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**THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS:
CHAPTERS I TO VIII.**

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It is obviously impossible, within the prescribed limits of these articles, to do anything like justice to the rich and varied contents of the Corinthian Epistles. It may, however, be of some service to New Testament students if an attempt be made to realize the circumstances under which they were written. For it is only when we are aware not only of the difficulties of the Corinthian church but of the tone and temper of its members that we can appreciate the skilful tact, the resolute firmness and the far-sighted wisdom of its founder and teacher, St. Paul.

It is proposed, therefore, in this and the following article to give some account of the first Epistle. For a systematic analysis or for a continuous paraphrase of St. Paul's words reference may be made to the standard commentaries. We shall permit ourselves to pursue a somewhat more free and elastic method of treatment. We shall simply try to understand St. Paul's thought with the context, so to speak, of its surroundings, and to emphasize at the same time the guiding principles that governed his counsels.

It is chiefly from the contents of the two Epistles that we form our opinion of the character of the Corinthian Christians. They would seem to have been a somewhat fickle, superficial, conceited set of people. The general population from which they were drawn was a very mixed one. When the city was refounded by Julius Caesar in 46 B. C. it was a settlement mainly of Roman freedmen. Greek residents would quickly follow, and, in time, the inevitable colony of Jews. In spite, however, of this hybrid character they appear to have been marked by certain traits characteristic not only of Greece generally, but of Corinth in particular. They were argumentative

and contentious, quick to split into factions at the bidding of some party leader. The fact that they were litigious was perhaps only a particular phase of this. That they were in danger of being polluted by the immorality for which Corinth was notorious appears more than once in the course of this first Epistle.

CHAPTER I-IV.

It was the Apostle's general habit to open his Epistles with an expression of gratitude to God for the Christian graces displayed by those to whom he was writing. When we bear in mind the numerous and varied faults for which he has to reprove the Corinthians it becomes a matter of some interest to see what thanks he felt able to offer in their case. St. Paul was not a person to scatter fulsome flattery at random. Hence it is significant that in I. 4-9 he limits his matter for thankfulness to the fact that they possess "utterance" and "knowledge" and that they fall short in no "charisma" (obviously using the word in the somewhat technical sense in which it appears later in the Epistle). Clearly it is rather on possessing the *gifts* than on displaying the *fruits* of the Spirit that he is able to congratulate his Corinthian converts.

It was owing to the absence of these *fruits* of the Spirit that they became so easy a prey to the two great besetting sins with which the Apostle, in the first four chapters, is chiefly occupied. On the one hand they were prone to a factious party spirit; on the other, they conceived their Christianity to be a form of "wisdom", a matter of the head rather than of the heart and life.

St. Paul's method of treatment for the evil of party spirit is to recall them to the thought and name of Christ. That name occurs nine times in the opening verses of chapter I; it forms the center of the sublime climax at III. 23. Their foolish conduct, he tells them, has amounted to dividing an indivisible Christ. It has amounted to putting the party leaders whom they had chosen into the place of Christ Himself. The Christ into whose Name

they had each one been baptized, was the Christ of all and in Him they all were one.

The statement in I. 17 that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the gospel, leads him to a declaration of what that gospel essentially is; and, at the same time to a reproof of their other fault, the pretentious conceit of wisdom. The gist of the wonderful passage that follows is this: the gospel of the Crucified is not a "wisdom" but it is a "power". The Christian missionary proclaims a crucified provincial as God. To the Jew, with his deeply rooted hopes of a Messiah whose outstretched arm should uplift his people, this spectacle of suffering weakness was a fatal stumbling-block. To the Greek, the whole idea was merely laughable. And yet St. Paul is not only fearless but sternly uncompromising. The Crucified is the supreme expression not only of the power but of the wisdom of God Himself.

