PARALLEL GUIDE 23
The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

Summary

Corinth was a vital and active city in the Roman Empire. The apostle Paul wrote at least two letters to this congregation which deal with vital questions in that community. The basic question raised by these letters is: How can Christians live in a non-Christian or pluralistic world and yet maintain their faith?

Learning Objectives

• Read the First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians

•Learn the content and purpose of the Corinthian correspondence as well as why some propose that these letters represent more than two epistles

• Discover the meaning and importance of food restrictions as they pertain to food sacrificed to idols

• Learn Paul's stance concerning marriage and celibacy

• Explore Paul's understanding of the Resurrection

• Learn the importance of collections and what this signifies

• Learn the meaning of apostolic authority

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Paul gave instructions which led to considering what the role of Christians in a pluralistic society (non-Christian) might be. What are your thoughts about this? You might wish to consider H. Richard Niebuhr's classifications in Christ and Culture in which he discusses various stances about the relationship of Christ and world. The titles of Niebuhr's chapters are "Christ Against Culture," "The Christ of Culture," "Christ Above Culture," "Christ in Culture in Paradox." Which title appeals to you?

2. Collections play an important role in the Corinthian correspondence. What might this imply about stewardship?

3. Does Paul's understanding of marriage and celibacy still apply to us today?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Your seminar is a small group. In all likelihood it is a cluster of Christians. We too live in a pluralistic world wherein we see many witnesses to the gospel as well as many missed opportunities. What stance should we take? What should we say? What can we do? What are you personally called to do to witness to the gospel? What is your group called to do to witness and to be in ministry?

Works Cited

Didache, in Kirsopp Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 2 vols., LCL (London: William Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1912-13).

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1, 2, G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, trans. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956).

Anthony Bash, *Ambassadors for Christ: An Exploration of the Language of the New Testament*, WUNT 92 (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 1997).

Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, James W. Leitch, trans., bibliography and references by James W. Dunkly (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975).

Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987).

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

Jan Lambrecht, s.j., *Second Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina 8 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, Linda M. Maloney, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (London: S.P.C.K.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1991).

C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: A. & C. Black; New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

Chapter 23
THE FIRST AND SECOND LETTERS OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS

Corinth and the Corinthian Church

Corinth was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. To this lively, boisterous port city with a reputation for immorality, traders brought not only their trade but also their cults. Archaeology has revealed both a shrine to Isis and a synagogue.

Paul founded the church there (1 Cor. 4:15; cf. Acts 18:1-18). Those who accepted Christ appear to have included some important Jews (Acts 18:8, 17), but clearly most members of the church were Gentiles. References to the low social status of the Corinthian Christians (1 Cor. 1:26-29) should be understood as involving some degree of hyperbole. It is obvious that not all of the Corinthian Christians were by any means at the bottom of the social scale. Gaius (1 Cor. 1:14) had a house large enough to accommodate Paul and all the Christian groups in Corinth (Rom. 16:23). Crispus, “ruler [NRSV “official”] of the synagogue” (Acts 18:8) is likely to have been comfortably off. If Chloe was a believer, as seems likely from the manner of Paul’s reference to her (1 Cor. 1:11), she was presumably a person of independent means. Paul’s references to the Corinthians’ conduct of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-22) suggest that the Corinthian church was rather mixed socially.

The Corinthian Correspondence

The New Testament preserves two letters to the Corinthians, but Paul’s correspondence with them was evidently fuller and more frequent than that. There appear to have been at least the following:

1) First Corinthians 5:9 refers to an earlier letter. In view of its apparent subject matter (1 Cor. 5:9-11), some suggest that the substance of this letter is preserved in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 as an insertion, for when we read from 6:13 to 7:2 without it, the section as a whole makes better sense.

2) First Corinthians, appears to be written partly in response to news that Paul has received from Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11) and partly in response to a letter containing written questions sent to Paul by the Corinthians (1 Cor. 7:1). The unity of 1 Corinthians itself is sometimes questioned, but without very clear reasons.

3) Second Corinthians 2:4 notes a letter written "out of much distress and anguish of heart and with many tears." This may be 2 Corinthians 10-13. This suggestion has some internal support from the evidence of the abrupt change of mood between chapters 9 and 10. Alternatively, the anguished letter may be 1 Corinthians itself (though that seems a little strong as a description), or it may simply be lost.

4) The rest of 2 Corinthians (excluding 10-13) falls clearly into three sections: an expression of joy (2 Cor. 1:1-2:13); a note about apostolic authority (2 Cor. 2:14-7:4); and a note about the Jerusalem collection (2 Cor. 8-9). Whether we have here what were originally separate letters, copied very early onto a single

scroll, or whether we have one letter with changes of mood and subject, is a matter of dispute. Either solution is possible.

The Issues in the Corinthian Correspondence

Despite these uncertainties, the correspondence gives us a vivid picture of the community that stimulated it. The Corinthian church was lively, fractious, petty, generous, enthusiastic, and frustrating—characteristics that sprang in part from the fact that it was trying to find its identity as God's people in a complex and sophisticated setting. The issues raised by the Corinthians are naturally shaped by their own culture: Are Christian women free to prophesy with their hair unbound (1 Cor. 11:2-16)? Can Christians eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1-13)? Such questions appear at first glance to be of purely antiquarian interest for us. The underlying issues and Paul's attitude in addressing them are analogous to those facing every holy community that tries to define its identity within an urban, pluralistic society, and every pastor or elder who tries to be responsible to such a community.

The basic question in the Corinthian letters is: "How are we to be the church in a non-Christian, pluralistic world?" Paul's answer is in one sense the classic Jewish answer: You will be monotheists! That answer alone will set them apart from most of the world around them. For Judaism—and hence for Paul—monotheism was not simply a matter of philosophical argument or speculation about the divine. Jewish monotheism was, as N.T. Wright calls it, a "fighting doctrine which engaged in battle on two fronts: against dualism, the rejection of the goodness of the created order, and against paganism, the deification of the created order or parts of it, or of forces within it" (1991, 125). The commitment to monotheism still sets Christians apart from most of the world around them. Dualism and paganism, in the sense in which Wright describes them, remain as rife now as in the first century of the Christian era, albeit in somewhat different forms.

