

James Philip Bible Readings

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THE BOOK of I CORINTHIANS

Paul wrote this letter to the Church at Corinth to deal with some major problems and difficulties that were dividing the fellowship and harming its witness. Its main purpose is to apply the message of the Cross, as expounded in the Epistle to the Romans, to the particular situation that existed among the Corinthians. It embodies, in other words, the practical outworking of the doctrine of the Cross in terms of Christian behaviour. Romans and Corinthians stand in the same relation to each other as theology and ethics, the one following inevitably from the other. Both these epistles are pre-eminently epistles of the Cross, the one expounding its doctrine, the other its practical application. To see this is to reach the heart of 1 Corinthians and is the key to a true understanding of its message.

1) 1:1-3

Paul's first visit to Corinth is recorded in Acts 18:1-18 and this important passage should be studied with care in order to understand fully the background of the situation to which Paul addressed himself in this epistle. The Apostle remained in Corinth for eighteen months teaching and preaching the Word after he had received assurance from the Lord that He had 'many people in this city'. It is this phrase that really defines all his care and concern for the Church there, and enables us to see the end from the beginning in all his faithful dealings with them. For they were the Church of God and His workmanship sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (2) and we see in this epistle how they were shaped and fashioned as if in a workshop by the discipline of the Cross.

Later reference to Corinth in Acts seems to indicate that after Paul's departure, other less healthy influences were brought to bear upon the fellowship causing the divisions and disorders which occasioned the writing of this letter. It was Paul's conviction that they were called to be God's people that made him so concerned to ensure that they should walk worthy of their high calling and he presented every man perfect (or mature full-grown) in Christ Jesus hence his blunt, straight from the shoulder teaching. Their problems needed urgent attention and it was no time for mincing matters. Plain speaking was necessary.

2) 1:1-3

Even a cursory reading of the first chapter will make it plain that certain very disturbing tendencies were manifesting themselves in the Church at Corinth. Commentators sometimes divide the issues into disorders and difficulties. The disorders were party factions, divisions, lack of discipline, impurity, abuse of Christian ordinances. The difficulties were concerning marriage and celibacy, meats offered to idols, spiritual gifts, bodily resurrection, offerings to the poor. The sequence here may be suggestive. It was in all probability because of the disorders in the moral realm that difficulties in the spiritual arose, for moral declension clouds the mind and spirit and prevents clear-sightedness in spiritual things. Now Paul dealt with the Corinthians on the principle by which he ordered his own life - the principle of the Cross. He proceeded to relate the message and discipline of the Cross to both disorders and difficulties. It is as if he were saying, 'Is there moral or spiritual disorder or difficulty in your life? Let the message of the Cross touch it.'¹ In this sense also we may truly use the words of Isaiah 'With His stripes we are healed.'

The reason it seems why there was so much disorder and confusion at Corinth was that as a fellowship and as individuals they had baulked at the radical challenge of the Cross and refused its discipline in their lives. And whenever Christians do this, trouble comes, with ineffectiveness in witness and unfruitfulness in service. 'As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine, no more can ye except ye abide in Me', said Christ. And to abide in Him is to abide in fellowship with His Cross.

3) 1:1-3

There are two ways of looking at the phrase 'called to be saints' (2). It certainly speaks of the supreme privilege and comfort and encouragement of the Christian - what a joy to have a sure place in the family of God but we must not miss the terrific challenge it brings to our lives. The calling to be a saint is a summons, not a plea or an exhortation, and it indicates God's determination to make saints of us, come what may. A cynic once spoke of Christians as those that were 'condemned to everlasting life'. He spoke more truly than he realised, for in the Christian calling it is as if a sentence of death were passed upon us - upon the old life and the old nature. This can spell nothing but alarm to the natural man in us, and it is as well that we should see that sainthood in the New Testament sense is costly to the old life. He who thinks that discipleship is something to be taken in one's stride, especially if one has the particular temperament for it, has not understood the rugged challenge of Christ. The trouble with us is that we are only prepared to go so far - as far as natural inclination and temperament will allow without involving us in any considerable upheaval. There are whole areas of our lives however that we certainly have no intention of allowing God to transform. 'Lord, think what that would involve', we cry apprehensively when by His Word He approaches us. But God says, 'Involve what it will, I am calling you to this, Come '. It is this that explains the rigour of the epistle and the thrill of fear that goes through us as we realise what it implies for our lives.

4) 1:4-9

Paul's commendation of the Corinthians is in contrast to the sharp censures he administers later on in the epistle. This is significant. Some think he is being sarcastic but there is no need to put such a construction on this passage. Sarcasm is a barren weapon, and should be but sparingly used. It can raise a cheap laugh, but it can also break hearts, and Paul was not the man to do such a thing lightly. We may certainly take his praise here as sincere and generous. In this he follows Christ Himself. We may remember that in the Letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation, Christ's commendation always comes before His censure. There is an example here we ought to try to follow. There are some Christians who seem to be unable to speak about any other Christian or piece of Christian work without disparagement or criticism. This is an unChrist-like jaundiced spirit that we must at all costs guard against.

Paul was generous in his appreciation of the Corinthians. But generosity is not flattery or dishonesty. He spoke truly. But he chose his words carefully. There are some notable omissions in his assessment of their spiritual attainments, and this becomes very clear if we compare this passage with what he says elsewhere to others, notably 1 Thessalonians 1:3ff. Gifts, utterance, knowledge can all be present in a believer's life while deeper evidences of the Spirit's sanctifying power - faith, hope, love - are absent. Gifts can hide spiritual poverty, as we may learn from what we read of their unhappy accompaniments in Corinth. The Church has often suffered because it has been content with what Corinth was content with instead of allowing the ploughshare of the Word of the Cross to go deep down into its life.

5) 1:8-9

Paul has his eyes on the long-term issue of God's dealings with the Corinthians here. Verse 9 expresses the assurance that all that he speaks of in v 8 will be fulfilled - 'God is faithful', the ultimate accomplishment of their sanctification is not in doubt. It is the 'here and now' that is his concern throughout the epistle. It is precisely because Paul could see the end from the beginning, and see the glory and the grandeur of that to which they had been called that he was not prepared to acquiesce in their living on a lower level. This is ever the mark of a true servant of God; he has caught the vision of what God can make of men, and he is too loyal to what he has seen to be content with any lesser attainment. It is this that makes him so lovingly ruthless with those for whom he assumes responsibility. It was because Paul saw what the Corinthians might be, and could be, that he was so unsparing of them in their carnal state. This should encourage us, when we ourselves are being ploughed under by spiritual discipline, to look beyond the 'here and now' to the ultimate realisation of God's purposes in our lives. God is faithful - too faithful for our comfort, at times, and strong enough to be severe with us and devastate us in order to produce in us the perfect image of His Son.

6) 1:10-17

Paul wastes no time in coming to the point. The dissensions in the fellowship at Corinth were to him such an urgent matter that he could brook no delay in dealing with them. The passage is self-explanatory. The tragic nature of the divisions is only too plain for all to see. There are two points in particular to note. Paul's plea is that they be 'perfectly joined together' (10). The word in the original means 'to be brought into one's proper condition' and this gives some indication of the nature of the problem at Corinth. Because of their divisions and factions they were 'out of condition', and were not fulfilling their proper function as a company of the redeemed. Their witness was rendered ineffective. The other point is this. Paul says in 17 that he was sent, not to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Was it, in fact, because the gospel had ceased to be preached as Paul had preached it, with his wholesome and faithful emphasis on the message of the Cross, that the trouble had arisen? Was the preaching of the Word not what it had been? Some have suggested that Apollos' ministry may have been responsible for this, and it may well be that he had not sounded such a radical note as Paul when he went to Corinth. Be that as it may, the heart-bruising, life-giving word of the Cross had been neglected and the 'wisdom of words' had beguiled them, with what disastrous effects we can see in this passage.

7) 1:18-25

This is one of the profoundest statements in the epistle, and indeed in all Paul's writings. The 'preaching of the Cross' (in the original it is the 'word of the Cross') stands over against the 'wisdom of words', and throughout there is a series of contrasts presented - foolishness and wisdom, weakness and power, Jew, Greek, and the Church of God. The Apostle is intent on stressing that the gospel of Christ is something above and beyond the merely human, and indeed so completely 'other' that it stands in opposition to human wisdom altogether. This is not to say that it is either irrational on the one hand or unintelligible on the other, but rather something that is concealed from reason as such and therefore something that must be revealed or disclosed by God before men can grasp it at all. The manner in which this disclosure is made is described in 2.1 - it is by the foolishness of preaching that God makes Himself known in saving grace and power to mankind, and in the preaching of Christ crucified that which is foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews proves to those who are called a word of transformation that brings to their lives present salvation and infinite possibilities of blessedness for the future. If then, God Himself gives such significance to preaching, it is only logical that those who appreciate this should accord it a superlative place in the life of the Church and the work of the gospel.

8) 1:18-25

Why is the message of the Cross foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling block to the Jews? This is a question that is much more relevant in our own day than we might imagine, and for this reason: in the first place, religion for the Greek was essentially a matter of reason. He believed he could think his way to God, but this means, ultimately, the denial of the supernatural, and it was to this, significantly, that Greek religion came. They were unable to conceive of a God who could break in from beyond to confront men. Such an idea was to them quite ludicrous and when the Christian faith came with its assertion not only that God had broken in but also that He suffered in weakness for sins of men, it was foolishness to them. Much of modern religious life today partakes of this attitude. For many people within the life of the Church God is very remote and far away, a comfortable sort of God well in the background, and above all One who does not interfere in one's personal life. So foreign to them is the idea of a living God that it is regarded as almost improper, if not indecent, and decidedly eccentric, for a man with a real experience of Christ to speak in personal terms of God's dealings with him, as if He were a real factor in his life. This is the Greek spirit, and its prevalence in the Church today is the measure of its spiritual paralysis and barrenness in an age that desperately needs such divine intervention.

9) 1:18-25

In like manner, the Jews' reaction to the message of the Cross has its up-to-date parallel. The Jews believed they could get through to God by good works and the gospel's affirmation that it is 'not by works of righteousness which we have done', but solely by the mercy of God in Christ that we can be saved, cut right across their self-righteousness. It is easy therefore to see how the preaching of the Cross was such a stumbling block to the Jews. It is the moral humiliation involved in accepting the need to be justified by faith alone that was too much for them; they rebelled against it with all the religious and moral intensity of their natures. It is certainly no accident that this issue has been fundamental down the ages of the church, for it touches the innermost heart of the human problem, which is the pride of man. This is precisely what causes such disturbance and even consternation in the religious life of today, especially where a true gospel testimony has gone by default and a religion of 'good works' has held the field. One has only to preach a direct unambiguous sermon along the lines of Paul's teaching in Romans 3 about the universal guilt of mankind and the universal need of salvation by faith apart from the works of the law, to see how much a stumbling block the message of the Cross can be: men are in fact prepared to accept everything else in the Christian faith except this one thing. But this one thing is that which constitutes the gospel. Justification by faith is the gospel and to stumble at it is to stumble at Christ Himself and salvation, and heaven and eternal life.

10) I: 26-31

There are two things to notice in this passage. Firstly, the statement in 26; Paul does not mean that the Christian Faith cannot boast of many intellectual converts, for this is demonstrably false. It is not wise men or noble men as such, but wise men or noble men after the flesh that refuse to capitulate to the claims of the gospel. Nor is it reason, but fleshly reason that stands in such irreconcilable opposition to the gospel. It is because not many men can be wise or noble without being proud of it in a wrong and spiritually dangerous way that so many of them turn from the claims and challenge of the gospel.

Secondly, notice the almost exultant way in which Paul stresses the fact that God uses the foolish and weak things of the world through which to accomplish His saving purposes among men. He is in fact asserting that the world-shaking effects of the gospel and the Church's testimony - 'they that have turned the world upside down' (Acts 17:6) - were accomplished by very ordinary men made extraordinary by the power of God. But more. He is also indicating the 'possibilities' for God in the weak things. Weakness he means is the 'door' by which God 'comes' to the world, He longs to bless and save. What encouragement this for those who feel their weakness and inadequacy in Christian service, and Paul-wise perform it 'in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling' (2:3). This is the 'death' we must die if our service is to be owned of God, and our weakness provides the opportunity for this, so that Christ may be all in all. Blessed thought!

11) 2:1-5

Paul now proceeds to show how he himself conformed in his ministry to the principles he had just enunciated. 'I also am no exception to this rule' he says, 'but came, quite simply, to declare to you the counsel of God, the good news of Christ and Him crucified.' Their need was to get hold of the facts of the gospel, and anything that tended to conceal or obscure them must be shunned. Above all, simplicity of presentation was his concern. One of our hymns says, 'Make the message clear and plain,' and a man may well tremble (3) when he thinks that with so much at stake what he says might not be clear enough and understandable enough to carry conviction to his hearers' hearts. This is the real danger of 'enticing words of man's wisdom.' It is possible to clothe the blessed gospel with such unfamiliar and abstruse and foreign thoughts that it becomes quite unintelligible as the good news of God - just as it is possible, by the subtle use of diplomatic phraseology and roundabout carefully guarded expressions, to take the sharp edge off the challenge of the truth and render it innocuous. These were the issues of which Paul was so deeply aware, and the neglect of which was causing so much trouble in the fellowship at Corinth.

12) 2:1-5

In contrast to the enticing words of man's wisdom Paul's preaching was 'in demonstration of the Spirit and of power'. What does this mean? It means that the Spirit of God demonstrated in an unmistakable fashion the truth of the message Paul preached, bringing an inner persuasion and a deep conviction to the hearts of those who heard it, and leading them into a living experience of the power of the gospel. This was indeed the hallmark of apostolic preaching as a whole. We recall Peter's experience in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:36ff). Few passages could illustrate more vividly what Paul is speaking of here. It was when Peter rehearsed with Cornelius and his household the apostolic message - the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Christ and the offer of forgiveness through His Name - that the Holy Ghost fell upon them all. The fact is that while Peter spoke to them, this inner persuasion began to grip their hearts, and the sense that here was something that applied to their own personal, eternal needs. It became real to them, and, as we say, 'came home' to them with life-giving power. That is the true understanding of this great phrase, and when the clear and unequivocal proclamation of the gospel word is combined with an utter dedication to the principle of the Cross in one's manner of living, it should always be accompanied with such signs following. For the gospel is not a story; it is a power. But the power needs to be released, and this is the only way it can be.