There is a vein of almost passionate emphasis running through this passage. One is inclined to conjecture whether some particular occurrence had evoked in the Apostle this mood of uncompromising sternness, this determination to concede nothing to the feelings of either Jew or Gentile. A suggestion has been made which has, at any rate, the merit of providing a very possible reason for this attitude of St. Paul's. In II:3 he tells his hearers how he came to them "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling". We recall the fact that he came to Corinth directly from Athens. His recorded address there (Acts XVII:23-31) was a distinct attempt to go as far as possible towards meeting his Athenian audience half-way; to find any possible common ground between their religious views and the Christianity he was bringing to them. The narrative in Acts leads us to conclude that the results were most meagre. It may be that the Apostle was disappointed and deeply distressed. In a strong revulsion of feeling he may have determined to abandon this method of presenting the gospel. For the future there should be neither compromise nor conces-

sion. He would know nothing among his hearers but "Christ" and Him "crucified".

If he did come from Athens to Corinth smarting under a sense of failure he may well have had strong feelings about the "wisdom" of this world and "the rulers of this world". He almost exults in the fact that God chose "the foolish things . . . the weak things . . . the base things" of the world. It is a passage which the modern missionary may well take to heart, when he is taunted with the fact that he can only gain converts from lower races and castes who apparently have everything to gain and nothing to lose by conversion.

And yet, St. Paul maintained, though the preaching of the gospel cannot be accommodated to the wisdom of the world, it is the expression of God's wisdom—a wisdom only to be appreciated by those who have been illuminated by God's Spirit. In the passage that follows (II:6-16) he elaborates the necessary truth that spiritual things can only be appreciated by a Spiritual consciousness. The Spirit of God is, as it were, the organ of the Divine Self-consciousness, and it is the spiritual in man that is capable of entering into relation with the Spirit of God and of understanding what God has to reveal. If the spiritual element in man be dormant or dead, he can no more understand the revelation of the Divine wisdom than a blind man can see a picture or a deaf man hear a song. It is in this absence of spiritual perception that St. Paul finds the explanation of the world's attitude to Christ.

And it was precisely in this respect that the Corinthians themselves were too much infected by the spirit of the world. There was too much pretension to "wisdom", too little spiritual perception. In chapter III he tells them that he could not speak to them as "spiritual" but "as unto carnal". They did not, of course, display the world's contemptuous indifference, but the world was still so much with them that they were but babes in spiritual things. It was from this that jealousy

and strife arose, producing in time the destructive party divisions.

The mention of these divisions causes the Apostle to return once more to the true center of unity—God. The work is His. Paul and Apollos—each fulfilling his own task—are simply His servants. They are colleagues with each other, but in His service. In sowing the seed at Corinth they are servants of the great Husbandman, or, to follow the apostle's swift change of metaphor, in rearing the edifice of the church they are servants of the great Master Builder.

The reference to the idea of building launches St. Paul into the famous passage which is not improbably suggested, or at any rate colored, by his knowledge of the city's previous history. In 146 B.C., Corinth had been sacked and destroyed by Lucius Mummius. The Apostle's words might not inaptly stand for a description of what happened when the city was given over to the flames. The magnificent temples and public buildings of costly stone would stand out like islands in a sea of flames. The meaner private dwellings of "wood, hay, stubble" would be licked up with fierce rapidity. A man who was content to leave his house to its fate might escape with his life, but it would be "so as through fire".

The different fates of these two classes of buildings suggests to the Apostle the different issues of Christian work. The one, the only foundation for all such work is Christ. Upon that foundation various men build. Some do good and enduring work. Others do work that is not so good. Sometime there will come the Day—the great Day of testing. Other days, of an ordinary kind, are ushered in by the glow of the sunrise. That day will be ushered in by a glow—not of gentle sunrise—but of burning flames. In the flames of that day all Christian work will be tested. The good and strong work will stand out triumphantly, resisting the flames and reflecting their brightness. The bad will be destroyed, and the workman can only leave it to its proper fate, glad that he may himself escape with his own life.