The controlling issue in the Corinthian correspondence was monotheism, as one might expect with a church composed of many former pagans. For Paul, however, that meant something more. It meant a Christ-centered monotheism; and that meant the cross. A follower of Christ, in Paul's view, was (or at least was called to be) one who "loves God . . . one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:3, 6; cf. 1:3). A Christian is someone who looks at the world in light of the cross (1:18).

If the Corinthian Christians learn this, they will understand who they actually are, and so discern the Lord's

body (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29; 12:12-27). They will see that they are merely a part of the Christian story—the story of Christ crucified and raised (1 Cor. 1:23; 15:3-4, 14)—and not act or think as if the story had already ended (1 Cor. 1:7-8; 4:5, 8; 7:29-31; 13:8-9; 15:12). They will understand that present possession of the Spirit is the sign that the New Age has begun in Christ (1 Cor. 12-14), but that its full presence is still to come in Christ (1 Cor. 15). Discerning the body of Christ, and who and what Christ will be, and therefore what Christ's followers are called to attempt, is the underlying issue in each of the questions touched on.

The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Greetings and Salutations 1:1-9

Paul's calling and his appointment as Christ's "agent" or "representative" (NRSV "apostle") are so closely associated in his experience as to be scarcely separable. Sosthenes, with whom Paul writes the letter, is perhaps the synagogue ruler of Acts 18:17.

Paul begins with thanksgiving for God's grace to the Corinthians (1:4-5) and for their rich spiritual gifts (1:6-7). The former is more important than the latter. The Corinthians "wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul says, sustained by the ultimate truth that "God is faithful" (1:7, 9). Paul's words speak more of what he wishes the Corinthians to do than what he thinks they are doing. The fact is, the Corinthians' "spiritual gifts" are in some respects as much a problem as a strength for them.

The Nature of the Body

Division in the community is contrary to the new (and correct) way of looking at the world that is given us through the cross (1:10-4:21). Chloe (1:11) probably presided over a Christian assembly in her house. If so, she may have had a special relationship to Paul, since it is "Chloe's people" who have brought news of dissension. There is strife in the Corinthian church, as groups of converts attach themselves to different figures. The phrase, "I belong to Christ!" (1:12) may be Paul's claim for himself, or perhaps (as implied by the NRSV) it is the claim of a particular party at Corinth asserting that it goes beyond all leaders (1:12-13). In any case, it is unbearable for Paul to contemplate Christ's church divided by factionalism and rivalry.

The statement in 1:17 is hyperbole. Paul does not scorn baptism (cf. Rom. 6:1-4), but he does consider that his first task is to proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified (1:18a; cf. Gal. 3:1). The gospel has a double effect. "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" (1:18; cf. 2 Cor. 2:15-16). Both groups are referred to in the present tense in the Greek, and there is no reason to suppose that Paul thought the process was necessarily complete or irreversible. He simply speaks of the consequences of certain attitudes. No doubt Paul was well aware of the professors of "wisdom" who felt it absurd to look for a revelation of God in such a scene of sordid disgrace as Golgotha. Yet, he insists, the Hebrew Scriptures support him (1:19; cf. Isa. 29:14 LXX). Christ crucified is a "stumbling block" and "foolishness" to many, Jews and Gentiles alike (1:23), but to others, Jews and Gentiles alike, Christ crucified is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:24).

The Corinthian converts should see this, says Paul, for by worldly standards they, too, were far from noble or powerful (1:27). But God's power uses what is weak to shame human arrogance (1:28-29). God alone is the source of our real life, and Christ Jesus alone is made our wisdom. That is to say (1:30), Christ is our means of being loyal to God's covenant ("our righteousness"), our means of truly belonging to God ("our sanctification"), and the means by which we are truly set free ("our redemption").

I

To measure all things not by the world's ideas of wisdom (2:6, 8-9; cf. v. 14) but by "God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (2:7) is to live in the church. This wisdom is acquired by the working of God's Spirit—God's power and dynamic—among believers, and it is imparted by them through the same Spirit (2:10-16). As long as the Corinthians engage in factions, they are far from possessing such wisdom or being open to mature teaching (3:1-4). Apollos and Paul are not rivals, but fellow servants (3:5) and co-workers (3:9). God alone "gives the growth" (3:7). Paul himself does have a special role in the Corinthian church. He "planted" it (3:6) and "laid a foundation" (3:10). But the foundation is Christ alone, and anything built on that foundation that is not worthy of Christ will perish. If the Corinthians act in the church as they would in a purely human institution, they are profaning God's temple, for they are profaning the dwelling of God's Spirit (3:16-17). In this context, confidence in things human is absurd. These human things—indeed, the world itself and the powers that rule it—are merely God's gift to the church. "All things are yours," Paul says to the Corinthians. They themselves belong to no one except Christ, and Christ to God (3:21-23). They must not "go beyond what is written" or be "puffed up in favor of one against another" (4:6), for all that they have is God's gift. "What do you have that you did not receive?" (4:7) With biting irony Paul compares the Corinthians' confidence in their various positions with his own continued labors as an apostle. Yet, he goes on, "I am not writing this to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children" (4:14). In Christ, Paul is their father, and he will therefore do his best to teach them: by urging (4:16), by sending his disciples (4:17), and by his own presence, whether "with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness" (4:21).

Life in the Body (1): On Causes of Scandal and Incest 5:1-13

Paul next turns to various problems, some of which were no doubt raised by "Chloe's people." The church is allowing behavior that is abhorred "even among pagans" (5:1). Discipline is needed, both for the sake of the wrongdoer (5:5) and for the sake of the community (5:7). Deliverance "to Satan" (5:5) probably means excommunication. Unless Christians are to leave the world completely, which Paul does not suggest, they must continue to live with those who do not share their values or their hopes (5:9-10). Their task is to maintain the quality of their own community and their own life together, not to judge outsiders (5:12-13).

Legal Actions Before Pagan Courts 6:1-11

Some in the Christian community were taking legal action against each other in pagan courts (6:1-6). Such actions showed that they were refusing to acknowledge their responsibility to judge, when necessary, within the community (6:2-6). Their refusal was a denial of community spirit. Indeed, it would be far better to "be wronged" (6:7). Why, Paul asks, must they go to the law at all?