13) 2:6-9

What Paul has said about the 'foolishness' of the gospel must not be misunderstood. There is such a thing as 'spiritual' wisdom, he proceeds to say, but it can be grasped only by those who are 'perfect', that is to say, spiritually enlightened and mature. His implication is surely clear. There would be no point in trying to communicate it to 'wordly' minds if the 'elementary' message of the gospel is 'foolishness' to them, since it would be infinitely beyond them. The fact is, the wisdom of God is a mystery. 'Mystery' in Scripture does not so much mean something mysterious in our sense of the term as something undiscoverable by the human intellect as such, something inaccessible to man apart from divine revelation. Salvation is a mystery in this sense, in that not until the Divine Spirit opens sightless eyes can men 'see' the kingdom of God.

This wisdom God has ordained 'unto our glory'. What can this mean? It speaks of the plan and purpose of God to take of our poor sinful dust and make it shine with splendour and glory and majesty, the achievement and realisation, the adornment of our whole being. It is the bestowing upon us of that which most and best fulfils the true intention of our creation. This is going very much further than an initial experience of conversion, and far beyond most conventional ideas of sanctification. We have only to read the opening chapters of Proverbs, which describe this heavenly wisdom - and we should - to realise what possibilities there are for a life that is utterly yielded to the Spirit's control, and what lustre this can impart to human character. Well might Paul say later in this chapter, 'The Spirit searcheth the deep things of God'.

14) 2:10-13

These verses speak of the means whereby the hidden wisdom of God is made known to men - through the Holy Spirit. Paul's words here are a commentary, so to speak, on our Lord's teaching in John 14-16 on the Holy Spirit. There, Jesus said that the Spirit would take of the things that were His and reveal them to us, and Paul echoes this thought in 12 when he speaks of the Spirit's ministry in making known to us the things that are freely given us of God. How needful it is for us to be apt and submissive pupils in this divine school, in order that we might apprehend fully the wealth that is ours in Christ!

There are two points in 13 to note. It is when we learn and receive the things freely given us of God that we have something worth speaking about in Christian witness, and the same Spirit that reveals these riches should be allowed to give us the words with which to speak them forth, and words taught by the Spirit will always be clear and plain words, direct and to the point. The phrase 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual' has been variously translated and interpreted. It does not mean, as has been sometimes supposed, to compare one part of Scripture with another. Combining spiritual things with spiritual would be a more accurate rendering, and would mean either teaching or fitting spiritual things to spiritual people, or explaining spiritual things in spiritual language. Both these meanings can be usefully combined. To give spiritual teaching, in language worthy of its exalted nature, to people who have the Spirit who understand it is to follow the example of our Lord Himself Who said, 'To him that hath it shall be given, and from him that hath not shall be taken away that which he hath'.

15) 2:14-3:4

Paul now deals with the hindrances to the reception of spiritual wisdom. In this connection we note two things. In the first place the 'natural' man - the man who has not received the Spirit, the unconverted man - cannot receive the things of the Spirit, since there is no point of contact to which they can appeal. This seems to bear out the interpretation of 13b - adapting spiritual things to spiritual people. In the second place the true believer who allows the 'natural' in him to remain and gain the ascendant, becoming therefore a 'carnal' Christian, also cannot 'take' this spiritual wisdom but only understand the most elementary things. They could be fed only with milk, not with strong meat. This represents a state of arrested development in spiritual life. The Corinthians had closed their hearts to, and rendered themselves incapable of receiving, the deeper wisdom which would have made all the difference to their lives, by being carnal. Those very divisions on which they based their notions of spiritual superiority were the mark of their carnality and had robbed them of their true heritage in Christ. We may learn from this a lesson for our modern situation. Divisions are a mark of carnality and when the life of the Church is delivered from its carnal propensities there may be some hope of unity. Spiritual quickening through the recovery of the message and principle of the Cross in the life of the Church is the way to the healing of our divisions, and it is some evidence of our lack of spiritual discernment that we should have assumed so readily that it was the other way round, and that spiritual quickening will come when unity is attained. We have confused the symptoms with the disease. Is disunity the real problem, or merely the evidence of a still greater one deeper down?

16) 3:5-8

Paul's point here is to indicate the relative unimportance of the preacher in relation to the message he preaches. Commentators tell us here that the word 'ministers' was originally used of 'table-waiters', and this emphasised the lowly nature of the work. It is as if Paul were saying, 'When the errand boy comes to your door with provisions from the store, it would be very odd if you were more interested in the boy than in what he brings for you'. Exactly. And so it ought to be in the ministry of the Word. It is to get things confused, to be more taken up, as the Corinthians were, with the personalities involved. We recall that when John the Baptist was questioned by the Pharisees he said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness'. A voice. That is what ministers are meant to be, the mouthpiece of the living God, no more, no less. This does not mean either that they are to be depersonalised or held in contempt, as the next Note's comment will make clear. It does however mean that the message becomes all-important. Time enough for recognition and reward when the books are opened and our labours are assessed - as to faithfulness, not success, by our glorious King and Head, Who is entirely just, and wonderfully generous in His apportionment of commendation.

17) 3:9-11

These words give the 'other side' of the picture. Although ministers are 'nothing', they do have authority, deriving from the God they serve, and they are not to be despised. The message boy at the door is not pushed away unceremoniously after he has delivered his goods. We owe it to him to express our thanks and treat him courteously. Nor is the minister's work 'nothing', for it is God that worketh in him. In this connection we may note the contrast between the 'I am nothing' in 7 and the 'wise master-builder' in 10. The true servant of God is a 'quality' nothing, not an 'amiable nonentity'.

Note also Paul's two metaphors in this chapter. In 6, 7, he likens spiritual work to sowing seed and reaping harvest, and in 10 to house-building. These are significant illustrations. Both take time and skill. We must be prepared to have long patience in such work. It takes time to build a living fellowship, and it takes time to build a live saint. No farmer does his work in haphazard, careless fashion. A good harvest means too much to him to allow of taking risks. In like manner, skill is needed both in laying foundations and in building superstructures in the spiritual life. 'Anything' won't do. It is highly important work, and only the best is good enough, in view of the eternal implications of the building. This sets the work of the ministry in its proper perspective. Well might Paul say, 'Who is sufficient for these things?'

18) 3:12-15

Paul seems certainly to be making a contrast in these verses. Gold, silver, precious stones, stand over against wood, hay, stubble, and the distinction he intends is between good and bad building material. All these things, as a matter of fact, are good in themselves, and in particular contexts, but in the matter of soul-building only the former are good, and the latter are deadly dangerous. For soul-work is to be tried with fire, and wood, hay, stubble, will immediately be burned. If we are concerned to build enduring work, we dare not use such materials. Now Paul is speaking primarily of the work of preachers in relation to those who listen to them, but this word may also be applied to what a believer builds into his own spiritual life. It is possible for a Christian by the careless way he lives, to be building wood, hay, stubble into his spiritual character, and rendering it devoid of anything enduring or of sterling worth and in the end, they shall suffer loss - not loss of salvation, but loss of reward. They will be stunted and spiritually emaciated when they might have been shining with glory. Not only so. We may apply this also to the influence we have on other people's lives. All of us have a stewardship in this respect in virtue of the fact that we are all called to be witnesses unto Christ. What we need to ask ourselves is: What sort of material are we building into the lives of those committed to our stewardship? What sort of impact do our lives have, our talk, our doctrine, our demeanour, our attitudes, upon those with whom we have to do? Is it gold, silver, precious stones, or wood, hay, stubble?

19) 3:16-23

The reference in 16 is not to individuals so much as to the fellowship as being the temple of God (cf Ephesians 2:20-22, where Paul speaks of the Church as an habitation of God through the Spirit). It is because the fellowship is indeed the temple of God that every reverence must be taken in handling it; it is not a light thing to be careless with the habitation of God. The word in 17, 'defile', is the same as that translated later in the verse as 'destroy', and is used in 2 Corinthians 11:3 for 'being corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ'. It is this kind of 'destruction' or damage of which Paul speaks here. His point is that the fellowship at Corinth was being injured by the introduction of divisive teaching, and by the preaching of a gospel without the challenge of the Cross in it, and that those who were guilty of this sin would have God to reckon with. 'Destroy' cannot mean everlasting destruction here, but it does mean definite chastisement and punishment, which might even include death (see 1 Corinthians 11:3 - there were those who ate and drank unworthily at the Lord's Table, and this defiled the fellowship, earning themselves judgment. They ate and drank condemnation to themselves, not discerning the Lord's body.) With this grim warning Paul urges them to stop glorying in man and causing such division in the Church.

20) 4:1-5

Having warned them of having wrong attitudes towards God's servants, Paul now expounds the right one. We see the sanity and the balance of biblical teaching here. Do not glory in man, it says, for they are but men. But on the other hand, they are stewards of the mysteries of God. This is no sinecure, but a calling that is arduous and deeply responsible, and demands respect and esteem. Not only so. The real criterion of judgment is to faithfulness, not popularity. We doubt not that there is some reference here to Apollos, who was 'all the rage' in Corinth. But many a preacher has sacrificed faithfulness on the altar of popularity and success, to the detriment of his own spiritual life and reward, and the devastation of the lives of those who have listened to him, content that it should be so. A gospel that does not crucify is obviously going to be popular with carnal Christians and will win many to its support. But what use will it be in terms of building for eternity? It is one thing to object to a challenging word of the Cross as being gloomy and forbidding, but what else is going to make men of us?

Paul goes on to say that he is answerable to the Lord for his ministry (4). It is irrelevant to him - although a source of grief - that they should sit in judgment on him, for he is doing his work as unto God. Happy is the man - and content and detached withal - who is able to leave the judgment of his work with the Lord Who brings to light the hidden things of darkness!

21) 4:1-5

Much is being said at the present time in the Church about stewardship, and we should learn from this passage something of its true nature. It is in essence a spiritual conception and, rightly understood, should begin in our thinking with the stewardship of our souls. God has entrusted this stewardship to each one of us. It is as if He said, 'Take good care of this precious soul for me, and see that you prepare it well for the everlasting habitations, for there is no loss like the loss of a soul.' This is the point at which stewardship must begin with every man, nor can there be any real faithfulness in this matter until the great business of salvation is once for all settled. The first great question that must be faced is: What provision have you made for eternal issues? Is it well with your soul?

It is after this has been dealt with that the other issues become meaningful - the stewardship of time, talents, and possessions. The Scriptures make explicit mention of tithing as a norm in the stewardship of money, and it is difficult to see how anyone could be thought faithful without taking this seriously. But this is a useful guide in other matters also. It is known for example that in many Churches in America Christians apply this standard to questions of full-time service. On the estimate that their normal working life would last forty years, they give four years of their time for full-time service on the mission field. Although we feel that a short-term period of missionary service may often have practical disadvantages on the field, we certainly applaud the spirit in which this service is given, and venture to suggest that if it prevailed more in our national Church, a very great many of our pressing staffing problems would be solved permanently, and the question of retrenchment would never arise.

22) 4:6-7

Notice Paul's words in 6. 'Not to think above that which is written' enshrines a deeply important principle. What he means is: Do not think beyond the warrant of the Scripture, live in accordance with the Word of God. It is an injunction to think scripturally, and never was such advice more necessary than today. Most of the troubles and pitfalls in the Christian life would be avoided if we followed more closely the dictates of Holy Writ. To think of man in the light of what the Scriptures say about man would safeguard us both from facile, optimistic estimates; about human nature and attainment on the one hand, and from gloomy cynicism and despair on the other. To think scripturally is true realism!

The measure of Paul's own realism is seen in the way in which he gently but firmly pricks the bubble of the Corinthians' self-esteem in 7. It is a remarkable thing that people who are greatly gifted are often the humblest of men; it is those not so gifted and who overestimate their abilities that make a parade of themselves. This is a pattern seen in many walks of life. The real aristocrat is not a snob; it is the would-be aristocrat who gives himself airs. And there is such a thing as spiritual snobbery also. This has been called by other names, with great effectiveness, and we turn to this in tomorrow's reading.

23) 4:7

A propos yesterday's closing thought, we cannot refrain from including a notable passage by G.K. Chesterton in his essay on Vulgarity: 'There is the man who wishes first to prove he is a gentleman, and only proves two things: first that he is vulgar enough to prefer being a gentleman to being a man; and second, that he has a hideously stunted and half-witted notion even of being a gentleman. There is the man who wishes to show that he has lived in the best society; and shows even in showing it that he does not know the best society from the worst... There is the man who is always being tactful without tact. There is the man who jokes loudly and laughs heartily, and so proves he has no sense of humour. There is the man who talks a great deal about understanding women, and with every word helps us with a ghastly clarity to understand him. There is the man who tells stories of the wonderful affability and friendliness of very rich men he has known, and thereby reveals his secret religion - that rich men are gods and that he is a fortunate favourite of the gods. All these men have the mark that I call for convenience vulgar; the mark that they give us their own moral and spiritual measure by stretching themselves to their full stature. If they had been a little lax and casual and humble we might never have found them out. If they had not been so clever, we might never have known that they were fools. If they had not been so gentlemanly, we should not have seen that they were cads.'