Possibly St. Paul may have blended in this picture scenes from the destruction of Corinth with ideas of the "great Day of the Lord" drawn from the Old Testament Scriptures and learned from his Jewish teachers. But the truth that he sets forth is as valid today as it was for the Corinthian church to which he wrote. For any Christian work at all, Christ is the only possible foundation. Upon that foundation myriads of workmen are co-operating to rear the fabric of the Christian church. The work done is of very different quality, ranging by degrees from what is strong and good to what is feeble and useless. The day of God's judgment will alone declare the final worth of it all.

But he has not yet exhausted the figure of the building. The idea of a temple suggests from a new point of view both the true ideal of the Christian and the sin of the Corinthians against that ideal. The Christian is a temple. His heart is a shrine and the divinity that dwells in it is the Holy Spirit of God. The Apostle has just indicated the narrow escape from doom of those who do inferior work in the construction of Christ's temple. How much heavier will be the punishment of those who do not construct at all, but actually destroy? Whose work is not even feebly positive but is wholly negative. And yet this was the very thing that the Corinthians by their disruptive party spirit were tending to do. In forsaking Christ the true center of unity and in ranging themselves under separate party leaders they were destroying their own life; they were ruining the temple of God which they themselves were.

And, after all, this "glorying" in men, this setting up and idolizing of some little human party leader was such a pitifully unworthy line of action for the Christian convert. He could claim so very much more if he would only be true to his privileges. He had the right to make his own all that the fervor of Paul or the eloquence of Apollos or the living faith of Kephas could give him. The gospel is no piece of pleasing and convincing dialectic. It is the only secret of victorious life in the present, the only

sure hope of future life beyond the grave. All this was theirs, for Christ was theirs, and He and they are folded in the arms of God.

This last thought, with all its magnificent scope was, however, not the only inference to be drawn from the fact that St. Paul and his fellow apostles were the servants of Christ. A further thought arises which was being painfully forced on the Apostle's mind. As servants they are solely responsible to Christ their Master. He and no one else has the right to pass judgment upon them and He will do so in His own good time.

The truth was that St. Paul had critics in the Corinthian church. The mere fact of the party divisions is itself a proof that he could not claim the undivided allegiance of its members. But the evil was beginning to assume a more hostile and malignant form. One of the four factions, the "Christ party" was not improbably composed of, or at any rate directed by, emissaries from the Judaizing section of the Palestinian church. They had no sympathy with the universalism of St. Paul's gospel; they regarded him as a traitor to Judaism and they branded him as a false apostle. We seem to hear behind the words of the Apostle here the first mutterings of the disaffection which grew, in the interval between I Corinthians and II Corinthians into a violent assault on his work and character; an assault which he met by the stern reproach and the scathing invective contained in the second Epistle.

Here St. Paul simply enters an emphatic protest against premature criticism of himself and his work, passing on at once to a passage of sad and reproachful irony. The Corinthians with their complacent assurance, their facile criticism are like kings enthroned in wealth and plenty. They are like spectators in the amphitheatre who gaze with cynical, heartless indifference on the scenes of bloodshed and death presented for their entertainment. The Apostles, on the other hand, are themselves part of the spectacle; they are like the band of gladiators who enter the arena pledged to give no quar-

ter but to fight out their combat to the death. The Corinthians are cool, critical, comfortable, respectable. The Apostles are eager, strenuous, laborious, yet despised and slandered by those for whom they toil; they are "the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things". Those members of the church, we imagine, who still retained some vestige of loyalty and affection for the Apostle, must have winced beneath the lash of these stinging words.

But St. Paul has many other topics waiting to be discussed and he feels that he must bring this question of unity to a close. He has, at any rate, *one* claim on the allegiance of the whole church. He was its founder, its spiritual father. They might have many teachers, but none of them could claim the place of founder and father. He will send Timothy to investigate their troubles and hopes himself to follow shortly. In the meantime, it will depend on the Corinthians themselves whether his visit shall be kindly or severe. If they persist in their present attitude of insubordination he will come "with a rod". If they yield to the gentle counsels of Timothy they will find in St. Paul a corresponding spirit of love and gentleness.