The Temptation to Promiscuity 6:12-20

Christians have found a new freedom. But freedom in Paul's understanding is not freedom to do anything. Rather, it is freedom to serve the true master. Freedom exercised without that awareness leads to new enslavement to the wrong master (6:12). Freedom exercised with that awareness means that actions are determined above all by relationship to God. Christians are bound to God through the Spirit (6:17), so they

must live as befits that relationship. They are not simply their own property (6:19). They have been "bought with a price" (6:20). Their whole existence, therefore, is to be a glorification of God.

Life in the Body (2): Responses to Corinthian Questions on Marriage 7:1-14:40

In addition to the news that disturbed Paul, "Chloe's people" had also brought a letter from the Corinthian

church raising certain specific issues. To these Paul now turns (7:1a).

a) The Corinthian Assertion (7:1). Paul begins with the question of marriage and celibacy. This section has often been misunderstood. The first key to understanding it is to realize that the words “it is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1b) are not what Paul himself said. He was too much a Jew for that. Paul is repeating what his correspondents had written. The Corinthian urge to asceticism may be the remnant of a pagan devaluation of human sexuality. Paul, at any rate, will have none of it.

b) An Ideal of Non-Patriarchal Marriage (7:2-7) and Related Questions (7:8-40). Paul is too much like a rabbi to accept the implied denigration of marriage (cf. Gen. 1:27-28), but he does qualify his defense of marriage in a way that allows for Christian liberty and particularly the liberty of Christian women. We note two points in particular.

Paul’s statement about the propriety of marriage is scrupulous—almost to the point of being laborious. It makes clear that the woman’s rights and the man’s rights are identical (7:2-5). In other words, what Paul describes is not a patriarchal marriage. Paul’s statements about the positive value of marriage do not imply a command to marry (7:6). There are reasons why Paul might wish all to remain celibate, as he is himself (7:8). He commends that state in particular to those who are unmarried and widows. But all must make use of their own gift from God, whether for marriage or celibacy. It is certainly better, says Paul, to marry than to be consumed with desire (7:9).

By commending celibacy to those who were single, particularly women, Paul was certainly at odds with patriarchal values. His advice to women, and in particular to young women, to remain unmarried was probably an infringement of the rights of the pater familias, for in Roman law a woman was under the guardianship of her father even after marriage. To this extent Paul is very much a defender of Christian liberty.

On his own authority (which he explicitly distinguishes from that of “the Lord,” 7:10), Paul opposes divorce or separation among believers. If a divorce or separation takes place, he does not, at least in the case of a woman, favor remarriage. This follows the advice he has already given to unmarried people in general. Even a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever should continue, Paul says, provided the unbelieving partner wishes it. Only if the unbeliever wishes to break the relationship should there be a separation, in which case “the brother or sister is not

bound”—by which, we assume, Paul means that such a person should feel free to remarry. We should note that Paul, like Jesus and Jewish tradition in general, says that partners should not end their marriages, not that they cannot. As we have seen (Chapter Eight on Mark 10:2-12), the notion of the so-called “indissolubility” of marriage is not biblical.

Paul’s best advice to men and women is to remain in whatever state they find themselves at the time of their calling as Christians (7:17-31). This applies to Jew and Gentile, and even (with some qualification: see 7:21b) to slave and free, as well as to married and unmarried. Paul’s reasons for this are simple. “The appointed time has grown short . . . . The present form of this world is passing away” (7:29, 31b). Marriage is a more complicated state than remaining single; therefore marriage, whether for a man or a woman, is a more difficult state in which to serve the Lord (7:32-34).

In conclusion, Paul again points out that he lays no constraints on anyone. He simply desires to secure their devotion to serve the Lord (7:35).

This principle controls his advice about dealings with one’s “fiancée” (7:36-38; Greek: parthenos, “virgin”;

see NRSV: margin)—part of an obscure passage with which interpreters have long had difficulty. The main question is: what does Paul mean by “virgins” in this context (and despite such commentators as Hans Conzelmann [1975, 134-136])? The women have committed themselves to live together in a relationship that we used to call “Platonic”—matrimonium spirituale, a spiritual marriage. There is other evidence that some Christians in the early church did this (possibly Didachē 11.11: see Niederwimmer 1998, 180-181), although firm proof of the practice comes somewhat later. Perhaps the Corinthian Christians chose to do it in anticipation of the Resurrection when (they had been told) there would be neither “marrying nor giving in marriage.” Those whom Paul is addressing have then discovered that it is not so easy to restrain themselves as they had imagined it would be. Paul’s advice is, as usual, pastoral and practical—if you can keep your promise, fine. If not, do not worry: just get married.

Clearly we would not choose Paul if we were looking for someone who had written most profoundly or enthusiastically about marriage. On the other hand, 1 Corinthians 7, properly understood, reveals Paul to be by no means the ogre about marriage or sexuality that popular misrepresentation has claimed.

On Food Sacrificed to Idols 8:1-11:1

Paul next turns to the problem of meat offered to idols. This issue arose when meat left over from pagan sacrifices was offered for sale on the open market. Slaughterhouses in Greece were frequently attached to a temple. A host might even invite guests to a meal in the temple itself. The function of such invitations was more often civic than religious. Wealthier and more socially active members of the congregation could find it extremely embarrassing to refuse them. In any case (some of the Corinthians probably argued) an idol was nothing (8:4-6), and so those who had scruples were merely showing themselves to be “weak” (cf. 8:7). The entire issue seems at first sight utterly irrelevant to us—but is it? In fact it raises a number of questions about

living in a non-Christian society, maintaining one’s own standards yet not being apart from the environment, when to compromise and when not to, all of which are present questions for us in a pluralist society.

The “strong” in the passage are those who obviously see no problem: they, as monotheists, have “knowledge” (Greek: gnosis), therefore they know that an idol is nothing and that is that. The “weak,” on the other hand, are evidently those who are scandalized by this behavior. The “strong,” by eating idol meat, are surely compromising themselves with paganism, especially if they are eating in a pagan temple.

Paul’s answer begins where they are: “Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that ‘all of us [who are followers of Christ] possess knowledge’” (8:1). So what? “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone”—and now Paul quotes the Shema—“who ‘loves God’ is known by him” (1 Cor. 8:1-3; cf. Deut. 6:4). Paul is making two points—first, that the essential thing about biblical monotheism is not “knowledge,” but relationship to God. The Shema does not tell us to “know” God, but to “love” God. Second, from this comes our confidence in the only “knowledge” that actually matters, namely that God “knows” us.