24) 4:8-13

Here is one of the most notable and moving passages in Paul's writings. To gain the sense of his words in 8, 'Now ye are full', add - 'by your way of it' - the apostle is being gently ironical, and adds, 'I would to God ye did reign. This unholy ambition of yours is not the sign of reigning in life.' Then, in stark contrast, comes the tremendous description of the apostolic pattern of life, with its suffering, shame and reproach for Christ's sake. That was what 'reigning' meant for Paul. It is a remarkable fact that so often when the Apostle speaks of reigning with Christ he also speaks of suffering with Him. 'If we suffer, we shall reign' (2 Timothy 2:12). Reigning in Romans 5:17, 21 is followed in the next chapter by crucifixion with Christ. 'More than conquerors' in Romans 8 emerges from 'all these things - tribulation, distress, nakedness, peril, famine, sword.' 'It is given to us' he says to the Philippians 'not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake.' This is what the Corinthians had never grasped, and what many Christians never learn, that in the Christian life, the way up is down, that the way to power is through weakness, that the pathway to royal living is one marked by suffering all the way. Martin Luther once cried, 'Wilt thou be joint heir with Jesus Christ? Wilt thou be like unto Him, His brother - and not suffer? Then at the last day He will certainly know thee not as brother and joint heir. Then He will ask thee, 'Where is thy crown of thorns? Where is thy cross? Where are thy nails and scourge?''

25) 4:14-21

There are compensations however in the life of suffering for Christ's sake, and in these verses we may discern a threefold evidence of this. In the first place, such suffering is fruitful and fruit-bearing in bringing many sons and daughters into the kingdom of God. All over Asia Minor and Europe there were living monuments to the fruitfulness of his travail in Christ. 'In Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the Gospel' - such was the glad proof of his effectiveness in missionary endeavour. In the second place, it is impossible not to see the rare tenderness of spirit that had developed in him. Sometimes we are inclined to ask, 'Why has God ordained this painful way for His children?'. The answer can only be that such disciplines are the only things that can deal with chronic hardness of heart in us. It was unquestionably because Paul went through such buffetings and took such hammer blows that he was so tender and compassionate and loving.

Finally, look at the undoubted authority in his words in 18-21. We need not doubt that when the Corinthians read these words, they instinctively trembled. This is the hallmark of reality in spiritual experience. It was said of the people who listened to Jesus that they marvelled, because He spoke as one having authority, and not as the scribes, and this is something which all true servants of His share with Him. Whether men accept their word or not, they will unquestionably recognise the dignity and authority with which it is spoken.

26) 5:1-13

This is a chapter of Church discipline and it contains several solemn lessons. Notice in the first place the progression from the beginning of the epistle - divisions, wisdom of words, spiritual immaturity, worldliness, puffed-up-ness, pride - and now immorality. This is a very significant progression, and we need to understand its import. When there are things like divisions and dissensions in a fellowship, we need to ask ourselves whether these are the real problems or simply the expression of something deeper. We wonder whether in this chapter we have not come to the real root of the Corinthians' troubles. Spiritual immaturity, worldliness, ambition, pride - but at the root of them all, and in the heart of the fellowship, a fearful moral canker that was spreading infection everywhere. Ah, we must learn to distinguish between symptoms and the real disease in the life of the Church. What are our problems today, the answers to which seem to evade and elude us year by year? Lack of missionaries, lack of ministers, lack of money, the problem of this, the problem of that - but are these the real issues, or merely the symptoms of something else, deep down in the Church's life? Root out the unhal- lowed things that are poisoning the body politic of the Kirk - whatever these may be - and the symptoms they have produced will begin to disappear like the morning dew. O for discerning eyes to see the real need.

27) 5:1-13

The apostolic censure and discipline in 3-5 is very solemn and frightening. Paul's attitude here, though severe, is based upon our Lord's own teaching. See Matthew 18:15-18. When persistent pleadings and efforts by individuals fail to correct and restrain the sinner, then excommunication is the only thing left. This may mean one of two things - either the believer is cast out of the fellowship, disowned, and barred from the privileges of membership so that by this means he might be brought to repentance, or a solemn disciplinary power given to the Church by Christ to deliver a scandalous and unrepentant sinner to Satan's power for the destruction of the flesh. That instances of this actually took place in New Testament times is clear from references such as 1 Timothy 1:20; 1 John 5:16; Acts 5:1-11 and 1 Corinthians 11:30, which speak of visitations of sickness and even of death upon believers for their sins. The Church may not have the moral courage to exercise such a solemn discipline today, but it is very possible that the Lord still does, and sets sinning saints aside and dispenses with their services when they persist in their stubborn folly, leaving them to learn the error of their ways in a waste and bitter wilderness of their own making, or even, in extreme cases - as the words in 5 seem to suggest - cutting them off by death, in order that the spirit might be saved in the day of the Lord. This is a terrible thought, but it is incontrovertibly taught in Scripture by Christ Himself.

28) 5:1-13

Paul's point in 6ff is that if the sin goes unchecked it will poison the whole fellowship and cause untold harm. This is why the exercise of the severest discipline in extirpating it is justified. The reference to the unleavened bread (8) takes us back to the Old Testament Passover story when, during the seven days of the feast, bread was eaten without leaven, symbolising the 'separateness' of God's people from all that would grieve Him. Paul means that for the Christian the whole of Christian life is the time of the feast, and all the time it should be a question of purity and sincerity and truth. Our only proper attitude, in face of the mercies of God revealed in the sacrifice of Christ our Passover, is to be perpetually free of leaven. In other words, nothing from the old life must be allowed to 'come over', lest, acting like leaven, it contaminate and vitiate the new. The Cross, rightly understood, passes a sentence of death upon everything in the old order. 'If any man be in Christ he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' (2 Corinthians 5:17)

29) 5:1-13

One last point before we leave this chapter. In 9-13 Paul is not referring to pagans who lead loose lives, and his injunction does not mean that Christians are to cut themselves off completely from non-Christians and have no association whatsoever with them. This would in fact be impossible without going out of the world altogether. We cannot avoid contact and association with unbelievers in everyday life. We must deal with the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker whatever their religious beliefs may be. Indeed, contact with them is an opportunity to win them to Christ, and we may not, on grounds of a false idea of separation, contract out of our responsibility to witness before them. We are not of the world, it is true, but we are in the world, and have been left in by Christ for a purpose. No, Paul is speaking here of discipline within the fellowship, and what he means is that when the judgment of the Church is passed upon this offending brother, individual members of the fellowship must see to it that they honour that decision, lest by associating with him still they be found to be taking sides with sin against God. This may sound like sending a man 'to Coventry', but the point is rather finer than that. For what would the alternative be, but to condone sin and, by association with him, imply that we were more 'Christian' than Christ Himself. Blasphemous thought!

30) 6:1-11

Paul is obviously shocked at the idea of a Christian going to law with another. But what exactly does he mean? This is a passage that has been subject to serious misinterpretation. It does not mean that a Christian must not use the courts of law of our land under any pretext whatever. For law and order are of God, and the powers that be are ordained of God. We are told to pray, moreover, for the powers that be, that we might live quiet lives, and this of course implies that we are to approve of them and be in subjection to them. It is therefore right and proper to claim the protection of law against evildoers. To be unwilling, on the basis of Paul's words here, to co-operate with the powers that be in the pursuance and fulfilment of their duties, is to misunderstand his teaching completely. Even Paul himself on one occasion appealed to Caesar, and claimed the protection of the supreme court of the Roman Empire against the baseless charges made against him. He availed himself of his civil privileges as a Roman citizen. What he is referring to here is the idea of Christians going to law with Christians and allowing their petty squabbles to bring the name of God into disrepute among the heathen. Such quarrels, he maintains, ought never to be submitted to any but to the Church. This position is based on our Lord's own teaching in Matthew 18:15, to which we shall turn in the next reading.

31) 6:1-11

A careful examination of chapter 6 will show that although it falls into two sections, 1-11 and 12-20, dealing with two seemingly dissociated ideas, it has nevertheless a basic connection with the subject-matter of chapter 5. For 12-20 continue the discussion of the question of immorality, in relation to the fact that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Ghost. The first part of this chapter dealing with 'going to law with one another' seems likely therefore to be related to it. The ease of immorality must surely have caused strife and had been brought before the heathen law courts. Thus Paul stops to deal with the whole question of going to law, before finishing his teaching on the issue of immorality. In our last reading we sought to clear up a misunderstanding about Paul's meaning here. He does not mean, as we pointed out, that we must have nothing to do with the forces of law and order - he himself in appealing to Caesar, availed himself of his civil privileges as a Roman citizen when baseless charges were made against him - but indicates that the idea of Christians allowing their petty squabbles to bring the name of God into disrepute by bringing them before heathen law courts is abhorrent and unthinkable. His contention that they be submitted to the Church is in line with our Lord's teaching in Matthew 18:15. This of course presupposes an authority in the Church and an endowment of wisdom in the fellowship which we do not often see today, but we may well conceive of such authority developing when spiritual vitality increases. Who indeed more fitted to guide, advise and arbitrate in difficulties than a truly spiritual Church, and to discern between the false and the true and recognise right and wrong in a difficult situation?

32) 6:1-11

Another point that emerges is: What is to be one's attitude when we are the 'wronged one'? Paul is quite unequivocal here. In 7 he says 'Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?' This is a challenge indeed! Our immediate reaction is: 'Why should I?' and Paul replies, in effect, 'For this reason - you are called to be saints, you are called to discipleship, and the way of discipleship is the way of the Cross, and this is the principle of the Cross in action. For it crosses all our natural instincts and desires, and goes as we say 'against the grain'.' That is what the Cross is about exactly. It is a practical death to our self-centredness, to our rights, desires and pride. The experience of the Cross for the Christian does not lie in the realm of mystical feelings but in the practical rough and tumble of daily life. This is the Word of the Cross (ch 1) that has power to sanctify our lives and when we receive it, it creates for us the opportunity to 'die' and to prove afresh the resurrection power of Christ through death. In the Christian experience the way to life is always through this kind of 'death'. As Jesus Himself taught, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit' (John 12:24).

33) 6:1-11

We must not miss the important lesson contained in Paul's words in 2 and 3. It is because of the high and exalted calling of the saints that it is unthinkable that they should descend so low. More than once Paul has charged the Corinthians with being spiritual children instead of mature Christians. Here he is thinking of the same thing and elaborates it. Christians must grow up, he implies, because if they fail to do so, they will fail to develop a capacity for future glory. According to Paul, Christians are destined for unimagined splendour and glory, and for service for God beyond all possible service in this life, and this life and the progress we make in it - is the training ground which is to develop and prepare us for that life. Now, this is the point - we must learn to become men and put away childish things, and attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, and having done so, begin to develop... . On the physical level, a man must attain adulthood before he begins to develop real characteristics of maturity and so it is on the spiritual level. 'What we shall hereafter be', as the hymn puts it, is determined by our development here and now of the capacity for being that. If we persist in remaining stunted and childish, it is our eternal destiny that we are affecting. We are called to live in the light of our high vocation, thus enlarging our capacity for the noble destiny that awaits us in the world to come. That is why we have to look with real sadness upon Christians who simply refuse to grow up and abandon their childish ways in spiritual life. They are forfeiting their opportunity of something big and glorious in the only world that really matters.

34) 6:12-14

It seems that at Corinth there were those who were misunderstanding and misinterpreting the whole idea of Christian liberty. (This is suggested in 9, where Paul warns them not to be deceived.) Christian liberty means freedom from sin, not freedom to sin, and the Apostle assures them that those who so indulge their sinful appetites will meet with a rude awakening on the day of the Lord. But now he turns to another aspect of Christian liberty, and one which is of the greatest importance for Christian life. Twice over, in 12, he states 'All things are lawful unto me'. Now obviously, this word must be understood in a particular way, as referring not to absolutes of right and wrong - some things in the moral realm are never lawful for the Christian. It is never right to do wrong - but to that category of things which in themselves are neither right nor wrong. There are many questions that arise in Christians' minds - and particularly young Christians in this area of life, 'Is it wrong to do this?' or 'What harm is there in that?'. Paul gives the principle here, All things are lawful, but they may not, in particular instances, be expedient in a particular context. And if a thing is not expedient, not advisable, in relation to Christian witness, then a Christian ought to avoid it. One thinks of the example of the athlete in training. It is not wrong for any man to enjoy food, and many of the sweet things that appeal to the human palate, but if a man is in training for a big race, he will certainly be ill-advised to indulge in too many sweetmeats, and he will very soon find this out when he goes on the race track; his attitude to these things must be conditioned, not by the question 'Is there anything wrong in this?' but by the race - Will they affect him in the race he is to run? So it is with the Christian; it is a question of keeping the sharp edge on one's testimony. And there are some things in this connection that had better be given a wide berth!

35) 6:12-14

Another supremely important area of Christian life is embraced in the second statement the Apostle makes in 12 concerning expediency. He adds this time, 'I will not be brought under the power of any.' This, we may say, defines the true Christian attitude to what we call the things of the world. Many people have a far too circumscribed idea of worldliness, and tabulate a few specific matters and attach this label to them. But this is to miss the real point of the Biblical position. Worldliness means anything that belongs to this world. Our work belongs to the sphere of the world, our friendships, our homes, our recreations, our pleasures, our hobbies and activities. All these things are 'of the world' in the sense that they are temporal and transient. But they are not thereby wrong because they are so. But here is Paul's point; they could become wrong if they assumed too much significance and importance in one's life. It is possible to be brought under the power of these things in the sense that they might come to dominate life, and Paul says, 'I will not be brought under the power of any.' It is scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of this principle enunciated here. God has given us richly all things to enjoy (1 Timothy 6:17) and we may by his grace enjoy them to the full, but we must beware of being brought into bondage to any of them. There are some Christians, for example, who lose their testimony through the friendships they keep. Now, friendship is not a wrong thing, it is one of God's choicest gifts, but friendship can become inordinate, and when it does, it drives men and women away from Christ. Our homes are not unlawful possessions - thank God for peaceful and comfortable homes - but many a Christian has lost ground spiritually because his home has become, in a variety of ways, a little god and come between him and Christ. But more of this in the next reading.

