cause for godly ends then they find comfort in being what Paul called a “fool for Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:10).

What character trait is needed for pastors to keep coming back week after week to people who quite often are not listening to what they have to say? Or to never cease reaching out to those who tune them out and then have the pastor for lunch after the sermon is over?

Can one make sense of this indescribable, relentless sense of mission that keeps pastors riveted to their post? Like the prophet Jeremiah, their emotions do often fail them (Jeremiah 15:18). Pastors do get discouraged, do feel abused and sometimes do lash out in unfortunate anger or resentment against their persecutors and critics.

But most stay the course. Their emotions may fail them, but the faith of Christ never fails them. Notice the wisdom in this note I saw on a pastor’s door: “The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors; and like the sea, it batters and bruises, and does not rest.... To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and know each time you do it that you must do it again.”

So, why do pastors stay in there? What keeps them going? Two things are necessary to keep faithful ministers going, growing and abounding from year



to year, and parishioners need to know this. These two essentials are a strong sense of initial calling and an unusual love and regard for members in their care. Without these it is easy to go under in the often turbulent ebb and flow of pastoral ministry. Let the ambitious beware.

Paul's sense of calling never left him. That blinding glimpse of Christ on the Damascus road is still a classic text on ministry. Most calls are not so dramatic. They are maybe more of a growing sense of conviction over time when the pastor and those in community with him slowly sense that God has indeed selected this individual for a special work (Acts 13:1-3).

But the call — however manifested — becomes a life raft that bothered and bewildered ministers cling to in years to come. That's when Christ's reminder speaks most forcefully and hopefully: "You did not choose me but I chose you" (John 15:16).

### **Supernatural love**

The unusual love ministers have for members — even for those who hurt them — is sensed throughout 2 Corinthians. Even though Paul needs to reprimand this church, he still wants things to work out between him and them. "We have opened wide our hearts to you ... open wide your hearts also" (6:11-13). He interjects: "I speak as to my children." And in a magnificent short declaration he plunges to the heart of the member-minister relationship: "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

That just about says it all. Paul is not in it for himself. He wants members to know that the most basic common ground between them is a mutual relationship with the risen Lord. Every true minister of Christ understands that even in corrective matters he must proceed in meekness, for he is often "instructing those that oppose themselves" (2 Timothy 2:25, King James Version). The true pastor does this with a deep Christ-like sense that most

people — even those who may hate him temporarily — are their own worst enemies.

Such attitudes reach the very heights of Christian love and empathy as well as Christian service. But Paul well knew that such depth and maturity of character and outlook are vital parts of any ministry that lasts. The calling is sacrificial, abiding. God takes the minister's life and then gives it to the people after placing within his servants a godly concern for the members (8:16). That's how ministers endure. This is why Paul could say: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift" (9:15).

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# **Paul and the New Covenant**

## **2 Corinthians 3**

Paul begins this chapter by pointing out that he, the apostle Christ used to begin the Corinthian church, did not need a “letter of recommendation” from anybody: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone” (verses 1-2).

The people themselves served as authenticating proof that Paul was an apostle of Christ: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Christ before God” (verses 3-4).

Paul then explains that God is the real source of his authority: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (verses 5-6).

### **The new contrasted with the old covenant**

Paul has already mentioned “tablets of stone,” and then the “new covenant.” He then builds the contrast between the new and the old. His authenticity as an apostle of Christ is not built upon the old covenant, but upon the new — not on the letters engraved in stone, but in the Spirit of God.

Let’s see how he develops the contrast: “Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more

glorious?” (verses 7-8).

Let's pause to be sure we know what Paul is talking about. He is talking about something written on stone, at a time when Moses' face shone with glory. He is talking about the Ten Commandments. This is what was written on stone. Paul is calling the Ten Commandments a “ministry that brought death.” Paul was not a minister of the letter (the Ten Commandments), but of the Spirit.

Notice that he does not say, like some people want him to, that he was a minister of “the spirit of the law.” Instead of combining law and spirit, Paul equated the law with the letter, and he made a contrast between the Law and the Spirit of God.