From these two principles Paul’s comments on the situation follow: The “strong” are essentially right (idols are nothing and pagan gods are only “so-called”: 8:5-6), but the phenomenon of paganism cannot simply be sidestepped or ignored because some do not have the correct “knowledge” (8:7). Meat in itself does not change our standing before God one way or the other (8:8), but to be faithful the church must maintain its visible critique of paganism, and that critique may well be compromised if Christians are to be seen “eating in the temple of an idol” (8:9-13).

The essence of the apostolic life is love—living for the sake of others—and that means sometimes abandoning things to which, in principle, you have a right (9:1-27); in any case pagan practices, even if you

know they are nonsense, can be corrupting (10:1-24). Therefore, as regards eating "food sacrificed to idols," if it just means going to market, then in principle the answer is, "Don't worry about it" (10:25), because to say anything else would be to imply that idols had power to make parts of God's creation a "no-go" area (10:26). If it means going to dinner with an unbeliever at his or her house, the answer is in principle still "Yes," not raising questions (for the same reason) (10:27). But if it means in any way seeming to countenance paganism (such as eating in a pagan temple), then the answer is "No." The church must be seen to retain its monotheistic critique for the sake of others who need that witness (10:28-33).

On Male and Female Behavior (11:2-16)

The following section (11:2-16) is very difficult to follow. Many exegetes explain it as Paul's insistence that women prophets wear a veil according to Jewish custom. This is the view implied by the NRSV translation, especially verses 5, 10, and 13. Two preliminary points may be made:

Paul seems to be just as concerned with the behavior of men as of women. Indeed, he begins with a prohibition against a man praying with "something on his head" (11:4).

A key to a better understanding of the female behavior that is causing Paul's concern may lie in the rare Greek word akatakalyptos with which he speaks of it. The NRSV (following the dictionaries) translates this as "unveiled" or "uncovered" (11:5, 13). A glance at Leviticus 13:45 (where the LXX also has akatakalyptos) will suggest, however, that the LXX translator understood it in a sense more akin to "disheveled." If that is the sense here, then 1 Corinthians 11:5, 13 should be translated "with her hair disheveled" or "with her hair loose." If that is accepted, then we can translate verse 11:10 to mean what it plainly does mean: "a woman should have her hair under control" (see RSV margin; contrast NRSV).

There is some evidence that it was a mark of the pagan male sacerdos to perform rites with the head covered (the Jewish prayer shawl is developed much later than the period that concerns us). Among women disheveled hair was a mark of the orgiastic worship of certain cults such as that of Isis, which had a center in Corinth. Paul's concern appears to have been with appearances. He was anxious that those performing liturgical functions in the Christian assembly, men or women, should not resemble the devotees of a pagan cult. To that end, he maintained, Christian freedom should be limited for the sake of the gospel. He indicates his intent by pointing to the practice of other churches where the women's hair presumably remained coiffeured, as was normal among Greco-Roman and Jewish women of the period.

Unfortunately Paul felt obliged to produce a theological rationale for this position. Based on the notion of the "head" or "source" of the woman being the man (as in Genesis 2), this rationale hovers on the brink of implying that women are in some way inferior to men. Paul, evidently seeing where the argument is leading, forthrightly declares that this is not what he means:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man or man independent of woman. For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman; but all things are from God. (11:11-12)

Unfortunately, the effect of this declaration is that the entire argument, which has been based on an asserted difference between men and women, collapses. Obviously, Paul knew that his Corinthians would be bright enough to see that. Changing tactics, he appeals first to common sense (11:13), then (like a Stoic) to "nature" (11:14-15). Neither appeal is convincing, even to Paul, as is evident from his final comment, which is exactly what adults say to a child when they either cannot or will not voice their real objection: "It's simply not done" (11:16).

Few passages, properly approached, can teach us more about the meaning of divine inspiration of scripture

than 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Clearly, inspiration does not lie in some presumed infallibility of the author or of the author's product. Scripture is

not a divine Ouija board. Inspiration lies in the use God has made of the author and the writing, warts and all. Probably Paul never wrote anything that is worse as an argument than 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. Yet with all its flaws, the passage shows us some important things. Paul unquestioningly accepted the liturgical and prophetic function of women in the Christian assembly. One solution that apparently did not occur to him was the one that seemed perfectly natural to the later church, namely, that women should stop prophesying. The passage also shows us that Paul was totally committed to the equality of women and men "in the Lord." He insisted on that equality even when his argument seemed to be pointing him in another direction.

On Conduct of the Lord's Supper 11:17-34

Paul next turns to the eucharistic practices of the Corinthians. The Lord's Supper was being ruined by social distinctions (11:17-22). Other groups in Greco-Roman society also experienced—and criticized—the kinds of distinctions Paul describes. The following extract, written a few years after Paul's death, throws light on his description of the Corinthian Eucharist:

I happened to be dining with a man—though no particular friend of his—whose elegant economy, as he called it, seemed to me a sort of stingy extravagance. The best dishes were set in front of himself and a select few, and cheap scraps of food before the rest of the company. He had even put the wine into tiny little flasks, divided into three categories, not with the idea of giving his guests the opportunity of choosing, but to make it impossible for them to refuse what they were given. One lot was intended for himself and for us, another for his lesser friends (all his friends are graded) and the third for his and our freedmen. My neighbor at table noticed this and asked me if I approved. I said I did not. "So what do you do?" he asked. "I serve the same to everyone, for when I invite guests it is for a meal, not to make class distinctions; I have brought them as equals to the same table, so I give them the same treatment in everything." "Even the freedmen?" "Of course, for then they are my fellow diners, not freedmen." "That must cost you a lot." "On the contrary." "How is that?" "Because my freedmen do not drink the sort of wine that I do, but I drink theirs." (Pliny, Letters 2.6)

In light of this and similar passages by other writers we may suppose that a man such as Gaius, who allowed meetings of the local church at his house (Rom. 16:23), may have been tempted to see himself as the patron of a private club or society. It would have been neither entirely surprising nor incomprehensible if he made distinctions in his house between the food he offered to his social equals and that prepared for those who were of lower social class. Pliny took offense at the humiliation of the disadvantaged. Paul does too, although his criticism goes further. Where some are so humiliated, "it is not really to eat the Lord's supper" that they come together (11:20). This "Eucharist" is no Eucharist at all.