36) 6:12-14

It would be difficult to find a more telling expression of Paul's philosophy than the words of Hymn 441 in the Church Hymnary, and these should be read with care. 'Earth's bliss', it says, 'is to be our guide, not our chain', and for this reason even the best joys are given to us 'with wings', lest our weak heart cling to them and make them our life instead of finding our satisfaction in Christ Himself. The fact is that the most legitimate pleasures and joys of life can become a deadly snare to spiritual progress, and the higher up the aesthetic scale the truer this becomes. But even the simplest pleasures can beguile us from the simplicity that is in Christ if we are not careful, and this is why Paul is so definite here about the danger of being brought under their power. One has to become so completely detached from even the legitimate things of the world - even in our enjoyment of them - and have such a sense of balance in our Christian lives that we have complete control over every appetite and desire. That is Christian victory, and thank God there is provision for this in the gospel. 'I have learned', said Paul to the Philippians, 'in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content'. Exactly. Because contentment does not depend on what we have, but on something much more intangible and therefore much more real, the hold we have on the things that are unseen and eternal. Detachment from the things of the world, because we are so deeply and intimately attached to Christ - that is the secret.

37) 6:15-20

Paul ends the chapter by pointing out two things which when understood make acquiescence in sin of any kind impossible and intolerable for the Christian. In the first place, our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Not only does He indwell us, He is one with us, and we with Him (17), so that when we sin, be our sin immorality or anything else, we not only do so in His presence, but also drag Him into it. This is a truly terrifying thought, and is one of the best incentives for keeping the temple clean and making all its powers and functions available and ready for His use.

In the second place, we are not our own, but bought with a price. The death of Christ brings us freedom, but it is freedom from one enslavement, that of sin, to be brought into a far more complete and utter enslavement to Christ which takes from us the right to have any independent existence at all, and in which our only title to life is that we should glorify God in our bodies and spirits which are the Lord's. This echoes Paul's teaching in Romans 6, where he cries, 'How shall we, who are dead to sin, live any longer therein?' Exactly. To understand the message of the Cross aright - as apparently the Corinthians did not - is to realise that it is henceforth no longer possible to serve sin.

38) 7:1-40

There are some preliminary considerations to be dealt with in this important chapter before we turn to the details of its message. In the first place, we should not make the mistake of thinking that Paul is expounding a doctrine of Christian marriage here. He is addressing himself to a particular set of circumstances - 'in this present distress' (26), and for a true and balanced presentation of the idea of Christian marriage we must compare Scripture with Scripture and take into consideration such statements as we find in Ephesians 5:22-33 and 1 Timothy 4:3 and Hebrews 13:4, where the emphasis is more upon principles than on particular circumstances. This cannot of course mean that we can dismiss Paul's radical and seemingly forbidding statements in this chapter: but it does mean that we shall seek to understand them in the light of his teaching elsewhere. It is most unfortunate that the Apostle should have been thought to frown on marriage and regard it as an inferior state, and particularly to have been thought to teach these attitudes in this passage. What he is concerned with here is a principle, that of discipleship and devotion to Christ. His point is that any good and gracious gift of God, be it marriage or any other exalted relationship, can become an evil if it displaces Christ in our affections. If we lose sight of this we shall not understand his teaching aright.

39) 7:1-40

The second preliminary consideration is the seeming distinction Paul makes between his own teaching and Christ's. There are statements in 6, 12 and 25 which have frequently been misunderstood. There are those who openly aver that Paul is at variance with Christ in this - as in other matters - but this is to misunderstand the entire instruction of the New Testament and its meaning and calls in question the whole doctrine of inspiration itself. What we must recognise is that the epistles - whether Paul's or Peter's or James's - expound Christ's teaching, amplifying it and explaining its import, and fulfil our Lord's own promise that when the Holy Spirit was come He would take of the things of Christ and reveal them unto us. The distinction made in the verses already mentioned is between subjects that had expressly been spoken of by our Lord in His teaching ministry in the days of His flesh and subjects that were not expressly spoken of by Him, and therefore no one could point to chapter and verses, so to speak, concerning them, as they could in other matters. This does not mean that the latter were less inspired, as we can see from Christ's own words, 'I have yet many things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now. Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth is come He will guide you into all truth.' And He has. And the epistles are the proof of the other things Christ has said to His disciples through the Spirit.

40) 7:1-9

The Apostle's teaching on relationships within the marriage bond ought to be studied with greater care than is often the case. We should beware of reading more into his words than he actually says. For example he says, in 1, 'It is good' not 'It is better'. He is not making odious comparisons, nor must we. Indeed he recognises the calling of God in this, for 'every man hath his proper gift of God'. A great deal of unnecessary heart-burning and distress would be avoided if it were more clearly understood that marriage is not a right to which we are naturally entitled, but a calling from God. There are two things to be said about Paul's observations here. The first is that he recognises that this is an area of life where problems are sure to arise and it is significant that Satan enters into his reckoning. The fact is, the evil one can interfere both in celibate and in married lives in this most delicate of all human problems. The Bible teaches that there is such a thing as the 'lusts of the flesh', but the answer to this problem is neither celibacy nor marriage, but a deep and deepening experience of the Cross. The problem of order and balance in the emotional life is solved only through Christ and the marriages that prove happiest and most stable are those in which the partners have gotten the victory in this area of life before coming together and who have allowed the discipline of the Cross to do its gracious work in them in the deep places of their hearts.

41) 7:1-9

The second point we must consider before leaving this passage is whether in fact Paul's seeming leaning towards celibacy here may be due to the fact that so far as Corinth was concerned at least, almost all the evidence he had seen of spiritual declension and failure and disorder in marriage was leading him to believe that it would be good for them not to marry at all. We may see some probable support for this view in later verses of the chapter. It is unfortunately too often true that marriage does in fact blunt the keen edge of a man's or a woman's consecration, and that absorption with one another draws them away from the things of the Spirit. Paul's point is that it would be far better, in the light of eternity, that they should never marry even if it means loneliness and a continual struggle with a difficult nature, with all the frustration that involves than to enter into a union that in the end will lose them their crown. Happiness is sometimes bought at too dear a price. How much safer to put the will of God for our lives first, and to accept gladly His providential dealings with us, in the knowledge that in that will we may find perfect fulfilment and lasting peace.

42) 7:10-17

This passage deals with separation and divorce. The Biblical position is quite clear. Paul's words are in line with our Lord's, in passages such as Matthew 5:32, 19:9 and Mark 10. Separation is permissible, but that only after the utmost attempts at reconciliation have proved fruitless. Separation, however, with the possibility of re-marriage - i.e. divorce - is not, Paul is quite explicit about this in 11. For the rest, we may note that what he says does not apply to Christians who marry unbelievers. This is forbidden elsewhere in the Scriptures (2 Corinthians 6:14). What it applies to is a situation in which one partner has been converted after marriage, and here the prospects are bright with promise, for the unbelieving partner is sanctified by the other (14, 16). What this means, we believe, is that the unit God works with normally is the family, not the individual, and that in saving one member He has a purpose of grace for the other also. The other is not automatically saved, neither are the children, but they are all alike brought within the promise and covenant of God so that by prayer and faithful testimony (see also 1 Peter 3:1) they may finally be won to Christ. This then is the new believer's first missionary responsibility - to seek to win one's partner in life and home to Christ, conscious that one has the encouragement of God Himself in this and His assurance that He will hear the prayers that are offered with such earnestness and longing.

43) 7:10-17

Paul's injunction not to depart from an unbelieving partner may be taken other than in a literal way. There is the wife who, to all intents and purposes, 'leaves' her husband by scarcely ever being at home because of her many Christian interests and commitments. She is, we think, little likely to win her husband to Christ because she has so little contact with him. And there is the husband who gives most of his time after working hours to Christian interests to the neglect of his unbelieving wife, depriving her of the companionship, help and comfort he pledged to give her when he married her. Doubtless there are difficulties and tensions in the home where one partner remains an unbeliever but we may not contract out of marital responsibilities because of this. Christian work and service simply become in this regard an escape from an unpleasant atmosphere, the expression of one's determination to avoid the hard discipline entailed in witnessing at home. In 1 Peter 3:1, 2, Peter speaks of husbands being won by the 'chaste conversation' of their wives, i.e. by the Christ-like quality of their demeanour and conduct. The operative words are 'while they behold...'. But how are husbands to behold this if wives spend all their time out of the home? 'Let not the wife depart', says Paul. Marital neglect on the part of either husband or wife is one of the major hindrances - and understandably so - to conversion. Husband, wife, had you thought of this possibility?

44) 7:18-24

The principle underlying Paul's words in the last reading is now seen to be of wide application. It is expressed fully in 24 - 'Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God.' There are several points here to note. In the first place, we gather again that Paul regards marriage as a calling, and therefore the married Christian must remain within the marriage bond, and faithful to its duties and responsibilities. To have an unbelieving partner is never an excuse for avoiding the responsibilities of one's calling. Next, Paul illustrates this further with reference to the rite of circumcision and to slavery - the principle is the same in each case. When a man is converted he is not to assume that he must change his work or sphere. God does not ordinarily save a man to take him out of his normal sphere, but means that he should exercise a Christian influence in that sphere. Many make this mistake and it is a serious one, and sometimes, sadly enough, it is fleshly discontent with his lot rather than any sense of a divine call, or even an unwillingness to face the disciplines involved in maintaining a faithful witness there, that makes a man want to change his place. No, says the Apostle, we may not change; we may not abandon our place until we know the divine will. As someone has said, 'When in doubt, don't'. For every situation, however unpromising, may be used for Christ. This is a hard lesson for some to learn. But to receive it will lead to contentment with one's lot, and will thereby help the Holy Spirit to use us there.

45) 7:25-35

Paul comes to the heart of the matter in these verses. 'Present distress' in 26 is thought by some to refer to a particular situation in Corinth, but it may be nearer the truth to place this phrase alongside another in 29, 'the time is short'. Together they set in contrast the 'now' of this life with the 'then' of eternity. As Christians we must live in the light of eternity and this must condition all our relationships, bringing us into an experience of detachment in which we live without carefulness (32) and serve the Lord without distraction (35). This is the one right attitude, whether in marriage or in any other department of life - complete detachment, coming from the realisation that we are made for the Lord and that the true meaning of life is realised and fulfilled in attachment to Him alone. When this is grasped and accepted and established in our lives, nothing will have power to distract us or preoccupy our souls. Detachment in face of the approaching consummation at Christ's return - to have wives as though they had them not - to suffer sorrow as though they sorrowed not - to sit light to the extremes of joy or sorrow - to enjoy all that God gives and yet be conscious and sure that the true fountain of life does not lie there but in Him - it is to this that Paul was calling the Corinthians by the application of the discipline of the Cross to the whole of their natural life. What a glorious way to live: This is victory indeed!

46) 7:36-40

The concluding passage of this chapter is difficult to understand and there have been varying interpretations of it. Some think that the man referred to is the parent or guardian of the girl and that the question revolves round the matter of giving her permission to marry. If he feels he is not doing the proper thing by her in refusing to allow her to marry, then, says the Apostle, let the permission be given; it is not wrong to do so. Others, however, think that it refers to a man betrothed to a woman and who is wondering in the light of Paul's teaching whether he ought to marry her. In this sense then Paul's advice is clear: J.B. Phillips' translation brings this out well: 'If any man feels he is not behaving honourably towards the woman he loves, especially as she is beginning to lose her first youth, and the emotional strain is considerable, let him do what his heart tells him to do - let them be married, there is no sin in that.' Whichever interpretation be right - and neither is free from difficulty - the whole question is a delicate one, and it is perhaps a salutary experience that such forthright statements as these Paul makes here should confront us on a day when so much casual and even careless thinking is done, and often unthinking action taken with such disastrous consequences. This much we may surely gather, a Christian people had better make very sure in their hearts before God that He has called them to marriage before rushing precipitately into it.

47) 8:1-6

The next problem Paul deals with is Christian liberty, which faced the Corinthians in the matter of eating meats that had been offered as sacrifice to idols. The important thing to realise is that the Apostle is continuing as in previous chapters to apply the message of the Cross to the whole question. All along he has been maintaining that only in a right relation to the Cross can there be any hope of order and fullness in the Christian life. He now adopts the same procedure in the matter of meats offered to idols. This is a question which is not a living issue for us now, but one can very easily see that it reflects other matters which are indeed living issues for many Christians today. 'Am I, as a Christian, free to do this? Ought I, as a Christian, to go there?' These are the questions that offer a real parallel for us, Now in Corinth there were on the one hand an enlightened, liberally-minded group - those who had knowledge (1, 2) - saw no harm in eating meats offered to idols, and on the other a strict and perhaps legally minded section who had real scruples about the matter. Two such widely differing views would obviously be a source of considerable disturbance within any fellowship, and the Apostle's advice was sought as to which attitude was to prevail. There are therefore important lessons for us to learn from this. And, by the way of introduction to them, we must remember once again that Paul is really dealing with matters here which are not intrinsically wrong in themselves but could be or become wrong in certain situations. It is important to realise this, and to recognise on the other hand that there are some matters concerning which a Christian must certainly say, 'It is not right for any Christian to do that.' There are some things which are wrong in themselves whether our conscience condemns us in them or not. The moral law is an objective reality whether our conscience bears witness to it or not and it is an extremely dangerous doctrine to assume that something is only wrong if our conscience condemns us about it. This distinction must be remembered when we think about Christian liberty. No Christian has liberty to sin and break the moral law of God.