Of course, it was God who gave the Law. Nevertheless, Paul saw a fundamental contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the old and the new. There is continuity, of course, for both old and new are covenants of the same God. But even though God does not change, and his underlying principles do not change, his covenants do.

Paul explains some differences in the next verses: “If the ministry that brought condemnation is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness!” (verse 9). The Ten Commandments were a ministry that condemned people. They had some glory, but not nearly as much as the new covenant. The Ten Commandments cannot bring righteousness, but the new covenant does.

“For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory” (verse 10). The Ten Commandments have no glory now, Paul is saying, in comparison to the new covenant, which brings life and righteousness.

“And if what was transitory came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!” What was fading away? Moses' face was fading,

but Paul is not talking about Moses' face any more — he is talking about “the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone.” That is what “came with glory” (verse 7). That is what was fading away.

The Ten Commandments, Paul is saying, came with glory, but they were temporary, just as surely as the glory of Moses' face was temporary. The new covenant not only has much greater glory, but it also “lasts.” The Ten Commandments, Paul implies, do not last forever. They were designed as a temporary “ministry of condemnation,” designed to lead people to Christ.

Notice the contrasts Paul has made:

| <b>The Ten Commandments</b>          | <b>The New Covenant</b>                |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| written on tablets of stone (v. 4)   | written on the heart                   |
| the letter that kills (v. 6)         | the Spirit that gives life             |
| a ministry that brought death (v. 7) | a ministry that brings life            |
| engraved in letters on stone (v. 7)  | ministry of the Spirit                 |
| came with glory (v. 7)               | even more glorious                     |
| the ministry that condemns (v. 9)    | the ministry that brings righteousness |
| no glory now in comparison (v. 10)   | the surpassing glory                   |
| it came with glory (v. 11)           | much greater glory                     |
| it is now fading away (v. 11)        | the ministry that lasts                |

Paul says that the Ten Commandments, although good, are temporary and fading. What has faded away concerning the Ten Commandments? Some people try to say that the Ten Commandments, instead of fading, are actually more binding on people today than ever before. They want to expand the Ten instead of letting them fade.

But Paul is saying that there is a fundamental change in the way people relate to God. The old way is a written law that condemns people to death.

The new way is the Holy Spirit, which brings forgiveness and life. The Spirit leads us to obey God, but it is a fundamentally different relationship, a different basis of relating to God.

There is some basic continuity between the old covenant and the new. Most of the Ten Commandments are quoted with approval in the New Testament. Those commands reflect aspects of God's law that were in effect long before Sinai—from the beginning. One is not — the Sabbath command. It was a ceremonial law, instituted for a temporary time period.

### **Paul's boldness in Christ**

Once Paul understood the change, he was strengthened and encouraged: "Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away" (verses 12-13).

Paul did not hide. He was bold in preaching the new way — salvation through the crucified Christ. But despite his boldness, and the clarity of the message, many people did not accept the gospel:

"But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts" (verses 14-15).

Many people today, Jewish or not, do not seem to understand. They keep reading the Bible with old covenant eyes. The only solution is Christ. Only in him can the "veil" be removed. "Whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (verse 16).

### **The basis of our relationship with God**

What does it mean to "turn to the Lord"? It means to see Jesus as the basis of our relationship with God. It means seeing our identity in him, not in the Law of Moses. Christ becomes central. We obey his law, the law of Christ (1

Cor. 9:21). When we put him first in our identity, he will help us see the covenantal change more clearly.

“The Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (verse 17). We have freedom in Christ — but what kind of freedom? Certainly, we still obey — Paul makes that clear in Romans 6. But in this context of 2 Corinthians, what kind of freedom is he talking about? It is freedom from the ministry that brought death — freedom from the old covenant. There is a lot of continuity, but there is some important change as well.

### **An unfading glory**

Not only do the covenants change from old and temporary to new and permanent, Christians themselves are changing: “We all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (verse 18).

Moses had only a fading glory, and his covenant had only a fading glory. It could give only temporary blessings. But we, with the eternal Spirit living within us, are being changed into a permanent glory — a glory that does not need to hide, a glory that looks to the heart instead of the stone tablets.