Against this background, Paul movingly reminds his readers of what the Lord had done for his disciples and all who followed them "on the night when he was betrayed" (11:23)! The tradition he has "received" and "handed on" is virtually identical to that preserved in Mark. Paul's quotation of it here allows us to see the traditions of

what the Lord said and did. Although not quoted a great deal directly in the letters, they did have their place in Paul's missionary teaching.

Clearly the Corinthian Eucharist was a real meal, not the formal, symbolic meal it later became. So Paul

closes with a warning about the dangers of eating and drinking unworthily at this table (11:27-29). His association of physical disease with mental and spiritual ill health (11:30-32) appears less strange in the light of modern insights about psychosomatic illness than it did to exegetes in the nineteenth century.

Paul instructs those who share the supper to wait for each other (11:33). Genuine physical hunger should be divorced from the supper. Perhaps this is the beginning of the formalization of the eucharistic rite that occurred later. About other matters Paul says, “I will give instructions when I come” (11:34). How interesting it would be to know what they were!

On Spiritual Gifts 12:1-14:40

Paul turns next to the question of spiritual gifts (*ta pneumatika*—literally “things spiritual”—12:1). Recalling the pagan background of the majority of the Corinthian converts, we should say a little more here about certain aspects of the religious spirit of Hellenism in the early Roman Empire. Luke Timothy Johnson gives the following summary:

Prophecy was held in high honor; not only the official variety, which involved the discernment of entrails, but especially the kind called mantic [i.e., affected by divine madness]. It could be found at ancient sites of oracles such as Delphi and Dodonna and among the priests of foreign mystery cults. It was characterized by ecstasy and speaking in tongues. Frequently it was accompanied by physical rapture and even self-mutilation. Mantic prophecy was held in reverence from ancient times, since it was regarded as a literal possession of the human psyche by the divine spirit (pneuma), and indwelling of the God (enthusiasmos; see Plato, Phaedrus 244A). The revelations uttered may have been difficult to interpret but they were received as divine oracles.

(Plutarch, The E at Delphi 387B in Johnson 1986, 29)

This is the background against which we must hear Paul. He warns that not all spiritual things (pneumatika) are necessarily good (cf. 1 John 4:1-3). When the Corinthians were heathen, they had been “led astray” (apagomenoi) to dumb idols (12:2). The chief point of this verse is in the word “led astray” (apagesthai). The verb refers to experiences of spiritual ecstasy in pagan religion, when a person is or is thought to be possessed by the divine. The first thing for the Corinthians to understand is that the work of God’s spirit is to bring persons into relationship with God, so that they can say, “Jesus is Lord.” Anything that obstructs that relationship is not of God (12:3). There is only one Spirit of God, but the Spirit brings many different “gifts” (charismata; 12:4). There is a basic unity and equality, therefore, in all true gifts (12:5-6) and they are always given “for the common good” (12:7). Paul lists some of the different kinds of charismata—wisdom, knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, interpretation. These gifts are inspired by the one Spirit, who is not a blind force but

one who wills, graciously and personally (12:11). It is evident that some contemporary uses of the word “charismatic” have moved very far from Paul’s use.

The gifts of the one Spirit belong to the one body, the body into which believers are incorporated. There are different functions in the human body, “so it is with Christ” (12:12), in whom baptism has made us one, “Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (12:13). As the parts of the body exist in mutual interdependence, so should the parts of the body of Christ (12:14-26), and “you are the body of Christ” (12:27). God appoints people to different functions in the church, and not all have the same gifts (12:28-30). “Speaking in tongues” is a gift that Paul considers neither likely nor desirable for every Christian. The rhetorical questions in verse 12:30 all require the answer “No.”

There are higher gifts (charismata), and the Corinthians should seek them. There is a “more excellent way”

than concern for gifts at all, and this Paul will now show them (12:31). There follows Paul's hymn to love (agapē). In popular awareness it is the best-loved passage in the Pauline canon, and perhaps popular awareness does not err. Without love, all other gifts are worthless (13:1-3). Love seeks only the good of the other, not its own good (13:4-6). Love is no easy way, for it must bear, believe, hope, and endure (13:7). In the age to come only faith, hope, and love will abide, and the greatest of these will be love (13:13).

Paul then returns to the problem of gifts. In view of what he has just said, the important thing, obviously, is to pursue love. Then by all means "strive for the spiritual gifts," the greatest of which is prophecy (14:1). Prophecy clearly refers not merely or even primarily to prediction of the future, but to exhortation and the exposition of Christian truth. Paul does not denigrate speaking in tongues. He claims the gift for himself (14:18) and would be content for all the Corinthians to have it, too (14:5, "I would like" [thelō] should not be understood as implying desire, but consent). Nonetheless, he values prophecy much more (14:2-19). "Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church" (14:4). "I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue" (14:19). It is not difficult to see why the Corinthians would have carried their admiration of mantic utterance into their Christianity, and we may find it easier to sympathize with them than with contemporary Christian elitists who overvalue the gift. Paul concludes with a midrash of Isaiah 28:11-12. He suggests that tongues may be a sign not of belief, but of unbelief (14:20-22). He indicates that outsiders are more likely to be converted by hearing prophecy than by tongues (14:23-25) and he appeals for all things in the assembly to be done "decently and in order" (14:26-40). Speaking in tongues is not forbidden, but prophecy should be desired (14:39b).

The only problem of interpretation in this section is verses 14:34-35. It is hard to reconcile these verses either with the fact that Paul has just been suggesting the proper arrangements for women to prophesy in church (11:2-16) or with his general attitude to women in the Christian community (Gal. 3:28). It is also hard to reconcile verses 14:34-35 with the advice Paul has just been giving to Christian women to remain

unmarried (7:25-38). If the women are to "ask their husbands at home," then whom are the unmarried to ask? Or does the rule not apply to them? Note further that the section as a whole seems to make better sense without verses 14:34-35, provided we follow the punctuation envisaged by the verse division, separating verse 33 from verse 34 (cf. KJV and RV). A number of scholars regard this as the best punctuation. The manuscripts suggest uncertainty about the placing of verses 34-35, some locating them after verse 14:40.