48) 8:7-13

The question of eating meats offered to idols was a very real one in Corinth for this reason: it was almost impossible to avoid eating such meat if they were going to have any social life at all, for almost all the meat that was bought in the markets had in fact been contaminated, so to speak, by being previously offered to idols. And the question of the idols was a deeply disturbing one for scrupulous consciences. The enlightened minds saw that idols were nothing but false gods and that therefore there could be no real contamination of the meat; they were free to eat as they pleased. This is the ideal. A Christian is set free from the bondage of false gods and is set at liberty. But, says Paul, not every child of God has this knowledge, and the enlightened believer must remember that, set free though he be, he is not free to exercise a harmful influence on his weaker brothers. He must remember that he does not live unto himself, but influences others around him. He must therefore take into consideration what effect his own actions may have on those weaker brothers, for, following his example, a weaker Christian may eat the meat and because he has scruples about it will defile his conscience, and he may be seriously led astray. Therefore, says Paul, the liberty of the strong Christian has become a stumbling-block to the weak. This must not be. The liberty of the strong must necessarily be conditioned by consideration of love and compassion for the weak. That is to say, Christian liberty in practice is generally much more restricted than it is in theory. We must, for the sake of the weaker brother, 'live a life outwardly at least a good deal narrower than our moral strength requires'.

49) 8:7-13

This whole question is dealt with more fully by Paul in Romans 14, and it will be useful to turn to that chapter now, to see the principles he enunciates for our guidance in 'doubtful matters'. First of all, in 14:5, he says, 'Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind' - that is, let him think things through for himself, as distinct from being conditioned by prejudice. Next, in 14:14, 'There is nothing unclean of itself' - here of course, as we have before pointed out, he is referring to things that are morally neutral, and which in certain circumstances might become wrong for the Christian. Thirdly, in 14:21, 'It is good neither to eat flesh nor to drink wine nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth'. Fourthly, in 14:22, 'Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. Fifthly, 'He that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith; for whatsoever is not of faith is sin'. When in doubt, says Paul, don't. And finally, in 15:1-3, 'We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves... for Christ pleased not Himself'. Happy is the man who enshrines these basic principles of Christian conduct in his deepest heart and allows them to condition and shape his whole life. Real strength of character is manifested best not in the expression of liberty, but in its curtailment for love's sake.

50) 9:1-3

Paul now proceeds to illustrate what he has been saying in chapter 8 about Christian liberty from his own experience, and what he says really flows from 8:13 - 'Wherefore if meat make my brother to offend.' He speaks in this chapter of another liberty which he had voluntarily sacrificed to the gospel - his right to live by the gospel. He had abstained from claiming support at the hands of the Corinthians (although he received support from other fellowships) because of the possibility of being thought to be seeking gain from his work. But this very action had been misinterpreted by his critics as an admission of inferiority to the rest of the apostles and was being used to belittle and repudiate his authority as an apostle. This he deals with in chapter 9:11-14 stating his rights and authority, 15-27 the principle of sacrifice that guided all his living; 3 refers to 1 and 2 not to the verses following it, and should read, 'That what is said in 1, 2 - is my answer to them that examine me'. It is sad, is it not, that Paul should have found himself in the position of having to defend himself before men who owed him so much. Of all men that might have disliked him or criticised him, they had least justification for doing so, for they were in fact the seal of his apostleship in the Lord. The very fact that there was a Christian Church in Corinth was due to him and to the authority he had received from the Lord. That indeed is an answer commanding enough to silence all criticism!

51) 9:4-14

Paul proceeds with his argument. The other apostles had support and maintenance; they ate and drank (4) at the expense of the Church, and had maintenance for their wives also (5). Were Paul and Barnabas denied this? Next, he appeals to the ordinary facts of human experience. He takes a threefold illustration (7) - the soldier gets his keep and his pay; the husbandman partakes of the fruit of the vine; the shepherd lives on the produce of his flock. The practice of the Christian Church is only sensible after all, and is a natural arrangement. But more, it is taught also in the law of God (8-10). God's care for the oxen that tread out the corn is an indication that His care for His servants will not be less but more. He ordains a reward for labour. Next Paul refers to their treatment of other spiritual teachers (12). If others were maintained, how much more should he, to whom they owed so much. Finally, he cites the example and illustration of the Jewish priesthood, and the ordained word of the Lord in this matter that they who preach the Gospel should live by it. These are the inalienable rights of the apostleship, and the right of every servant of God, in the eyes of God.

52) 9:15-18

Paul now turns to the principle of sacrifice which motivated all his living. He tells us in these verses that he voluntarily restricted his rights and his freedom as an apostle for the gospel's sake. 'I have surrendered my right', he says. This is the practical outworking of the principle of the Cross in a man's life. Indeed, that ultimately is the only right we have - to surrender all rights for His dear sake. The words he speaks about the constraint of the gospel upon his soul are deeply moving, and we may well ask ourselves whether this in fact is the motive that controls our witness and service for Christ. For sometimes another motive lies behind self-denial, although this sounds like a contradiction in terms. It is possible to promote habits of self-denial as we are accustomed to speak of them from subtle self-regarding considerations, and this, we fear, is the explanation of that narrowness of life that is unlovely and forbidding, and produces a remoteness and inaccessibility in a man which is far from reflecting the grace and gentleness of Christ. As C.S. Lewis would put it, when self-denial becomes a god and an idol, it turns into a demon. There are some Christians more interested in self-denial than they are in Christ. O let us beware of allowing our self-denial to pander to our religious ego and become a subtle and dangerous form of self-assertion!

53) 9:19-23

These are tremendous words. In them we see a man whose whole personality was subdued to the gospel in a total self-abnegation which knew no bounds or limits. This is how much his Christian liberty was limited by the law of love. It was to this that the constraint of the gospel led him. Paul does not mean that he sacrificed his Christian principles in order to reach men - that were unthinkable - but that he was prepared to go to any lengths, short of compromising his position, in seeking to bring men to Christ. Why should I be restricted in my Christian freedom? Why should I be conditioned by the weak brother? My rights? My privileges? Not so did Paul speak. He gladly embraced all possible limitations because that was what Christ did when He became man for our sakes. Have we ever thought of the restriction Christ voluntarily placed on His holy freedom by being born in a manger? He made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross. Who are we, in face of this, to talk about our rights and freedom? 'Don't talk to me of liberties' cries Paul, 'I am free with the freedom of Christ, but the constraint of love is upon me and my freedom I gladly lay on the altar. This I do for the gospel's sake.' We had better know what we are about before we come too near to this chapter. There is a holy fire burning in the Apostle's words. And it will do one of two things to us - either it will burn or scorch us - or else ignite us!

54) 9:24-27

Paul now adds a compelling reason why the principle of sacrifice must be adopted in the Christian life. There is a danger, if it is not, of becoming 'castaway'. This word does not, as has sometimes been supposed, refer to the loss of salvation - all the weight of Scriptural evidence indicates that this is an impossibility - but it does speak of the possibility of a Christian being 'disqualified', in the sense referred to in chapter 3. It is particularly solemn to realise that such a mighty giant as Paul should consider this to be a possibility in his own life. What a warning against complacency: he uses two illustrations from athletics to make his point. Of course a man may be free to do this or that, but a man who has a race or a fight in view will voluntarily and gladly deny himself the right and pleasure of indulging in sweet foods for the sake of the prize before him. And will there be less discipline, less temperance (in the truest sense of that term) in the Christian than in the athlete? Is the man who is to play in a football match going to show a better example of discipline and temperance than a Christian is going to show for the gospel's sake? It is to the shame of the Church of Christ that sportsmen should be prepared to discipline their bodies for a corruptible crown in a way that Christians are not prepared to do for Christ's sake. Liberty in Christ is one thing; but we need to beware lest by giving free rein to our liberty we lead ourselves into a new bondage and lose our crown. George Matheson says, 'I give Thee back the life I owe...'. That is the only safe way. Even our liberty in Christ must bear the marks of the Cross.

55) 10:1-13

The subject of this passage continues the thought of 9:27 - disqualification. It is as if Paul were saying, 'Look what happened to the Israelites of old - that is an illustration of what I mean, and is a warning to all who fail to keep their body under, and bring it into subjection'. There is a great deal here for our learning. Notice first of all the repetition of the word 'all' in 1-4, and how it is set over against the 'many' in 5. Paul is making a distinction between those among the Israelites who were faithful to God and those who were not. The fact that they were all Israelites, and within the covenant, did not mean that they could afford to be complacent and careless in their lives, and when they made this fatal mistake, they suffered dearly for it. They were overthrown in the wilderness. Paul's point here - and he is thrusting it home to the Corinthians and to us - is that privilege entails responsibility. The Israelites were a favoured people, they had the privilege of the Covenant, they were given spiritual meat and drink, but when the responsibilities that always accompany such privileges were neglected they incurred the displeasure of the Lord - and were disqualified from entering into the Promised Land. They lost, not their salvation, but their reward. This, says Paul, is written as an example to us (6, 11). Their history is meant to teach us, to save us from the pitfalls in which they came to grief. O for grace to learn from what is recorded for our warning and admonition.

56) 10:1-13

We should not miss the import of Paul's language here as he refers to the experience of the Israelites. There are those who teach that in the Old Testament, God's blessings to His people were material blessings - that God gave Israel the land, prospered them in the kingdom of Israel and so on - whereas in the New Testament His blessings are spiritual. But this is to misunderstand and misinterpret the Scriptures as we may learn from this passage. Paul specifically indicates that the Israelites received spiritual blessings, and that they had experience of Christ in the wilderness. We do not suggest that what we read of here was not really historical - of course it was, but it was history with a difference. When Moses smote the rock and water gushed forth, it quenched their physical thirst, but according to Paul that was not all that happened. They also drank spiritual water. These Old Testament histories are therefore sacramental as well, they symbolise something spiritual. Christ was there meeting with His people. When they passed through the Red Sea, it was not only a physical deliverance, it was a spiritual experience. We must at all costs conserve the idea that the Israelites had true spiritual experience of Christ in the wilderness, and if we cannot accept this we are simply denying the doctrine of the Trinity. For the doctrine of the Trinity means that Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son of the Father, co-eternal with the Father, and if so, then it is as true to say that He was in the wilderness with His people as it is to say that Jehovah was with them. A great deal of impoverishment, not to say misunderstanding, has come to our interpretation of the Scriptures because we have not recognised that Jesus Christ was operating in Old Testament history. There are few chapters more important than this one as a key to the correct interpretation of the Old Testament.

57) 10:1-13

There are two further points before we pass on. One is that Paul is obviously comparing the sins of the Israelites, lust, idolatry, fornication, unbelief, murmuring, with what was happening in Corinth, the ambitions, jealousies, and bickerings, and saying to them, 'Look what happened to the Israelites when they sinned as you are sinning, and beware. This could happen to you.' The other point is the tremendous word about temptation in 13. The explanation of this sudden reference to temptation may lie in the supposition that the Corinthians were making excuses to Paul for falling thus into sin. 'You do not know our circumstances. Look at the cesspool of iniquity in which we have to live, and the pressures that constantly surround us. Is it not understandable that we should be falling into sin and idolatry? Everything is weighing against us.' 'No,' says Paul, 'that will not do. There are no special circumstances. Temptation is common to man. Furthermore, God is faithful, Who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able.' That there is great comfort and encouragement in that word we need not doubt, but we should not miss the terrific challenge it brings to us, for it tells us there is never any need for sin. When we go down under in time of temptation, it is always true to say that we need not have gone down. We say, 'I could not hold out any longer.' But God says, 'You could have, and you should have'. When we fall, we do so in the presence of a way of escape. What is this way of escape? The Cross, which Paul has been preaching throughout this epistle, and that in a twofold way, in that it deals both with the inward 'fifth column' in our hearts to which every temptation makes its appeal, and also with the outward enemy, Satan, who originates the plot to bring us down. It is all a question of accepting the Cross. Every time we sin we are voting against the Cross as a principle of living.

58) 10:14-22

The stark command in 14 to 'flee idolatry' should suffice to convince us that the adoption of the Cross as a principle of life is not an elevated mystical experience but a firm and forcible turning away from sin. God points out, as it were, the way of escape (13) and says, 'Now run for your life'. It will not be surprising that we fall if we dally needlessly with temptation. Now Paul goes on to point out that there is a complete incompatibility between Christian and idolatrous feasts. 'Beware', he says, 'lest the liberty you assume you have to eat meats finally leads you to complicity with idols and destroys you.' His argument is that those who eat of the sacrifice, whether spiritual or heathen, inevitably identify themselves with the altar and with its meaning. This was true in the Old Testament with Israel and therefore as a principle it is true also with regard to the Gentile sacrifices. To eat those meats is to associate oneself with the evil spirits to which they are offered. This is morally impossible for the Christian, he cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils (21); to do so would provoke the Lord to jealousy, for He yearns for the entire devotion of our hearts. He will not brook any rivals. We must therefore flee from the poisonous atmosphere of the evil one. For us it must be either the one or the other, never both. To come to the Lord's Table is a profession that we have come out from the world. Therefore, says Paul, live up to the profession you make!

59) 10:23-33

Paul sums up these verses by repeating the basic principles which must guide all our conduct. Our Christian liberty (all things are lawful, 23) must be conditioned by our concern for others (24). On the one hand we must not be over-scrupulous. Some Christians in fact are, and this leads them into a fearful bondage, and into an unhealthy morbidity which paralyses the spiritual life. Don't ask too many fussy questions about the meat offered you at a feast. But on the other hand, if an issue is made of the matter, and if the meat is expressly declared to have been offered in sacrifice - and, remember, this may be done just to test you, or embarrass you - you must be quite firm. You must not eat. Not because it would be bad for you, for you know that it cannot harm you, but because it might be bad for a weaker brother present, and bad for those who thus tempt you. 'Give none offence', says the Apostle. That is, do not allow your liberty in these things to become a stumbling block either to a weak brother or to an unbeliever, who may be watching you far more closely than you imagine. We must live, he concludes, to the glory of God (31) and this will mean putting others before self, not seeking our own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

60) 11:1-16

This chapter brings us to something that was then, and is now, a difficult and perplexing problem, the place of women in the Church, and the order of worship with regard to women in the fellowship. One preliminary consideration must first be faced. It is often asserted nowadays by modern commentators that Paul was writing to a particular situation and at a particular time, and that although what he said was God's instruction to that fellowship in their particular environment, we ought not to assume that what he says is binding on all Christians in every age. This is a dangerous assumption to make and might well be applied in principle to other matters, to the peril of true doctrine. It has indeed been applied to our Lord's attitude to the Scriptures and to His teaching about hell, and scholars refer to the 'time-bound-ness' of Jesus and aver that He was simply accommodating Himself to the views that were currently held in His day. But this is to involve the integrity of His character and we must not allow them any such licence. They also say that Christ was a child of His time, and was limited by the ideas of His time, but this is even more dangerous, for how, if this were true, could we be sure He was right in anything He said? No; this attitude is an unwarrantable one, and we must look in a different direction for a resolution of the problems that face us in this chapter.