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# Between Death and Resurrection

## 2 Corinthians 5:1-10

Everyone eventually dies. But the gospel says that everyone will be resurrected — brought back to life. When will this happen? The resurrection will occur when Christ returns ([John 6:40](#); [1 Corinthians 15:21-23, 52](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:14-17](#)). We will be given new and dramatically different bodies—imperishable, glorious, powerful, spiritual, and immortal ([1 Corinthians 15:35-51](#)).

But what happens between death and the resurrection? What is happening right now to believers who have died? And what will happen to *us* when we die, and are still awaiting the return of Christ and the renewal and transformation of our bodies?

### **Far better to be with the Lord**

The apostle Paul deals with this question in two of his letters. When he wrote to the church at Philippi, he was in prison, thinking about the possibility of death. I'll paraphrase what he wrote:

“If it's just for my own convenience, I'd rather die and get it over with. I'd like to escape the problems of this world and be with Christ. But I don't want to just think about myself. I've got work to do, and it is better for *you* if I stick around a little longer.”<sup>1</sup> Paul thought that being with Christ was a lot better than living on earth.

Paul lived for a while longer, but eventually he died. Since Christ has not yet returned and the resurrection has not yet happened, Paul is still not in his final state. He is in what theologians call “the intermediate state” — somewhere between death and resurrection.

### **Clothed with life**

Paul tells us more about it in a letter to Corinth. He is again talking about



the difficulties of life in this age. We are persecuted, he says, given over to death for Jesus' sake ([2 Corinthians 4:4-11](#)).

He is motivated to continue “because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus” (verse 14). He knew that there would be life after death. “Outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day” (verse 16).

And then Paul describes what will happen to his body: “If the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (5:1). Ancient Greeks described the body as a tent, meaning a temporary dwelling. They thought that at death, the soul escaped the tent and existed without any need for a body.<sup>2</sup>

Paul uses this metaphor, too, but he says that our temporary dwelling will be replaced by a permanent one. The new body will be heavenly, not earthly, and eternal rather than wasting away.

He doesn't tell us exactly what this home will be like, nor exactly when we get it. We might wish he had given those details, but that is not his purpose. He is simply saying that we've got something a lot better waiting for us.

He gives a few more hints in subsequent verses: “Meanwhile [in this life, in this body] we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked” (verses 2-3). As we struggle with the pains and infirmities of our present mortal bodies, we would really like a better body.

Some people go to fitness centers in search of a better body; others try special diets. Some go to plastic surgeons. But no matter how good the fitness center and how diligently we diet, we are going to die. That's not such a bad deal, Paul says, because we'll get something a lot better.

## **At home with the Lord**

“For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (verse 4).

Ancient Greeks expected to be a disembodied soul. Paul did not — that would be like being naked, he says. Our home and clothes might be a bit shabby right now, but the solution to the problem is not to go naked and homeless, but to get a better home and better clothes.

The body we have now is wasting away. It has aches and pains, wrinkles, memory lapses and tooth decay. It is temporary, mortal. So we want something better: to be clothed with *life*, to have life as a permanent possession, as a permanent home.

We were created for eternal life, heavenly life, not the aches and pains of mortal life. “The one who has fashioned us for this very purpose is God, who has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (verse 5). God has plans for us, and he will make sure they work out.

“Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.... We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (verses 6, 8).

Paul is contrasting life before and after death: We are now in the mortal body, but not with Christ.<sup>3</sup> After death, we will be with Christ, but not in the old body. That’s what he prefers.

### **What difference does it make?**

But there are a few pieces missing in this jigsaw puzzle, and so we need to make some guesses. Paul talks about a heavenly dwelling — apparently a body we will be given after we die. But in other passages, he says that our bodies will be resurrected when Christ returns. He does not tell us how these two ideas fit together.

Do we get a new body when we die, and a third one when Christ returns? Or are we disembodied for a while, despite Paul’s desire to avoid it? Or is the concept of time irrelevant in the intermediate state? If our eternal home is in heaven, how will we remain with the Lord when he comes to earth?<sup>4</sup>

The Bible does not answer all these questions, for the simple reason that we do not need to know the answers. Those details have nothing to do with the way we live right now. Whether we are awake or asleep, with a body or not, does not change our need to trust in Christ, nor our duty to love one another.