The presence of so many difficulties in two verses has led a number of scholars to conclude that attempts to make sense of them as Paul's are hopeless, and that the verses are not his at all, but an early gloss. If, however, they are Paul's, the most likely explanation appears to be that in verses 34 and 35 he is once again (cf. 7:1; 8:1; 10:23) quoting the Corinthians themselves. It is some among them who make the claim "women should be silent in the churches" and so on—a claim that Paul abruptly dismisses. Are you men claiming, he asks, "either that the word of God originated with you, or that you are the only ones it has reached?" (14:36, NRSV adapted) That the form of "you . . . only" in Greek is masculine seems to indicate that it is the men who are addressed by these questions. Certainly they cannot be addressed simply to the women.

The Resurrection of the Body 15:1-58

The flaw in the Corinthians' thinking, manifested equally in their inclination to faction and their overestimate of the value of spectacular gifts like speaking in tongues, is a tendency to be satisfied with their present condition. They deceive themselves too easily into thinking that already they have all spiritual gifts (1:5-7); already they are complete, rich, and reigning in the kingdom (4:8); and already they are strong (10:12). The last major section of Paul's letter undergirds all that has gone before by reminding them of their hope for something that is still in the future.

Paul recalls the Corinthians to that basic gospel “through which also you are being saved” (15:2). Jesus first died, then rose to new life (15:35), and so became “a lifegiving spirit” (15:45). With them, as with Jesus, there must be first the “sowing” of the mortal body, and only then, with the Resurrection, the new spiritual being—“a spiritual body,” that is, a being truly filled with God’s breath and power (15:44). Paul’s language is the language of Judaism rather than that of Hellenism. It is the Jewish doctrine of resurrection that he teaches, not the Greek doctrine of immortality. In the Greek doctrine of immortality, when the body dies, the soul is set free from the restriction of flesh and continues its life unrestricted. In Platonic tradition, which is the foundation of much subsequent Western thought, immortality is a characteristic of the truly human soul, which naturally survives the dissolution of the body. Death is merely the discarding of an outworn envelope. In biblical teaching, by contrast, the entire created order is good and owes its existence to God. Disembodied existence is regarded with repugnance (cf. 2 Cor. 5:4). Death is the death of the total person, and freedom from death or victory over death must likewise mean victory for the total person. The biblical hope is not for immortality of the soul, but for resurrection of the body (cf. 1 Cor. 15:53-55). This does not mean resuscitation or reanimation of physical corpses. It is the complete transformation and recreation of human beings as psychosomatic totalities.

Paul insists that the Corinthians look to the future. If present life is the only fulfillment Christianity has to offer, then Jesus did not rise and the apostles are liars (15:12, 15). If Christ did not rise, then Christ cannot be a source of life. In this case the Corinthians’ faith must all be a delusion (15:14), they are still in their sins (15:17). Those who have “died in Christ have perished” (15:18). If this is so, then Christians are, of all people, “most to be pitied” (15:19). Paul himself would be foolish to suffer for such a belief (15:29-32).

Paul cannot speak of the future except by metaphor (15:35-49). “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (15:50). The Corinthians may be “spiritual,” but they are yet far from the goal. “We will not all die, but we will all be changed” (15:51).

Serving the Body: The Collection for the Saints 16:1-4

In accord with everything else Paul has said to the Corinthians, he endeavors to see that the collection for Jerusalem should be a regular act of discipline—to be done “decently and in order”!—rather than as a last-minute scramble.

Paul concludes, as often, with a fragment in his own hand (16:21; cf. Gal. 6:11-16). The cry, “Our Lord, come!” is written in Aramaic transliterated into Greek (on Maranatha, see NRSV margin). The term may be liturgical and probably goes back to Aramaic-speaking Christians of the very first years of the faith.

The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians

Opening salutation

Paul’s opening follows its usual pattern. Timothy worked with Paul in founding the Corinthian church (Acts 18:5).

Thanksgiving After Affliction 1:3-11

Paul’s Greek in verses 6-7 is not easy to follow, although the general sense is clear: union with Christ means union with fellow Christians, so Paul’s suffering and his consolation help the Corinthians. We do not know what “the affliction” in Asia was (1:8). Was it the affair of the silversmiths (Acts 19:23-40)? Probably not, since Paul appears to be saying that his life was in danger, and the affair of the silversmiths does not seem to

have gone that far. Perhaps it was the imprisonment during which he wrote to the Philippians, since his life was clearly in some danger. At any rate, Paul's experience of being reduced to a hopeless situation was, he says, "so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (1:9).

Paul's Ministry to the Corinthians 1:12-2:16a

Paul speaks of events that have divided him and the Corinthian church. He acted "not by earthly wisdom" but "by the grace of God" (1:12). Some of the Corinthians have thought that Paul was vacillating because he had planned a visit to Corinth that he did not make: "But I call on God as witness against me: it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth" (1:23). Instead he wrote a letter "out of much distress and anguish of heart" (2:4).

It seems that the Corinthians responded to Paul's appeal. He counsels them against being too severe with the offender—"so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2:7). As an example of how a religious community of this period might deal with an offending member, we may look at the Qumran Rule:

Whoever has gone about slandering his companion shall be excluded from the pure Meal of the Congregation for one year and shall do penance. But whoever has slandered the Congregation shall be expelled from among them and shall return no more.

Whoever has murmured against the authority of the Community shall be expelled and shall not return. But if he has murmured against his companion unjustly, he shall do penance for six months.

(IQS 7.15-18)

When Paul considers his work, with its combination of opportunities and frustrations (2:12-13), he feels nonetheless that God is leading him through the world, as the NRSV has it, "in triumphal procession" (2:14 — literally "in triumph"). Some see in verse 2:14 a metaphor based on the "triumph" granted to successful Roman generals, in which the generals' prisoners were paraded before the crowds. Others suggest that, since such a parade normally ended in the execution of the prisoners, it would hardly be a metaphor Paul might use of the apostolic life. It is clear that in Paul's eyes the effect of the apostolic witness is like the effect of the cross itself on those who are being saved and those who are perishing, "to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2:15-16a; cf. 1 Cor. 1:23-24).