61) 11:1-16

Paul is dealing with Christian conduct in public worship. He has obviously heard of irregularities in the fellowship at Corinth, and some 'emancipated' women have been dispensing with the veil on their heads when coming to Church. This he now proceeds to deal with. There are several points here. The reason why a covered head dishonours a man (4) is that in Jewish worship a man did wear a veil as a token that he could not commune with God face to face and live (cf 2 Corinthians 3:14, 'the veil untaken away'). But the whole message of the gospel is that the veil is taken away in Christ, and that in Christ a man can have communion with God face to face. For a Christian man therefore to cover himself in worship would be a symbol which denied the truth of the gospel. This is why men take hats off when they enter Church. The reason however for a woman having her head covered is different. Certainly in Corinth, an unveiled woman would be thought of as a loose woman, and her appearance thus in Church would outrage modesty and a sense of propriety, but there is something deeper than local colour here, as we may see in 10. It is difficult to see how Paul's words about having 'power on her head because of the angels' (whatever this may mean) could be taken as simply referring to some local situation. Indeed, it follows from what he says in 9 about the fundamental relationship between man and woman in the divine order of creation and must therefore have a basic and timeless validity, and to this we shall turn in the next Note.

62) 11:1-16

There are two differing interpretations given to 10. One is that it refers to the 'sign' of authority on the woman's head - that is, she covers her head with the veil as a sign that she submits to the authority of her husband. But scholars object to this by saying that the Greek word will not bear such a meaning. On the contrary, they say that 'power' refers to her long hair, which is spoken of in 15 as her 'glory'. (Remember, Samson's long hair was his 'power' and 'glory', and the symbol of his anointing.) In the same way, the very thing which is the symbol of her subjection to man is the sign of her beauty and power and glory as a woman. There may be a hidden significance in this, that the more womanly a woman is, in the sense of being subject to her husband, the more completely she fulfils her destiny in God's sight and attains to His plan and purpose for her in the world.

This brings us to the underlying principle in all Paul is teaching here, the true Biblical relationship between man and woman. Here, and elsewhere, the principle of subjection is plainly taught. In the divine order of creation the man is the head of the woman and the woman is subject to the man. This does not mean, however, as some think, that Paul is saying that the woman is inferior to the man. In God's sight indeed, man and woman are equal in dignity but there is a differentiation of function. It is this functional difference of which Paul speaks here. There are womanly functions, and manly functions, and, as indicated above, a woman achieves her truest destiny when she remains within these and does not invade those that are divinely allocated to her partner.

63) 11:1-16

We add a note here from Readings on this passage by the Rev. William Still: 'Paul freely allows that some may argue on questions of women in the Church and their subjection. But those who do need to know what they are about. We are surprised that so many young women, having been shown this Scripture or having seen it themselves, do not take it more seriously. The man is the head of the woman, as Christ is the head of the Church. This is why modesty and subjection rather than absolute silence is the guide for women in the fellowship. A woman may sit in a prayer meeting in silence, but be anything but subject in her mind, whereas she may open her mouth in prayer and confirm her subjection, glorifying the Lord by the grace and brevity of her utterance. We do not like to hear women opening a session of prayer, nor do we think women should take the major part, nor do we wish our faithful women to be offended by this; for they sometimes come to the rescue of a meeting when the men to their shame sit silent. We think the man should pray before the women, but how we sympathise with a woman who waits and waits and then breaks out herself. God used women to do men's work in the Bible only when men refused to be men. Given true modesty and subjection, a woman may surely use her discretion in the Lord. We think therefore that she should not ignore the hair and hat question, for even if it is only an outward sign, there are more than men to be considered. We are told in 10 that the angels are watching and may be offended. He, and she, that hath ears to hear, let them hear!'

64) 11:17-22

These verses indicate that at Corinth, and doubtless in the early Church in general, the Sacrament was not simply a token meal as it is now with us, but also embodied an actual meal, which was called the love-feast. It is this that is the object of Paul's concern here. This meal was obviously a social occasion for the fellowship, culminating in the gracious and blessed remembrance of our Lord's death. But excesses of the worst kind had entered in at Corinth to mar the fellowship and to desecrate the solemn ceremony that followed. Some kind of class distinction seems to have entered in which richer members brought their own food and ostentatiously ate it in an undignified scramble. The poorer members went hungry, and some of the rich became drunken! This, in a fellowship that prided itself on its superior spiritual gifts: these excesses verged on the blasphemous, and Paul does not spare them in his denouncement of them. It is perhaps not without significance that this idea of the 'love-feast' has died out in the Church, and it may be a useful and significant pointer to the dangers of what we sometimes call 'social fellowship' within the Church and the deterioration in spiritual relations that it can bring in its wake. Paul says, 'Your houses are the places for that kind of fellowship', and we think he has spoken a word here full of wisdom and insight. Of course, it is in our homes, rather than in the house of God that such social intercourse best takes place. This is a ministry that only some, not all Christians, have seen the significance of, and in this connection we venture to suggest that if more homes were homes, as distinct from places to eat and sleep in, the so-called problem of youth might be a far less serious one than it appears to be. Some families create their own youth problem because they have failed to supply what is needful in security and interest in their homes for their youngsters. It is scarcely surprising that they should become difficult, disaffected and finally unmanageable.

65) 11:23-34

The words of the institution of the Lord's Supper, so familiar and dear to us, are here made the basis of one of the most solemn and terrible warnings in all the Scriptures. The Supper is so solemn just because the possibility of its abuse is so serious a matter. It is possible to eat and drink unworthily, says the Apostle (27), and this is to be guilty of the body and blood of our Lord. This is akin to crucifying Him afresh (see Hebrews 6:6), and brings summary judgment upon those who do so. 'For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep': these awesome words can only mean what they say. All sickness and suffering are of course not due to our own sin, but we need to be sure in our own hearts when we are afflicted that the cause is not in our own sin and unfaithfulness. Paul expressly attributes the sickness and even death of some in Corinth to their shameful abuse of the Lord's Table. Since this is so, and since eating and drinking unworthily is viewed with such seriousness, it is all the more remarkable that in our denomination we have contrived to create a situation in which far more people are liable to eat and drink unworthily than should be the case. For it has become the habit for casual and indifferent churchgoers to make an occasional appearance at Church on Communion Sunday 'to keep their names on the Church Roll', and often Communion Sunday is the only Sunday we see them in Church at all. But the very Sunday they should stay away is Communion Sunday; it is the very last day they should think of coming to Church. For how can they eat and drink worthily if they have been neglecting the ordinances of the Word for weeks and months previously?

66) 12:1-3

The last words of Chapter 11 and the opening words here indicate a new subject - spiritual gifts, or 'the spiritualities', as opposed to the 'carnal problems' that have already been dealt with. Here also, in this realm, there were problems for the Corinthians for they were apparently ignorant (1) of the fact that in the spirit-world there are evil as well as good spirits. This is the reality lying behind the somewhat cryptic words of 3. What Paul refers to is almost certainly the spiritual gift of 'speaking in tongues'. (He deals with it more fully in chapter 14, and it will be helpful, for a general background to the subject, to read the relevant passages there). 'Speaking in tongues' is one of the accredited gifts of the Spirit, it is true, but the point Paul is making is that gifts can fall into the hands of Satan, and especially a gift of this nature. For 'speaking in tongues' refers to ecstatic utterance, and where there is ecstasy there may be excess. It is possible to be carried away in this gift by alien spirits, and this it seems, is what was happening in Corinth. Some had, in fact, been calling Jesus accursed in unknown ecstatic tongue, and Paul points out sharply that this cannot be a mark of the Holy Spirit, but of an evil spirit. Some were not sure about this, thinking that everything said under the impress of such ecstasy must necessarily be 'spiritual' and therefore good and holy - a mistake commonly made even today - and were overawed by it. No, says the Apostle, there is an evil 'spirituality' as well as the good. Try the spirits, whether they be of God. As we would say, 'All is not gold that glitters.'

67) 12:4-11

The point of this passage, which has as its subject matter the idea of diversity in unity in the operations and gifts of the Spirit of God, is to underline the fact that the gifts possessed by the Corinthians were surely in the hands of an evil spirit, since they had produced not unity but dissension in the fellowship. Now, says Paul, this is to misunderstand, not to say adulterate, their purpose. The gifts, however diverse, must be in unity, harmonising with one another, complementary to one another, not competing with one another, just as there is unity within the Godhead, Spirit (4), Lord (5), and God (6). God is behind all. He giveth severally, as He will (11), for His own purposes and for His glory. He is the Commander-in-Chief, Who knows the overall plan, and requires that the several gifts should work in unity for the fulfilment of His purposes. It was the tragedy in Corinth that they were all vying with one another, instead of contributing to the profit of the work and the fellowship. One lesson for us is surely plain. We need to recognise different functions even within the evangelical pattern. If a man is fully persuaded about what God has given him to do, and is doing it to some purpose, let us not try to interfere with him because he does not happen to conform to our own ideas of how things should be done. As someone has said, 'It is like butting one's head against a stone wall to try to change a fellowship which God has founded and is blessing. It is not the wall that is hurt'.

68) 12:12-27

A fellowship, maintains the Apostle, is not a conglomeration of individuals, but an organism, a body working in harmony in each of its parts, and each contributing its share to the common life of the whole. No member can do without the other. This is a passage rich in instruction, not least in the fine distinction it makes between the equality in dignity and status of God's people and the difference in function that each has in His purposes. It is this that should effectively destroy the feelings of scorn or contempt that some members might have for others, and any attitude of superiority over or of being more important than, their fellows. No one in God's family is more important than another, for each is precious in His sight. And even if one piece of work seems more important than another, it is not really so in the absolute sense, since it is only one part of a whole in which each part has its own strategic and even unique importance. Differentiation of function, not superiority or inferiority, is the point. A true appreciation of this should also serve to deliver some from the cramping and almost paralysing sense of inferiority that colours all their experience because it has not been given to them to serve God in certain ways. No one should grieve or pine because of this, for we cannot be more useful to God than He chooses to make us. And if we serve Him with all our might in ways that we can, He will not hold it against us for failing to serve Him in ways that we cannot. This is perhaps why Paul stresses the necessity of the seemingly more feeble members (22), for it is precisely they who, because of discouragement or inferiority at not being able to do great things, might be tempted to think there was little use doing the lesser things and thus neglect them, to the hurt and detriment of the whole purpose of God. Some instruments in a great orchestral work have only a few notes to play in the entire piece. But what impoverishment to the performance - not to say disruption! - if these notes were missed out!

69) 12:28-31

There is an important lesson for us here in the order of precedence Paul gives to the various gifts. The first three have to do with the Word, and 'after that, miracles, gifts of healing', and the gift of tongues comes last. We suppose there will always be those who will be more attracted to the latter than to the former and be preoccupied with the excitement and spectacle involved in miracles, healings and tongues rather than with the Word, but at least we should see from this chapter that when this is so, the attraction is not spiritual but fleshly. Not only so, one of the disquieting things in modern Church life is the contemporary preoccupation with healing ministry to the virtual exclusion of any real emphasis upon the growth and development of spiritual life through the teaching of the Word. We find it very strange, not to say a matter for great concern, that fellowships should become so enthusiastic about healing without any corresponding concern for evangelical, expository ministry. Is the healing of the body, then, of more importance than the saving of the soul? This betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the teaching of the Scriptures and of the work of the Gospel and can do nothing but harm ultimately to the life of the Church. In the New Testament we see, it is true, evidences of a healing ministry, but the miracles there performed were incidental to the main movement of the work of the Spirit and the early Church took them in its stride, and at no point became preoccupied with them. For them, what was of supreme importance was the preaching of the Word. To take therefore what essentially was incidental and make of it the central concern of one's life and ministry is to distort the New Testament pattern. And this is always fraught with peril.

70) 13:1-13

These famous words speak of a more excellent way than any preoccupation with gifts can offer. 'There is something higher and greater', says the Apostle, 'than tongues, or prophecy, miracles or healing, and that is love.' Familiarity with this chapter tends to lose for us not only its beauty, but also its terrific challenge. Rightly understood this is one of the most uncomfortable and disturbing passages in the whole Bible. There are two things that we must remember in reading it. In the first place Paul is putting this forward as his answer to the disorders and divisions in Corinth. It is surely obvious that what he says here would finally answer all the envying and bitterness and jealousy and malice among them 'love envieth not, vaunteth not itself'. Secondly - and this is of fundamental importance - Paul is intent, throughout the epistle, on expounding the doctrine of the Cross, and unless we understand this passage as an expression of the practical outworking of the message of the Cross, we have not understood it as Paul meant it to be. Love is not a spasmodic grace, and we err greatly when we sometimes speak as if it were something easy. The fallacy is to confuse it with the occasional generosity that we all feel in particular circumstances towards people to whom we may feel well disposed. No, love is not a natural grace at all, but something planted by the finger of God in a renewed heart. It is only crucified people who can love, and the measure in which we have died to sin and self is the measure in which we can truly love.