Life between death and resurrection is simply a temporary state, and it is not our focus. Rather, we focus on what is eternal—life after the resurrection — what N. T. Wright calls “life after life after death.” And the most important fact about our future is that our life will be *with the Lord*. He wants to share life with us — he created us for that very purpose (verse 5).

And it is not just a never-ending life — it is a life filled with never-ending love and joy. Eternal life is not just a change in quantity, but also a change in *quality*. And when we see that, it can make a difference in the way we live right now, because Christ wants us to share in his life *even in this age*.

Notice Paul’s next thought: “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it” (verse 9). Since he is giving us a good future, we try to give him a good present.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> This paraphrase is based on [Philippians 1:21-24](#). It reads in the New International Version: “To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

<sup>2</sup> N.T. Wright responds to this idea: “If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls leave behind their mortal bodies, then death still rules — since that is a description not of the *defeat* of death but simply of death itself” (*Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, p. 15).

<sup>3</sup> Spiritually, we are in Christ and he is in us; not even unbelievers are ever *completely* away from Christ. Although he is omnipresent, he is also more “present” in some places and some ways than in others. Paul’s point is that we will be with him in a far greater way after we die than we are right now.

<sup>4</sup> Wright offers an explanation: “Heaven and earth in biblical cosmology are not two different locations within the same continuum of space or matter. They are two different dimensions of God’s good creation.... Heaven relates to earth tangentially so that the one who is in heaven [e.g., Christ] can be present simultaneously anywhere and everywhere on earth.... Though in one sense it will seem to us that he [Christ] is ‘coming,’ he will in fact be ‘appearing’ right where he presently is” (111, 135).

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# **Out of His Mind?**

## **2 Corinthians 5:13-15**

Some people thought that the apostle Paul was out of his mind. He used to be a high-ranking leader in the Jewish religion. Everyone respected him and respected his opinions. He was a clear thinker, and a persuasive speaker. He was on his way up in the world, and if you knew what was good for you, you wanted to be on his good side. If he was your friend, you had a friend in high places.

And then one day in the desert, it seems that Paul threw it all away. He was blinded by the brilliant desert sunshine, he fell off his horse, and some people say he must have hit his head on a rock.

Whatever the reason, he was not the same old guy he used to be. In fact, he started working against the very things he used to support, and he embraced the ideas that he once tried to fight. People told him that if he didn't stop it, they were going to kill him. He kept right on doing it anyway.

He risked his life. He had to flee from danger several times. He travelled land and sea not just to get away from his enemies, but also to try to convince more people of the ideas he now had – ideas about Jesus being the Savior of the world. Imagine that – some carpenter that the Romans executed as a criminal, being the Savior of the world!

Some people said Paul was out of his mind.

And yet he travelled onward, preaching to as many people as he could. He was shipwrecked at sea, thrown into prison, beaten with whips and sticks, and still he insisted on preaching about Jesus.

And sometimes even the people who believed Paul, who believed in Jesus, wondered if he was out of his mind. Why does he keep doing this even when he knows it is going to get him in trouble?

There were some people in the church at Corinth who were a bit embarrassed by what Paul was doing. He's not a very good leader, they said. He doesn't look very impressive – he's got a bald head and a crooked nose and bad eyesight, and a bit of a limp from where the robbers beat him up. He's not a very good example for us, because we can't be as fanatical as he is. He's not a balanced person – he is an extremist – rather unbalanced. They did not want Paul to be their leader – they wanted somebody else.

Well, news of this got back to Paul, and he wrote the church at Corinth a letter to explain what he was doing. And in that letter he told his friends how they could, as he put it, “answer those who take pride in what is *seen*, rather than in what is in the heart” (2 Corinthians 5:12). They are looking on the outside, he said, but what *you* need to do is look on the inside, because that's what counts the most.

He told them: “If we are ‘out of our mind,’ as some say, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you” (verse 13). If we are crazy, it's because we are crazy about God. And if what we say makes any sense, then it's because we are trying to help *you* see, what *we* can see.

Why do we risk our lives, and get thrown in jail, and we have to fight wild animals for the amusement of the people? He answers that in verse 14: “For Christ's love *compels* us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”

Now wait a minute! How does love “compel” people to do anything?