CHAPTER V.

This chapter is concerned with the case of impurity that had reached the ears of the Apostle. A member of the church had taken to wife his own step-mother. St. Paul indicates no particular channel by which the news had reached him, but seems to regard it as a matter of general notoriety. The name of Corinth, it is true, was a synonym for impurity; and fornication, as distinct from adultery, was regarded with leniency, if not approval, by contemporary heathen thought. But here was a crime by which even heathen thought—with all its laxity—was outraged. The crime had been committed by a member of the Christian community and apparently the members had seen in it nothing to disturb their self-complacent calm. With indignant brevity the Apostle lays down the

only possible course of action, the expulsion of the offender. This the community *must* do, in justice to itself, in order to remove the pollution of so vile a stain.

The phrase in which St. Paul utters his verdict, "to deliver such a one unto Satan", has caused very great difficulty to commentators. The chief point at issue is, whether the phrase merely signifies excommunication, or whether some graver additional penalty is implied. It seems, on the whole, most probable that something more than mere excommunication is meant. Ramsay suggests that the words may find their most appropriate explanation in the well-known pagan custom whereby a wronged person who was not in a position to retaliate, consigned the wrongdoer to the gods and left the punishment to be inflicted by a divine power. Others, keeping more closely to Scriptural parallels, think that the punishment indicated was analogous to that inflicted on Elymas or even on Ananias and Sapphira. This last is the view supported by Renan. "*Il ne faut pas en douter,*" he says, "*c'est une condamnation à mort que Paul prononce.*" We must be content for the present to leave the precise meaning of the phrase unexplained with the general conviction that what is indicated is physically punitive visitation, having for its object the ultimate spiritual restoration of the sinner.

What, however, appears quite clearly is that the church had to be freed from his presence; for while he was there he would certainly be a source of pollution to others. "A little leaven," says the Apostle, "leavens the whole lump." The word "leaven" suggests to him the thought of the Passover feast. He recalls the scrupulous care with which every scrap of leaven had to be removed from all Jewish homes before the Passover lamb could be slain. What a contrast did the Corinthian church present! *Their* Passover lamb, the true Passover Lamb, was already slain, and yet the leaven of notorious sin was not cast out. The whole situation was an intolerable contradiction.

Before leaving this topic the Apostle takes occasion to correct a perverse misapprehension of some words he had used in a former letter. When he told his converts to eschew the company of people who were in various ways vicious, they seem to have interpreted his words in an absolute sense, as meaning that they must have no dealings at all with any one of this description. He reminds them, here, that his words only applied to the Christian community. To have carried out the injunction in relation to everyone would have meant that they must remove themselves entirely out of the world. He merely meant that these vices must not be tolerated within the church. Judgment on the outer world may be left in God's hands. To set their own house in order is the duty of Christians. The passage closes with the stern, brief injunction: "Put away the wicked man from among yourselves."

CHAPTER VI.

The Apostle now passes on to another glaring fault, one that was certain not only to destroy the peace of the church, but to discredit the gospel in the eyes of the heathen world. The vigorous language of the passage shows that his feelings were almost as deeply stirred by this sin as by that other one of impurity. Sorrowful surprise, indignant reproach, biting sarcasm, all struggle for utterance in his words. Christians actually sue their fellow-Christians at law and take their suits before a heathen tribunal.

A difficulty of interpretation arises in connection with the opening words. "Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world? Know ye not that we shall judge angels?" It is not quite easy to say in what circle of ideas the words find their place. One rather plausible suggestion is that the whole passage is ironical; that the words ought to be printed in inverted commas, because they are a quotation by the Apostle from words used by the Corinthians themselves. The sense in that case would be: "You say that you will one day sit in judgment both

on men and angels. Surely, then, people who claim so high a function as that, should be able to settle their own disputes, without the necessity of taking them before a heathen court."