71) 13:1-3

In the first three verses Paul teaches from a negative standpoint what life is without love, and it is clear that a Christian life without love is a life without hope. It is very startling to see the implications which he places before us here. It is possible, he indicates, for a life to be endowed with any or many or all of these gifts and yet be devoid of love, and therefore be nothing in the sight of God. Notice two things. Firstly, the word that comes to mind when we read 'sounding brass or tinkling cymbal' is 'metallic'. There are people to whose spiritual experience you can apply exactly that word - there is a hard and even harsh note about it, forbidding and unattractive. Ah, where love is, above all else there is warmth, and the sweet savour of the Spirit of God goes out from it. No impressive possession of gifts can ever compensate for the lack of this basic Christian grace (2). In the second place, the whole question of motive is brought before us with a devastating challenge. Certainly it is possible to bestow all our goods to feed the poor from the pure motive of love, and people have been known to love like that, but Paul implies that this can be done without love, and if so, then there must be some other motive. Take the simple action of tossing a coin to the beggar in the street - the illustration Henry Drummond takes in 'The Greatest Thing in the World' - as a case in point. Why do we do it? To ease our conscience perhaps? Because if we walk past without giving him anything we shall feel uncomfortable? But what sort of motive is that? Is that love? We are not interested in love, or in the beggar, but in ourselves. It is not love, but self-love that has activated us. To purchase relief for our uncomfortable consciences is simply another form of self-love and self-centredness. It is possible to make sacrifices for other than motives of love. So-called self-sacrifice may often be more accurately named self-expression! Of which more in the next Note.

72) 13:1-3

C.S. Lewis has an amusingly devastating passage in his book, 'The Four Loves' which we take the liberty of including here as a further comment on yesterday's reading. Speaking of the kind of person who 'lives for others' he goes on: 'She did all the washing; true, she did it badly, and they could have afforded to send it out to a laundry, and they frequently begged her not to do it. But she did. There was always a hot lunch for anyone who was at home and always a hot meal at night (even in midsummer). They implored her not to provide this. They protested almost with tears in their eyes (and with truth) that they liked cold meals. It made no difference. She was living for her family. She always sat up to 'welcome' you home if you were out late at night; two or three in the morning, it made no odds; you would always find the frail, pale, weary face awaiting you, like a silent accusation. Which meant of course that you couldn't with any decency go out very often.... As she so often said, she would work her fingers to the bone for her family. They couldn't stop her. Nor could they, being decent people, quite sit still and watch her do it. They had to help. Indeed they were always having to help. That is, they did things for her to help her to do things for them which they didn't want done.... Can she really have been quite unaware of the countless frustrations and miseries she inflicted on her family? It passes belief. She knew - of course she knew that it spoiled your whole evening to know that when you came home you would find her uselessly, accusingly, 'sitting up for you'. She continued all these practices because if she dropped them she would have been faced with the fact she was determined not to see; would have known that she was not necessary. That is the first motive. Then too, the very laboriousness of her life silenced her secret doubts as to the quality of her love. The more her feet burned and her back ached, the better, for this pain whispered in her ear 'How much I must love them if I do all this!' That is the second motive. But I think there is a lower depth, the unappreciativeness of the others, those terrible wounding words - anything will 'wound' such an one - in which they begged her to send the washing out, enabled her to feel ill-used, therefore, to have a continual grievance, to enjoy the pleasures of resentment. If anyone says he does not know these pleasures he is a liar or a saint.'

73) 13:4-7

What then is love, this quality the absence of which is so fatal and deadly to life? Paul proceeds to describe it. What love is, is shown by what love does. It is interesting to see that Paul nevertheless uses a number of negatives to describe what love is. This does not mean that love is a negative thing, rather it underlines yesterday's point, that love is possible only when the natural heart is marked by the discipline of the Cross, and natural attitudes, such as envy, ambition and pride, are crucified. The long-suffering in 4 has reference to people rather than things, and means that a man with a loving spirit puts up with people for a long time. When we think of Christ's unaccountable patience in His dealings with us, we can begin to understand what this can mean in a life dominated by His love. Indeed, this whole section affords us a portrait of Christ Himself. Love is kind, for Christ was kind. Think how He went about doing good, bringing joy and blessing to so many hearts and homes. 4b stresses the humility of love, free from airs and proud pretensions. In 5 it is the courteousness of love that is emphasised - a timely reminder that good manners are not optional for the Christian, and that objectionableness will not pass muster for faithfulness - the two things are not the same, as some seem to think. It would not be too much to say that throughout the passage the generosity of love is underlined. Love is an expansive grace, it enlarges the heart and spirit of a man who is controlled by it, and brings him, so to speak, up to his full height. Well, do we love?

74) 13:8-13

The great thing about love is that it goes on, it lasts, whereas prophecy, tongues, knowledge are all alike temporal gifts and will pass away. Let it never be forgotten, says Paul, that even if God gives us the gift of knowledge with which to understand many mysteries, we still know only in part, we are finite creatures, we see through a glass darkly, and much will remain hidden from our eyes. This is a salutary reminder, when we are tempted to pride and arrogance in our pretensions to knowledge, that there are many 'blind spots' in our make-up which God intends shall remain. Nor let us miss the gentle rebuke in 11. Paul has already in the epistle charged the Corinthians with immaturity and childishness in spite of all their gifts and their ambitions, and here he is delicately hinting that being preoccupied with the gifts of prophecy, tongues and knowledge as they were was a mark not of spiritual advancement, but of spiritual immaturity. It is a great temptation in spiritual life to covet the gifts of God in the wrong way and from the wrong motive, and when believers are more interested in gifts than graces it is a sign of immaturity, a kind of childishness that must be put away. Love is the mark of maturity, of true Christian manliness, and, paradoxically, love enables a man to penetrate far more deeply into the mysteries of things, for it embraces all lesser gifts within itself. Love is not blind, as the modern books would have us believe, but all-seeing, and the Scriptural idea of love has associated with it the idea of a deep inner discernment - the more we love, the more deeply discerning we shall be. This is why love is the greatest of all, greater even than faith and hope, for love is of God, and God is infinite and eternal.

75) 14:1-5

The Corinthians had been preoccupied with spiritual gifts, especially tongues, and Paul has reminded them that they could have gifts without love, and that without love all would be in vain. But love does not exclude gifts, rather it brings a fine sense of proportion into spiritual experience, enabling us to see the real priorities on the one hand, and bringing moderation into play in the exercise of the gifts on the other. The best of the spiritual gifts, and the most important, is prophecy, not in the sense of foretelling, but rather forth-telling the truth of God: 'Greater is he that prophesieth than he that speaketh with tongues' and we may add also, 'Than he that worketh miracles'. People's reaction to this is a fairly accurate indication of their spiritual maturity. If news got around that a great miracle-worker had come to town for a series of meetings, there are those who would find the lure of such gatherings quite irresistible, but who would nevertheless set at a discount an unostentatious ministry of the Word that made no concessions to the human heart's love of spectacle. Such is the relative importance of the two ministries in many minds. But let us recall what the Jews said of John the Baptist: 'John did no miracle; but all things that John spake of this man were true' (referring to Jesus). Ah, they spoke more truly than they knew! This is the highest - and most lastingly effective - ministry of all, to speak true things truly of Jesus Christ. This is something worth coveting, and no man will ever be counted a failure in the Kingdom of God, be he ever so deficient in miracles and tongues, if he succeeds in speaking well of Christ!

76) 14:6-19

Paul continues in these verses to speak of the greatness of prophecy as compared with tongues. It is not that tongues should be forbidden, but that they should be subservient to and in control of the mind and understanding. This is what the Apostle pleads for in 15 and 19. It is all a question of whether emotional excitement or sanctified thinking is to dictate the course of the individual's life or that of the fellowship. Revelation, knowledge, prophecy, doctrine - these are the essentials for the Church, and all else will miss the mark without them. These are the 'certain sounds' mentioned in 7-9, and without question they will be in control in a mature, balanced fellowship rather than the tendencies to extreme manifestations of excitement and ecstasy which may all too easily become fleshly. It is not without significance - and this is what those preoccupied with 'tongues' should stop to ponder - that the great classical movements of revival in Church history have never been noted specially for manifestations of this spiritual phenomenon, nor have the great giants of the faith been conspicuous in the exercise of the gift. Nor should we forget that the one Church in the apostolic age that is known to have been preoccupied with it - the Corinthians - was riddled with disorder and division and had a very low spiritual tone throughout its membership.

77) 14:20-25

The gist of Paul's point here is as follows: He is putting two alternatives before his readers and asking, as it were, 'Which would you rather have? A company of believers speaking in an unknown tongue and the unconverted coming in to listen, then going out saying, 'They are quite mad,' as he would be entitled to do; or a fellowship of believers gathered round the Word and the prophets standing up and proclaiming the truth of God in the power of the Spirit - the unbeliever coming in listens, is convinced, convicted, led to repentance and born of the Spirit into newness of life. Well, which would you rather have?' It is surely clear from this what a tremendous importance Paul places on the proclamation of the Word. So far as he was concerned it was the chief means of converting men to Christ, and if this be so it must necessarily take precedence over every other matter in the fellowship. Furthermore, he indicates to be unable to see this is a sign of spiritual immaturity, 'In understanding be men' he cries (20). To be preoccupied with speaking in tongues is to refuse to grow up, and in the serious business of Christian service and warfare there is no room for arrested development. It is not too much to say that even today one of the greatest barriers to the ongoing work of the kingdom of God is the adolescent spirit that pervades much of Christian experience. God wants men who will stretch themselves to their full height for the Gospel's sake!

78) 14:26-33

This passage has been the subject of very different interpretation. There are those who would maintain that the invariable pattern of what a Church service should be is given here, with no organised leadership, but with all taking part as the Holy Spirit leads. This is held by some groups to call in question the validity of what may be called the 'one-man ministry' in favour of an 'any-man ministry'. But this is not necessarily the true understanding of the passage. It may well refer, not so much to a regular diet of worship, as to what we might call a fellowship meeting. The modern equivalent would be our discussion group, in which everybody takes part. At all events, disorder and chaos seemed to prevail in Corinth in these gatherings, and Paul points out very sharply that there was little evidence of the Spirit's presence where such unruliness took place. God is the author of peace (33) not of confusion, and when He is in control the spirits of believers will move at His sovereign direction in harmony, and there will be order and seemliness in everything, not confusion. In our experience, it is when one man is in God-appointed leadership of the fellowship that a true and fitting sense of worship obtains, rather than when every member indiscriminately takes part. We must not forget that God hath set some - not all - in the Church to be prophets and teachers. The idea of the priesthood of all believers certainly does not imply the ministry of all believers!

79) 14:34-40

The reference to women in 34 follows directly from what has been said in the previous verses. We should be careful not to assume that Paul's words about women keeping silence had reference only to Corinth, due to the particular conditions existing there. The words in 33, 'As in all churches of the saints' belong properly to 34, not to the statement about God being the author of peace, and 34 should therefore read 'As in all churches of the saints, let your women keep silence in the churches.' Taken thus - and commentators are agreed that this is the correct reading - Paul's words are made an injunction that has force for all the churches, not Corinth only. Enough has already been said on this subject in the Notes on chapter 11 and we need not recapitulate here. The force of 36 seems to be, 'Who are you to be claiming special arrangements for yourselves? You are no different from other fellowships. There is a pattern for all the churches, and Corinth is not an exception.' And he has one last parting shot in 37, 'You claim to be spiritual: very well, then, test your spirituality on my words to you. If there be any discernment in you at all, you will surely realise that I am speaking with the authority of the Lord.' Exactly.

80) 15:1-12

The existence of this tremendous, glorious chapter is due, humanly speaking, to the fact that there were some in Corinth who were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead (12). Paul makes this the occasion of a full-scale treatment of the subject. In the first section of the chapter we find a threefold proof of the reality of the resurrection of Christ. Firstly, there is the existence of saved men and women (1, 2). The fact of the Church is one of the best proofs of the resurrection of Christ, for here are men and women who themselves have been raised from the dead to newness of life. Notice Paul's phrases - 'ye received, ye stand, ye are saved'. This is what lifts the doctrine of the resurrection out of the realm of theory and speculation and makes a true believer quite certain about the matter. He knows - for it has happened to him. Secondly, Paul substantiates the resurrection from the Scriptures. Christ rose again according to the Scriptures: The point the Apostle is making is that the resurrection of Jesus was not a hastily concocted fiction stuck on to the story by the disciples to give it a happy ending, but something integral to the strategy of God and foretold by the very Scriptures that prophesied his death. (See Psalm 2:7; Psalm 16:10; Psalm 22: 22ff; Isaiah 53:10). Thirdly, there is the testimony of the eyewitnesses (5ff). The implications of this last are very impressive and far-reaching. When we think of the flimsiness of the evidence on which scientists make such confident pronouncements about evolution - a few odd teeth and a broken bone or so - and from that they construct an elaborate story about prehistoric man and realise how prone they are to assert that there is no real evidence for the resurrection of Christ, we begin to see that objections to the Christian message are not usually based on intellectual but on moral grounds. Once the validity of this evidence is admitted - and it is far too authentically documented to be questioned - one is obliged to kneel down and own Him Lord of all, and this is what the proud heart of man is not prepared to do.

81) 15:12-19

Paul now goes on to the implications of the resurrection, first of all in relation to our salvation. He is quite emphatic in his assertions. The alternatives to the resurrection are inescapable. Apart from it, he says, 'Your faith is vain (14), you are yet in your sins (17),' and 'we are of all men most miserable (19)'. Why then, does so much depend on the resurrection? Well, Christ came into the world to die for the sins of men. He suffered, in our place, as our Substitute, to pay the penalty of the broken law and offer to God what we could never give, a perfect righteousness, to atone for ('make up for') our failure. It was this atoning work to which He referred when on the Cross He cried, 'It is finished'. But was He right? And how can we be sure that He was? Supposing He were wrong? What proof is there that atonement was made, that God was propitiated? What if the price He paid for sin was not great enough for a whole world's sin? What if the infinite liabilities incurred by man through sin were not in fact met and cancelled on the Cross? Solemn, disturbing questions indeed: How can we know? Ultimately this is not something that we can ever decide for ourselves, only God could know if the sacrifice was sufficient. He must tell the world if He is satisfied with Christ's atoning work. And this is what He did in raising Christ from the dead. The resurrection of Christ was God's 'Yes' to all these questions, the divine imprimatur on the finished work of the Cross, His seal of approval upon His Son's atoning death. If His work had not been sufficient, He would have been overcome of death and God could not have vindicated Him; death would have claimed another captive. The fact that the Holy One saw no corruption but rose again shows that death was conquered by His mighty power. This is the glorious significance of the Resurrection. Everything - everything - depends upon its validity.