Maybe you've seen people who have fallen in love, and will do all sorts of things totally out of character, just because they are in love. For some people, it might mean that they are willing to go to a baseball game and sit through hours of nothing happening. For other people, it might mean they are willing to go shopping for hours without buying anything at all.

Love has compelled them. It's almost like they have gone out of their

minds. No one is physically, forcibly compelling them to do anything, but they are doing it out of their own free will. It is suddenly what they would rather be doing with their time and their life. It's a change of character, a new purpose in life.

And that's what happened to the apostle Paul. Jesus wasn't physically and forcibly causing Paul to do all these crazy things – but Paul himself wanted to do them, because of his love for Christ.

And why did he have such a love for Christ? Because he was so overwhelmed by how much Christ loved *him*. Christ had such love for Paul, that Paul just had to respond.

What made Paul think that Jesus loved him? It was because Jesus died for him. Jesus was willing to do crazy things for Paul. Jesus was willing to risk his life for Paul, to be beaten and killed for Paul.

Paul says that “one died for all” – he means that one person died for everybody else. Jesus died for *all people*. He loves *everyone* as much as he loved the apostle Paul. Some people said Jesus was crazy, and the way he used his life just didn't make any sense, according to the way the world thinks. He just got killed for his trouble. He *knew* he was going to be killed for it, but he did it anyway. He did it for you, and for me, and for Paul, and for the people in ancient Corinth, too.

That kind of love is compelling, Paul says. We'll do crazy things when we experience that kind of love. Maybe we'll go to the vacation paradise of America, and not vacation. Maybe we'll give up our vacation and spend two weeks with underprivileged kids. They can never pay us back. They might stress us out, they might be a pain in the neck, but we do it.

Maybe it's because Jesus has a crazy love for us, and then we respond to him by having a crazy love for helping other people. It doesn't quite make sense to some people, but that's OK. Jesus went to the cross for us, and that

makes a major re-orientation of the way we look at our lives, and what our life is really for.

Notice what Paul says next: “one [person] died for all, and therefore all died.” And we say, Huh? How did everybody die when Jesus died?

That’s a difficult question. Paul is saying that everybody gets a new start on life with Jesus. The old approach to life goes to its grave with Jesus, and it’s not supposed to get resurrected. There’s a new way to live – and that’s what we see in the next verse: “And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (verse 15).

Here Paul is telling us the purpose of it all: Jesus died for everybody, *so that* we should no longer live for ourselves. We should not live just for what we can get out of it, just for our own benefit, but we should live *for Jesus*. He died for us, so we should live for him. Our sins and our selfishness died with him, so the life that we have now is a *new* life, a life that is compelled by the love of Jesus, to live for Jesus.

And since Jesus lived and died for other people, when we live for Jesus, that means that we live for other people, too, because that’s what he would do. Jesus died for us, so that we might live for other people, helping them in the name of Jesus. And Jesus is working in us, or we should probably say that the Holy Spirit is working in us. The Holy Spirit is compelling to respond to the love of Jesus, compelling us to do things that other people don’t want to do.

So, thanks for being here, and for responding to the love of Jesus, and for sharing the love of Jesus with other people. It’s the best thing we can do, even if somebody else says that we are out of our minds.

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# **The Grace of Giving**

## **2 Corinthians 8**

When Paul met with the original apostles, they agreed to divide the mission field — Paul would focus on the gentiles, and they would focus on the Jews (Gal. 2:9). But they did make one request of Paul: that he remember that many believers in Jerusalem needed financial help (2:10).

Paul was happy to remember these needs, for it gave gentile believers an opportunity to have some involvement with Jewish believers. Since the gospel began among the Jews, it was appropriate for gentile Christians to acknowledge and be thankful for the Jewish people. They could do this by sharing some of their material blessings.

Therefore, as part of his work with the gentile churches, Paul coordinated an offering for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1 etc.). He described the importance of this offering in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

### **Poverty and generosity**

He began by describing how generous the believers in northern Greece had been: “And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity” (8:1-2). Although they were very poor, they were very generous, and Paul attributes this to the grace of God. God had given them the willingness to give what little they had, and to do it with joy.