It seems, however, on the whole, more probable that the explanation of the words is to be found by reference to certain ideas on the subject of angelology, ideas which St. Paul held in common with the Jewish thought of his age. The angels were identified in later Jewish thought not only with the forces of nature but with the destiny of nations. It was apparently held that God would not pass judgment on a nation till He had first passed judgment on its representative angel. The fortune and the fate of a people and of its representative angel were identical. This interpretation of the passage is made more likely by the fact that Rabbinical parallels can be adduced from the words that immediately precede. The Rabbis laid it down that one who took a law suit before idolatrous judges was an impious man and a blasphemer.

Whatever be the true explanation of these mysterious sayings, there is no mistaking the point of the incisive rebuke that follows. The Corinthians prided themselves on their *wisdom*. Was not this vaunted wisdom of theirs equal to the comparatively simple task of deciding the disputes that arose between Christian brethren? The real evil, however, lay not in the absence of sufficient wisdom to decide the disputes, but in the very existence of such disputes. "Why not," says the Apostle, "take wrong? Why not rather *be* defrauded?" This would be the Christ-like way. But so far were they removed from this ideal, that they were actually themselves the aggressors; they wronged and defrauded the very men who were their brethren in Christ.

From this weighty reproof, St. Paul then returns for a moment to the question of social purity. His words reveal the wide gulf that lay between Christian teaching on this point, and the conventional pagan opinion of the age. The average Greek held that *every* requirement of the body could claim its gratification and the only stand-

ard of conduct in this matter was the attainment of physical health and beauty. St. Paul, on the other hand, draws distinctions. With regard to foods, he admits that they are morally indifferent. But with regard to a man's body as a whole, "it is for the Lord". Our bodies are members of Christ; as such, they are consecrated dwelling places of God's Spirit. It is obvious that this conception was absolutely incompatible with any toleration of those faults which Corinthian society regarded with such an unduly lenient eye. It is also obvious that the Greek view was bound to result, as indeed it did, in the degradation of woman and the decay of family life; while the teaching of the Apostle must ultimately secure the true glory of woman and the hallowing of the home.

CHAPTER VII.

At this point St. Paul proceeds to answer the questions sent in a letter to him by the Corinthians themselves. The first one with which he deals is that of the respective excellence of celibacy and marriage. His counsel is clear and practical. Celibacy is, in itself, honourable, but in such an environment as that of Corinth, it was liable to grave and severe temptation. Wedlock was the true safeguard of chastity and purity. This view, he hastens to say, is given as counsel and not as commandment; for he, not obscurely indicates that he himself regarded the single state as, on the whole, more fitted for unhindered service of the Lord.

St. Paul's treatment of this question has not escaped criticism. It has been urged that his words betoken a somewhat low conception of the marriage bond, a conception very different from the one afterwards set forth in his Epistle to the Ephesians. But surely the answer to this is not far to seek. He is speaking to converts who had but lately emerged from heathendom, and whose first years of Christian service were being spent amid the temptations of such a city as Corinth. He must speak to them as he himself had said, "as unto babes in Christ".

He must feed them "with milk, not with meat". At their present stage of development the lofty views of marriage set forth in the Epistle to the Ephesians would have been simply unintelligible to them. The one there set forth may indeed differ from the one here before us as meat differs from milk. But the milk of simple practical doctrine was needed by the men of Corinth. St. Paul was giving them the teaching they could bear.

In the advice that follows next, he draws a distinction between definite commands of the Lord and his own personal counsels. Christ had laid it down that the husband should not put away the wife and the wife should not leave the husband; or if she were compelled to leave him, she must then remain unmarried. These general commands, however, did not cover all the particular cases that might arise in a place like Corinth, where some members of a family might accept the preaching of the gospel while others rejected it. It is with possible cases of this kind that the Apostle proceeds to deal.