On Apostolic Authority 2:15-6:13; 7:2-16b

Who is "sufficient" for such a ministry (2:16b)? No one! For we are not, says Paul, "peddlers of God's word like so many" (2:17a). "The many" (Greek: *hoi polloi*) is used here, as in other Greek literature, as an expression of scorn (cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.3.4. "The few who think they are born to fidelity and honor" are contrasted with "the many" who do not). True apostles, Paul says, by contrast with "peddlers of God's word," are persons "sent from God and standing in his presence" (2:17). Is Paul beginning to "commend [himself] again" (cf. 2 Cor. 11:16-33)? Does Paul need "letters of recommendation" to establish his credentials? The Corinthian church itself is his letter of recommendation, written "on tablets of human hearts" (3:1-3). The latter image, reminiscent of Jeremiah 31:33, leads naturally to the contrast between old covenant and new in the following verses. Paul repeats: apostles have no sufficiency in themselves, but they do have a sufficiency from God, by whom they are made competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (3:4-6).

We must emphasize that Paul is not contrasting the "external religion" of the old covenant with the "religion of the heart" of the new, nor is he contrasting "works" with "faith." He is making the point that is also made

in his letter to the Romans, namely, that “through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). It was inevitably a “ministry of death” (3:7) and a “ministry of condemnation” (3:9). The new covenant, by contrast, is a “ministry of justification”; that is, it manifests God’s continuing loyalty to all creation, Jew and Gentile alike (3:9).

In Paul’s view those of his former co-religionists who do not perceive and admit that there is grace for the Gentiles are “hardened” (3:14). They are in the process of “perishing” (4:3; note that the process is not complete). “The god of this world” has “blinded” their minds (4:4). Nothing said here, however, excludes the theology Paul speaks in this letter: that even “hardening” does not place anyone, Jew or Gentile, outside the loving purpose of God, and that eventually “all Israel will be saved.” Paul’s concern here is not with that question at all, but with what it means to be truly an apostle of Christ. To be an apostle, Paul says, is to proclaim not oneself, but the lordship of Christ (4:5). God the creator has begun a new work of creation, “in our hearts . . . the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6).

Do apostles seem feeble instruments—mere earthen vessels—for such a proclamation? The obvious inadequacy of the apostles as vessels for this treasure proves only that the treasure is not their creation, but God’s (4:7). The apostles are afflicted, but the affliction is not fatal; they are persecuted, but the Lord stands by them (4:8-9). God delivers them from any ultimate evil, even though they continue to live in a world at present marked by sin and death. Apostles who suffer persecution suffer in union with Christ. They always carry with them the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in them (4:10; cf. Rom. 8:17). The main reference here (cf. 4:14) is to the future resurrection. The life of Jesus will be manifested when their natural bodies are changed into spiritual bodies (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35-49).

“So death is at work in us, but life in you” (4:12). This is indeed true, for the apostles suffer in order to bring the gospel to the world. In the spirit of the psalmist who proclaimed hope in the midst of troubles (4:13; cf. Ps. 116:10), Paul expresses his own hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead (4:14). In a wonderful vision of exchange, Paul declares that “everything is for your sake” so that grace may extend “to more and more people” (4:15). This thought leads him to speak of the transcendent nature of Christian hope. Beyond momentary affliction he looks for “an eternal weight of glory” (4:17). As in Romans 8:18, what is to come is so great that it will be beyond all comparison with present difficulties, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (4:18).

In verses 5:1-5 Paul appears to reject again the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul in favor of the Hebrew hope of resurrection (see above on 1 Cor. 15:42-55). It is not the thought of a future “unclothed” existence as a disembodied spirit that fills the apostle with hope, but the dream of a new life in which all the possibilities of existence will be truly fulfilled. “We wish not to be unclothed but to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (5:4). Present possession of the Spirit is the guarantee that this hope is based on reality (5:5). The apostle accepts life or death, seeking only to please God, “for all of us must be revealed before the judgment seat of Christ, so that all may obtain according to what they have done through the body whether good or evil” (5:10, NRSV alt.). The question is not one of “salvation by merit.” Paul’s point is simply, as Jan Lambrecht puts it, that at the judgment of Christ “we will all be seen for what we are” (Lambrecht 1999, 86).

The true apostle is dominated by “the love of Christ” (5:14: meaning Christ’s love for us and our love for Christ). Being so dominated, the apostle can know nothing merely “from a human point of view” (kata sarka, literally “according to the flesh,” 5:16). The meaning of this phrase has been much discussed, but the NRSV

paraphrase probably gives the right nuance. Once (presumably in his former life before he was encountered on the Damascus road) Paul "knew" the Messiah "from a human point of view"—perhaps meaning that Paul hoped for a glorious, victorious Messiah who would vindicate Israel by humbling its enemies. If so, then in the light of the cross—the crucified Messiah—Paul "knows" the Messiah in such a way "no longer." To be "in Christ," that is, to be in the fellowship of the real Messiah, the crucified and risen Messiah, is to experience a miracle analogous to creation itself (cf. 4:6). This is the final miracle, and God gives apostles the task of proclaiming it: "the ministry of reconciliation" (5:18).

Paul's vision, as in Romans 8, moves finally from the personal to the cosmic: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (5:19a). New life is available, but people need to hear of it (cf. Rom. 10:14-17). This is the work of an apostle, for God is also "entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (5:19b-20). The ambassadorial language here has long been associated by commentators with the notion of the imperial legate, or else, within Judaism, with that of an envoy sent by the Sanhedrin or the High Priest to distant synagogues with authority to convey decrees and judgments, and this may be correct. As the result of an examination of the epigraphic evidence (i.e., inscriptions), Anthony Bash suggests that Paul and his readers would have been more likely to have in mind Greco-Roman thought about the kind of embassies sometimes sent between one community and another to appeal for peace in a dispute (Bash 1997). The irony in Paul's use of such a metaphor is this: Greco-Roman embassies seeking peace were normally sent by the weaker party to the stronger (e.g., Luke 14:32). They involved ritual self-abasement and humility on the part of the ambassadors and, by implication, on the part of those who sent them. In effect, Paul would have been saying that through his ministry as God's ambassador, God was being suppliant to humanity, and God was accepting self-abasement for the sake of peace. It is a suggestion that makes the Pauline notion of the apostolate into something rather scandalous. But then, that scandal would be in marked conformity to the scandal of the cross as Paul describes it (cf. 1 Cor. 1:21-25), not to mention his description of the apostolic ministry (2 Cor. 10-13, especially 12:9-10). Although Bash's argument is not absolutely watertight, his suggestion remains an intriguing possibility.