“For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people” (8:3-4). Since the Macedonians were poor themselves, Paul did not ask them to give anything to the poor in Jerusalem, but they learned about the collection and wanted to

help. They gave more than Paul thought they could. (We can read Paul's thank-you in his letter to the Philippians.)

“And they exceeded our expectations: They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us” (8:5). Why did they give? Because they gave themselves to Christ, which would include a willingness to use all that they had to further his work. As they submitted themselves to Christ, they wanted to participate in this offering.

Paul no doubt wanted the Corinthians to follow this example. The Macedonians showed that spiritual maturity leads to material generosity. The Corinthians had more money and should be even more generous.

### **Paul's appeal to the Corinthians**

“So we urged Titus, just as he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part” (8:6). Titus had apparently begun the work of collecting the offering in Corinth, so Paul asked him to finish it. By calling the collection an act of grace, Paul connected it with the gospel and suggested voluntary generosity.

Paul then appealed to the tendency of the Corinthian Christians to think of themselves as better than others. “Since as you excel in everything — in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving.” (8:7). Some of the Corinthians boasted about superior faith, speech and knowledge. Paul says they should also strive to be sincere, loving and generous. They should demonstrate their faith by the way they live.

“I am not commanding you,” Paul says, “but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others” (8:8). Paul did not tell them how much to give, but he would know how much they gave, and their quantity would be a reflection of their quality.

Many people today do not want to be compared to others, especially when

it comes to donations, but Paul apparently felt that Corinth would be helped by a comparison. Their contributions showed their sincerity.

Paul then used the supreme example, Jesus: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (8:9). Although Jesus enjoyed equality with God, he willingly gave it up to save us (Phil. 2:5-8). He became a curse for us so that we might escape the curse and be blessed instead (Gal. 3:13).

Through Christ’s willingness to give, we share in his riches. Grace is not an abstract theory — it is practical. It had physical results in the life of Jesus, and it should have physical results in our lives, too.

### **According to ability**

Paul then appealed to the Corinthians’ previous generosity: “And here is my judgment about what is best for you in this matter: Last year you were the first not only to give but also to have the desire to do so. Now finish the work, so that your eager willingness to do it may be matched by your completion of it” (8:10-11). In other words, keep up the good work.

Paul then added a qualification: “according to your means” (8:11). Give according to your ability, for God looks on the heart, on the willingness, not the amount. “For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what one does not have” (8:12).

Paul did not want the Corinthians to impoverish themselves (there was probably little risk of that), but for them to share some of their material blessings. “Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality” (8:13). If the wealthy Corinthians aimed for equality and gave according to their ability, their gift would be generous.

At that time, they had plenty and could share. But the time might come

when they would be needy, and other Christians would then give to them. “At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality” (8:14).

Paul then adds a quote: “As it is written: ‘The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little’” (8:15; Ex. 16:18). This quote is from the story of gathering manna in the wilderness; it is not about people sharing with one another. Paul quotes it not as a proof, but as a proverbial saying that illustrates equality.

### **Three trustworthy men**

To help the Corinthians be confident that their offering would be used in the right way, Paul put in a few good words for Titus, who would accompany the offering: “Thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same concern I have for you. For Titus not only welcomed our appeal, but he is coming to you with much enthusiasm and on his own initiative” (8:16-17).

Titus was concerned not only for the offering, but for the Corinthians themselves. He volunteered to travel to Corinth and serve as a security guard for the collection.

Paul then mentions a second person, whom he does not name: “And we are sending along with him the brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel. What is more, he was chosen by the churches to accompany us as we carry the offering, which we administer in order to honor the Lord himself and to show our eagerness to help” (8:18-19).

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians also served as a letter of commendation for the couriers he sent. He expresses his confidence in them, so that the Corinthians can also be confident that these people were trustworthy. Here, Paul mentions that the churches chose this man to accompany the offering to Jerusalem — and Paul reminds them that his own motivation is to serve the Lord and to help his people.

“We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man” (8:20-21). Paul had been accused of improper motives when he preached the gospel; he was even more likely to be accused when taking up a collection. So he took precautions, much as we today might use an auditor to verify that the offerings are being used for the purpose for which they were collected.