The principle on which his advice is based is that of the solidarity of the family life. He appeals to the admitted case of the children. They are regarded as holy inasmuch as they are bound up with a holy parent; and the principle enunciated holds good of the conjugal no less than of the filial bond. For this reason, then, the Christian husband or wife should always be willing to remain with the heathen consort. There is the further reason, to, that this passive receptive attitude may be turned into one of positive acceptance. The believing consort may one day convert the unbelieving one to Christ. In any case, it was entirely mistaken to suppose that acceptance of Christianity by husband or wife necessarily involved separation from the unbelieving consort. And, declares the Apostle, the principle that thus applies to matrimony holds equally good in other aspects of life. The Christian life may be lived by the Jew or the Gentile, the slave or the freeman. It is conditioned neither by nationality nor by social rank. It involves no violent upheaval of

the existing circumstances of life. "Let each man where-in he was called, therein abide with God."

The duty of parents to their unmarried daughters next claims his attention. He gives his counsel in a few words, and hastens at once to state the general principles that justify it. To give them in marriage or to keep them in singleness at home—either is right and the decision must depend on the individual case. But, in general, the Apostle holds, the single state is better. A time of persecution is impending; the present world is only a passing show; the right attitude for the Christian is one of detachment from it, an attitude of serene aloofness. And this is usually more possible for the single than for the married. The married man has more responsibilities and, therefore, more anxieties; the unmarried is more free to serve the Lord without distraction. This is St. Paul's personal view. He is careful to point out that he only puts it forth as such. But, in giving this advice, he thinks he has "the Spirit of God".

CHAPTER VIII.

This chapter is occupied with the answer to another of the difficulties propounded in the letter from Corinth, the question of eating meats offered to idols. It is necessary, here, to realize the condition of things that caused the difficulty. Ordinary social festivities, as a rule, partook of a religious character. They were generally under the auspices of some deity in whose honour libations were poured or to whom the animals, whose flesh was eaten at the meal, had been offered in sacrifice. Much of the meat offered for sale in the markets, and, therefore, to be found in ordinary private houses, came from the heathen temples, where certain parts of the animal had been used for sacrificial purposes. The rule of the Jews with regard to all such meats was one of uncompromising prohibition. Hence the answering of this question placed the Apostle in a real dilemma. He must not, on the one hand violate the scruples of the Jewish Christian;

on the other hand he was bound to vindicate the broad principles of spiritual religion.

The opening words of his reply go to the very heart of the matter. The resolving of this difficulty, he intimates, was not a matter of greater or less knowledge. To approach the question from the side of knowledge was to misconceive the whole situation. It was a matter of love; and if the Corinthians had only been as anxious to excel in love as they were to shine in knowledge the difficulty would never have arisen. It was possible that on the purely intellectual side of the matter the Corinthian might be quite sound. He knew the supremacy of the true God and the comparative worthlessness of the false gods of Greek mythology. His *knowledge* on this point was unimpeachable. But others had not attained to his height of knowledge. Throughout their previous life they had seen these meats in association with heathen life and heathen ritual, and they could not at a stroke free themselves from the associations of a life-time. For them, just as it was for the Jews, such meats were inevitably polluted meats and to touch them was to outrage the scruples of their conscience.

Doubtless they were weak, and their attitude was, in respect of logic, indefensible. But they were brothers and this matter was to them one of moral life or death. To be encouraged by the example of fellow-Christians, to partake of these meats with all their associations, was to relapse into the heathenism from which they had just emerged. They were Christ's. He had not criticized their weaknesses, but had, in great love, given Himself for them even to death. And was that salvation, purchased by the death of Christ, to be risked because a stronger brother was determined to air his intellectual superiority to his weaker brothers' scruples—and this, in such a trivial matter as meat? The voice of love drowns all such pitiful pretensions as these. The brother's life comes first. It would be nobler, if need be, to forswear flesh for ever than to dream, for such a paltry reason as this, of placing in jeopardy that life which Christ died to bestow.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)