God's grace may be free, but it requires a response and calls one to responsibility. The apostle must proclaim both grace and responsibility, reminding those who hear that God is now showing the kingdom in a new way: "As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. . . . See, now is the day of salvation!" (6:1-2) This is the pattern of apostolic ministry, and it follows exactly the pattern of Jesus' own ministry (6:3-10). This is the ministry Paul and his companions have offered to the Corinthians (6:11-12; 7:2-4), and now the Corinthians

have accepted it. Paul finishes this section of his writing with a song of joy over the response that his letter to Corinth has received, as he has heard from Titus (7:7-15). "I rejoice," he says, "because I have complete confidence in you" (7:16).

Separation From the World 6:14-7:1

Some scholars believe that this passage is the substance of Paul's "previous letter" (1 Cor. 5:9). It is not difficult to see why the initial reaction of Paul the Pharisee to the reported behavior of some of his Corinthian converts might have been along the lines implied here. Other commentators suggest that the language of this passage resembles that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, especially in its use of the name "Belial," which does not occur elsewhere in the NT, as a name for Satan. This leads them to claim that the passage is not Pauline at all. By contrast to both these views, Jan Lambrecht argues that the passage, which is in fact a chain of Old Testament allusions (cf. Rom. 3:10-18), fits perfectly well into its present context (Lambrecht 1999, 120-127). It may be seen as the culmination of Paul's apology for his ministry, and a renewal of that call for the Corinthians not simply to conform to the society around them that had, in fact, occupied much of 1

Corinthians (e.g., 6:1-20; 8:1-11:1).

The Collection for the Saints at Jerusalem 8:1-9:15

The collection for the Jerusalem church was a major project in Paul's ministry (cf. Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; Rom. 15:25-27). The collection was in part a sign of the messianic age. It may also have served a political purpose for Paul, since it was a tangible demonstration of fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Finally, the collection was also a genuine response to need (Gal. 2:10).

Paul continues to stress the collection, although it did not help his relationship with the Corinthians. His intention to avoid any misunderstanding is obvious (8:20-24). If the Corinthians take part in the collection, they will be offering thanks to God for what they have received (9:11). They will be promoting fellowship with the Jerusalem church (8:4) and equality among members of the Christian family (8:14; cf. Rom. 15:27). They will also be promoting the glory of God (9:13). There is a note of embarrassment in this section. Paul has informed the Macedonians that the Corinthians were very generous in their pledges (9:2) even as he now boasts to the Corinthians about the generosity of the Macedonians (8:2-5). The Macedonians have done what they promised, and the Corinthians have not. Paul might appear to be a liar (9:3-4). But something besides Paul's word is at risk. Paul understands generosity as a requirement of being a Christian. It is a way of being faithful to the good news (9:13). When Christians give to each other, they show the pattern of Christ: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (8:9).

An Anguished Letter 10:1-13:14

This section of 2 Corinthians might be the "anguished letter" mentioned at 2 Corinthians 2:3-4 and 7:8-12. Anyone who simply tries the experiment of reading it aloud as a dramatic speech will see how extraordinarily effective it is as a piece of rhetoric.

It is difficult to be sure just who Paul's rivals were, or what they stood for. Although he claims that they preach "another Jesus" (11:4), it is not clear whether he refers to a difference of doctrine or a difference of style.

We can guess some things about Paul's rivals by what he says in his own defense. Possibly their authority was validated by "letters of recommendation" from other churches (cf. 3:1). They claimed to preach the gospel on the same terms as Paul, that is (presumably) without charge (11:12; cf. 11:7-11). They claimed a background in Judaism (11:22). They were "servants of Christ" who had endured on Christ's behalf (11:23). They claimed to have had "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1). Perhaps they have produced "signs" to back up their claims (12:12). If there is any connection between them and the approach to the faith that Paul criticizes in 1 Corinthians 1-3, then perhaps they were claiming to preach or teach the "wisdom" of God in some special sense (1 Cor. 1:17-25; 2:1-13). All this is rather vague, and the real differences between what they taught and what Paul taught remain unclear (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6). Perhaps the most important thing was that for Paul certain attitudes of personal and spiritual superiority undermined the fundamentals of the gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 1:28-31).

Paul reacts bitterly to the claims of his adversaries. He matches them boast for boast. In doing so he is by his own standards "talking like a madman" (11:23). He is well aware that his only real "boast"—and by implication the only boast of his converts—is his weakness. "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (11:30). In verses 12:2-13 Paul speaks of "a person in Christ": Undoubtedly he means himself. But—and this is the distinctive thing in the description of this ecstasy—he puts a space between himself and this man. And it is only at this remove that he will take part in the glory which this man—

himself—has by virtue of these high things.

(Barth 1956, 332)

In one of the most moving passages in his writings, Paul speaks of a “thorn in the flesh”—presumably a physical infirmity—from which he had prayed to be free. He speaks also of the answer he received: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). In Paul’s view it is the willingness of the apostle to be weak and vulnerable, like Jesus, that proves the genuineness of the apostolate. “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but . . . live with him by the power of God” (13:4). That same willingness is also the mark of the faithful: “Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed” (13:5-6).

Paul and the Corinthians: The End of the Affair?

How did Paul’s stormy relationship with the Corinthians end? Were he and they eventually reconciled? We have several reasons for supposing they were. First, the early chapters of 2 Corinthians really do seem to describe a reconciliation equivalent to the quarrel recorded in chapters 10-13. Second, the letter to the Romans mentions the collection for the saints made in Achaia (Rom. 15:26). Third, and most significant of all, the Corinthians kept Paul’s letters—even, apparently, those that might have been most embarrassing to them.

End of chapter

Ask their husbands back

But see Bart Ehrman, Misquoting Jesus. He argues persuasively that Paul never wrote this.