Paul then mentions a third man: “In addition, we are sending with them our brother who has often proved to us in many ways that he is zealous, and now even more so because of his great confidence in you” (8:22). Paul commends this man in terms of his attitude to God and in his attitude toward the Corinthians; both are important in this offering.

Paul closed this chapter by praising the men again: “As for Titus, he is my partner and co-worker among you; as for our brothers, they are representatives of the churches and an honor to Christ. Therefore show these men the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you, so that the churches can see it” (8:23-24).

We are proud of you, Paul says, so please give the kind of generous offering we know you are capable of. This will show the sincerity of your love not only to these three men, but will also be an example to other churches. Just as we told you of the Macedonians’ generosity, we will tell others about you.

Fund-raising is often a thankless job, but it is essential. In order for the people who have an abundance to share with those who have need, church leaders must communicate those needs, and must encourage people to be generous. Paul used several methods of persuasion: his own relationship with the givers, their relationship with God, their reputation with others, their desire to excel and prove themselves, the example of Christ, the example of

others, and assurances of faithful handling of the offering.

Why would Paul, who focused on the cross of Christ, use so much of his letter asking for donations? Because he understood that there is a logical and spiritual connection between the cross and Christian behavior.

Jesus' willingness to give is an example that believers are to follow. Our priority in life is not our own comfort — it is service, and we are to serve Christ by serving others. His grace toward us should be reflected in our grace toward others — grace not only in forgiveness, but also in the material blessings we have been given and should share.

Our attitude about offerings has spiritual significance. Paul says it is evidence of our love — our concern for others. We all need to excel in the grace of giving.

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# Rich in Good Works

## 2 Corinthians 9

As Paul worked to spread the gospel in the gentile world, he also worked to have the gentiles give an offering to poor believers in Jerusalem. We see evidence of this offering in several of his letters; it was a consistent theme of his work.

Paul saw a vital connection between God's grace and our giving. Just as God has been gracious toward us, we should be gracious toward others, sharing the spiritual and physical blessings God has given us. Although good works can never pay for God's grace, they are an expected result of God's grace working in our lives.

Paul told the Corinthian Christians about this offering in person, and in a follow-up letter he wrote some more encouragement for them. We'll pick up the story in 2 Corinthians 9.

### **Don't let us down**

"There is no need for me to write to you about this service to the Lord's people" (9:1). In other words, I've already told you about it. You know that this offering is going to help the believers in Jerusalem.

"For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action" (9:2). The Corinthians (in southern Greece) had already told Paul that they were willing to give generously, and Paul had used their zeal to encourage the Macedonians (in northern Greece). In a similar way, he used the generosity of the Macedonians to encourage the Corinthians to be even more generous (8:1-7).

But now came the time for talk to be turned into action: "I am sending the



brothers in order that our boasting about you in this matter should not prove hollow, but that you may be ready, as I said you would be” (9:3). Paul is putting some gentle pressure on the Corinthians to live up to their word—he does this by saying his own reputation is on the line. The Corinthians had said they would be generous; Paul had said they would be generous, and now the time came to see whether they were right.

“For if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we — not to say anything about you — would be ashamed of having been so confident” (9:4). We do not want to be embarrassed, Paul says, and you don’t want to be embarrassed either. So put your money where your mouth is. It’s time to prove yourselves.

Paul expected the Corinthians to follow through on their promises, but he did not take it for granted. He wrote to remind them, to encourage them to do even better. He was not shy about financial matters. He expected total commitment from his converts, and he set high standards for them.

“So I thought it necessary to urge the brothers to visit you in advance and finish the arrangements for the generous gift you had promised. Then it will be ready as a generous gift, not as one grudgingly given” (9:5).

Paul was zealous for the gospel. If he took time to coordinate this offering, it was because he thought it was very important. And because it was important, he sent reminders about it, he sent people to check up on it, and he used all his persuasive strategies to make sure that it was a successful offering.

If Paul suddenly showed up and caught the Corinthians unprepared, they would no doubt have given an offering. But the offering would have been given out of obligation, not well thought out, and not as generous as it could have been with some advance preparation.

**Expect a blessing**

“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (9:6). Here Paul quotes a proverb — a saying that is generally true, although exceptions may exist. A farmer who sows a lot of seed will usually be rewarded with a good crop. But sometimes bad weather can ruin the crop. Even then, the farmer will probably receive in proportion to the amount sown.

Paul is saying that the same is true in financial generosity. A person who is generous will usually be rewarded. The reward doesn't always come in money, and it doesn't always come in this life, but God does bless people who are generous.

“Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (9:7). If we feel obligated to give, if we resent the offering, if we dread the request, then we are not really generous. True generosity is an attitude of the heart, and that is what God is looking for and that is what he rewards. So everyone should make their own decisions about how much to give. Paul is pointing out some factors we may want to keep in mind as we consider how generous we can be.

“God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (9:8). God is generous, supplying all that we need, so we do not need to hoard everything we have. He wants us to abound in good works, and generosity is one of them.

“As it is written: ‘They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor; their righteousness endures forever’” (9:9, quoting from Psalm 112:9). This quote is not about collections for the poor, but Paul nevertheless finds it appropriate here. It describes God's generosity and assures us that God will always be righteous, working for and blessing his people.

Paul makes the promise even more clear when he says, “Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness” (9:10). Paul is using “seed” as a metaphor. He is writing to people who live in a city, not on a farm. His point is that God is the source of all blessings.

Whatever our source of money is, God can cause the source to prosper, so that we will in time receive more and more. He can work in the entire picture, from its beginning in seed, to its final result in bread. And Paul is saying that if we are generous, then God will bless our source and our results.

But the most important blessing is the harvest of righteousness, the gift of being counted as righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. We are counted as righteous by his grace, and we are simultaneously called on to live in righteousness, to conform our actions to what he wants, and this includes generosity.

### **The harvest of thanks**

“You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God” (9:11). If you are generous, God will bless you, Paul promises, so you can be generous in future occasions, too. He will bless the beginning of your income and the results of your work. He will supply your needs, so you can continue to give to others.

And as you do that, Paul says, people will be thanking God for what you do. This collection meets a real need, and the people who receive it will appreciate it and be thankful for it. We have many good reasons to feel good about helping them.

“This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God” (9:12). The offering has both physical and spiritual value.

“Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else” (9:13). In this one verse, Paul makes many points:

- \* The Corinthians prove themselves by this offering. It shows that their love is genuine (8:8), that their word is good. Can it do the same for us?
- \* People praise God for good works (Matt. 5:16). Do they see good works in us?
- \* When we accept the gospel, when we accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we should obey him. Is our faith accompanied by obedience?
- \* People particularly appreciate generosity. It is a visible and practical way to let the gospel have results in our lives.

People will not only give thanks, Paul says, but they will also pray: “And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you” (2 Cor. 9:14). If God gives you the grace of giving (8:7), then people will pray for you, no doubt asking God to bless you.

We can be confident that God will supply all our needs and give us blessings we can share with others. As we share material blessings, we also form spiritual bonds between brothers and sisters in Christ.

“Thanks be to God,” Paul concludes, “for his indescribable gift!” (9:15). Can we describe this indescribable gift? Is it the grace of giving, the willingness to be generous with what God has given us? Is it the assurance that God will supply our needs? Is it the spiritual results that generosity has—thanksgiving and prayer? Or is it the often-hidden way in which God blesses those who are generous? For all these and more, thanks be to God!

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*The Bible: A Guided Tour* (co-author)

*Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings*

*Evangelism Without Guilt: A Focus on Relationships*

*Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles* (co-author of volumes 1 & 4)

*Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Galatians*

*Exploring the Word of God: Reading Through Romans*

*Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture*

*The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women* (co-author)

*The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ*

*Using Microsoft Word for Academic Papers*

*What Does the Bible Say About Prophecy and the Millennium?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?*

*What Does the Bible Say About the Old and New Covenants?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?*

*What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?*

One chapter was written by Neil Earle, instructor in church history at Grace Communion Seminary and retired pastor of the Grace Communion International congregation in Glendora, CA. He has a master's in history and a master's in theology from Fuller Theological Seminary.

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## **About the Publisher...**

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshiping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at [www.gci.org](http://www.gci.org).

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news,



and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

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