82) 15:20-28

The aspect of Christ's death underlying the previous verses (12-19) is what we call substitutionary; but here it is the representative character of His work that occupies Paul's attention. Adam and Christ are spoken of as public or representative figures, the heads of the old humanity and the new respectively. When Adam sinned, all men sinned in him and partook of his disastrous fall. But there is a second family, the family of God in Christ, and all members of this family partake in the blessings of the Head. All that Christ did He did for us, as our Representative, thus, when He triumphed over sin and Satan, we are victorious in Him. He carries us with Him, so to speak, in the victory He won on the Cross and in His resurrection. Thus, those who believe in Him not only share in His risen life now, but shall do hereafter also in the fuller sense (22, 23). The redeemed in Christ shall be gathered home - this is simply mentioned at this point and is elaborated later in the chapter - and the resurrection of Christ as first-fruits is the pledge and guarantee of the final harvest of the Church unto eternal glory. The delivering up of the kingdom by Christ (24) and His subjection to the Father (28) refers to His mediatorial kingdom - as a love-gift from the Son to the Father - and the subjection spoken of is one of office, not of His Person and there is no thought of detracting from His co-equality with the Father in power and glory. What ought to occupy our thoughts here is not a technical quibble of doctrine, but the fact of the immense cosmic activity of Christ, so majestic in scope that we can but dimly understand or even imagine its infinite meaning. The lesson Paul means us to learn is that the Resurrection of Christ has cosmic repercussions!

83) 15:29-34

In these verses Paul mentions some aspects of Christian practice and conduct which become meaningless if the resurrection of Christ is not true. 29 is probably one of the most difficult and awkward verses in the entire New Testament to understand. What can it mean, to be baptised for the dead? What it appears to refer to is a practice which seems to have existed in the early Church of baptising a living person in place of someone who had died before they themselves could be baptised. We need not assume that Paul condoned such a practice or approved of it - he is simply using this as an instance and showing that, right or wrong, it would be meaningless if the resurrection was not true. It is not the illustration that is important, but what it illustrates, just as it is not baptism but what it signifies that we must fully grasp. Indeed, this parallel is very much to the point, for Paul goes on to speak of what Christian baptism has meant for him - the sharing of Christ's sufferings and afflictions. Do we see the point? What is the use, he cries, of dying daily as I do, of fighting with wild beasts at Ephesus, and undergoing all manner of trials and perils, if there is no resurrection? It makes suffering for Christ meaningless if there is no glory to follow. Suffering for its own sake is no part of the Christian message. 'Weeping endureth for a night, but joy cometh in the morning' - so says the Scripture, but if you are going to take away the morning from me, says Paul, everything becomes meaningless. 'If in this life only....' (19)!

84) 15:35-50

Paul's two questions here, 'How are the dead raised?' and 'With what body do they come?' need to be prefaced with another very relevant for our day, 'Is there a resurrection of the body at all?' There is a great deal of confusion about this whole subject in people's minds today. So many think of heaven as a 'ghostly' place, or speak of it as a state of mind. But this is not only a mistaken view, it is the antithesis of the biblical doctrine. For Paul teaches here that there will be a resurrection of the body and you cannot have a resurrected body in a state of mind. Heaven must be a solid order of existence because even now Christ is there as a glorified Man. The manhood of the ascended Lord is a cardinal doctrine of the faith, and His glorified Manhood is the first-fruits of the general bodily resurrection of all believers.

Not only so. The doctrine of the resurrection of the body is an absolute necessity for the whole concept of salvation. Without it there can be no salvation in the fullest sense. What is man? A combination of body and soul, made thus by God in a perfect unity. Death is the ultimate expression of that disruption, the materialised evidence, so to speak, that sin is no fiction but a grim, disastrous reality. And death is the enemy precisely because it sunders body and soul. Now, if redemption is going to be real, then that rupture must somehow be healed and the unity of man's original creation somehow restored. Unless there is a reversal of the process of disruption, we cannot really speak of redemption in the fullest sense at all. Now this is the claim of the Gospel, not simply that there is life after death, but that there is a life from which death is finally removed, torn up by the roots. Thus, with the separation between body and soul wrought by death forever removed, body and soul will be reconstituted as man, with body and soul one as they have not been since the Garden of Eden. This is the breathtaking grandeur of the biblical conception of redemption. There will be men, new men in heaven with bodies that are the perfect vehicle and expression of souls that have been redeemed by grace. How very wonderful.

85) 15:35-50.

The question of the nature of this resurrection body still remains. What are we to say about this? Well, Christ's resurrection is the pattern and it will help us greatly to think of His risen body. Jesus died, and rose again - the same Jesus, and yet He was different - there was an indescribable something about Him that was different. It was obviously the same Jesus, but His risen body had somehow different properties - He could appear and disappear, be recognised or not at will, and a careful study of the relevant passages will show that He does not appear to have been subject to the laws of space or even time as He was before the Cross. We might put it this way - it was the same Person but His form was different. Paul illustrates this from natural experience - it is the same corn of wheat that was sown that comes up, yet different in form and extent, and immeasurably richer in every way. The new grain is, as it were, an extension of the bare grain, and bears a fundamental relationship to it. 'It' has been raised up, but 'it' has been changed. It was so with Christ, and it will be so with us. It is not this flesh and blood that will be raised (50). But it is still 'we' who rise again - the same 'we', but clothed in a new form, in the new body, the spiritual body of which Paul speaks in 44. This is a great mystery and we can only grope with words in our attempts to describe or explain it. May God by His Spirit help us to see as much as may be permitted us now in our finite and sinful state.

86) 15:35-50

The contrast between the first and last Adam is very striking. It is Christ the last Adam who is a life-giving Spirit, and He has already given to all who believe in Him the gift of life, which will be manifested at the resurrection (not bestowed then, since it has already been given). This is the point of the illustration of the grain in these and the previous verses. It is not the same corn that we planted that rises again, but it is the emerging of a life already hidden and latent in it. And so it is with us, if so be that we have been born again. The new creation is implanted at our rebirth, and it is there now, could we but see it, body as well as spirit. Paul emphasises this also in 2 Corinthians 5:1, 'If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved (referring to our mortal bodies) we have (not will have, but have) a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens'. 'Concealed as yet this honour lies' says the Paraphrase, and this is corroborated by Paul's teaching in Colossians 3 that our life - i.e. the new creation - is hid with Christ in God.

Paul speaks of varieties of bodies, terrestrial and celestial (40) and differing glories (40, 41). His point seems to be: Why should it then be difficult to conceive of different kinds of men - natural men with natural bodies, and spiritual men with spiritual bodies. If God has planned a new kind of man - a new humanity - should we be surprised if he has a new kind of body?

87) 15:51-58

Finally in this tremendous chapter Paul speaks of the glorious alternative to death that awaits some believers at the end-time. Death is not the only means by which the seed of our mortality is quickened to new, resurrection life. The alternative is the coming of Christ in His glory. Death will not be the portion of all believers - some will be alive and remain at His Coming, and these will not die, but will be 'changed' apart from death, and shall put on immortality in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. The transition from mortality to immortality will be immediate, and they will escape the stark horror of death and its corruption. This blessed prospect beggars all our powers of comprehension. It is like the fairy story - C.S. Lewis suggests that fairy stories represent 'good thoughts' given by God to men from time immemorial - in which the wicked witch casts a spell upon the poor princess who lies senseless until the coming of the Prince to awake her, destroy the witch and live happily ever after. That is indeed the gospel - Satan has cast a spell upon mankind, and the promise from the dawn of history was that one day the Prince would come. And He has come, and the embrace of His love breaks the spell and sets the prisoners free. So when Christ comes again, the spell will be finally broken, and death will be swallowed up in victory, which victory is given to us in Him, and all that comes under the name of corruption and mortality shall be eclipsed, and God shall clothe the souls that He has redeemed in His precious blood with bodies of glory. What an incentive to stand fast and to abound in the work of the Lord! The prospect wondrous bright; as the hymn says, 'The eternal glories gleam afar to nerve my faint endeavour'.

88) 16:1-4

The contrast of subject between the resurrection and the collection (1) could not be more startling and complete. Some think it is a change from the sublime to the ridiculous, but we may be sure that Paul is intent on teaching something very pointed and practical in placing the two together. It is no accident that the question of Christian liberality comes in at this point, for there is an intimate connection between the two. We may say that the link is found in the word 'abounding' in 15:58. A true knowledge and experience of the resurrection will make men abound in their giving. It is one thing to exult in the glorious truths of the resurrection chapter in 1 Corinthians but the real, practical question is, 'How steadfast are we in the matter of the collection? Do we abound in the Lord's work in a financial sense?' Faith and finance are integrally related, and where faith in the resurrection is vital and vibrant the financial problems of the Church will be markedly affected. If God's people were to obey this injunction of Paul's there would be no need for special appeals and special ingatherings. We have to face this fact plainly and bluntly, that we need a Stewardship and Budgeting Committee because the giving of God's people is so desperately shabby throughout the Church as a whole. Now the answer to this problem is not to make endless appeals for money, but to seek to bring about a rebirth of faith in the resurrection, and let its glorious power course afresh through the life of the Church. May God grant that this may come to pass in Scotland today!

89) 16:5-9

There are two points to notice here. In the first place we may link the great words of 9 - 'a great door and effectual' with yesterday's reading. There is a great and effectual door opened to the Church of God throughout the world today, and His work could go forward with great strides if only there were money to finance it and men and women to do it. And the question we have to ask ourselves is whether we are among the many adversaries that hinder its fulfilment. Is there a door somewhere in the world that you could go through? Or is there a door somewhere that you could open by your givings? Could you put someone else through? Through a course of training, for example? Perhaps you could help to equip a missionary or help pay his passage?

The second thing is this: Paul says in 8, 'I will tarry at Ephesus until Pentecost, for a great door and effectual...'. Nowadays people tend to reverse this and say, 'We cannot stay any longer in this work because there are many adversaries.' As soon as they meet with difficulties and oppositions they give in - whether in personal spiritual life or in the service of the Lord, and they take the existence of the adversaries as a signal for pulling out. But Paul found this to be an incentive for staying on. Is this a word for someone today, at home or abroad? Is this how it is with you, in your home, in the office, in your part of the field? Ah, do not bewail the adversaries. Rather recognise that where there are these, there is also a great and effectual door. There is work to be done!

90) 16:10-12

Paul's comments here about Timothy and Apollos are interesting. From what we read in the epistles to Timothy we may gather that Timothy was somewhat disposed to fearfulness and discouragement in the Lord's work. This is probably not something that those not called to the service of God can fully appreciate, but those who are certainly can, and they know just how needful wise encouragement is for the servants of the Lord. Fear can sometimes paralyse a servant of God and hinder his effectual ministry, and the people to whom he ministers should at least see to it that no attitude of theirs will be the cause of any unnecessary distress. It is certainly true that a congregation can by their sympathetic responsiveness help a preacher to give of his best, and conversely, by a coldly critical attitude effectively stifle his utterance and make it almost impossible for him to 'get his message over' to them. Bearing in mind the dissensions in Corinth referred to in chapter 1 - 'I am of Paul, I of Appollos...' this was probably a necessary word to them in relation to their reception of Timothy.

We wonder if 12 conceals a certain tension between Apollos and Paul. Was he unwilling to visit Corinth again because he realised there was so much dissension there? Was he perhaps conscious that he himself may have been partly the cause of it? Or was it because Paul had asked him to go 'with the brethren'? Was working 'with the brethren' not very attractive for him? Well, what do you think?

91) 16:13-14

The ringing challenge in 13 seems to sum up all that Paul has been saying to the Corinthians throughout the epistle. In relation to the disorders and divisions that had well nigh wrecked the fellowship, he gives this warning to 'watch', to guard against the dangerous inroads the devil was making into their life and witness. And the way to be watchful? - to stand under the Shadow of the Cross. The Cross is the only safeguard. Then, in relation to their wavering in moral issues - he quoted the story of Israel in the wilderness and how they fell away because their faith was not strong - he exhorts them to 'stand fast in the faith'. This is the only safeguard against the danger of becoming a castaway, and there is only one ground on which we can thus stand fast - at the Cross. Then, in his numerous references to their childishness and immaturity he has emphasised the need to grow up and attain full stature. Thus, here, 'Quit ye like men'. And finally, 'be strong'. Let the power of the resurrection touch your life. Let that grip you; yield yourself to its control. And then this last word, 'Let all your things be done with charity' - let love colour all in the fellowship. How Paul's words must have gone home to their hearts. There was so much unlove among them, how could it have been otherwise, with so much bitterness and envying and unholy ambition - with so much refusal of the Cross!

92) 16:15-24

How much there is to learn in the closing words of Paul's letters in the incidental mention of various people and matters. The household of Stephanas 'addicted' themselves to the ministry of the saints. Well blessed addiction: Theirs was a home where God's people found a haven, a place of encouragement and refreshment, where they could bring their troubles and distresses and be sure of finding comfort and encouragement. What greater ministry for a home than this? A great door and effectual, indeed. Then, in 18, 'They have refreshed my spirit' - well that is something, to have been a refreshment of spirit to the mighty apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was not on such a high level of spiritual attainment that he did not need encouragement and help at times, or that he could not find spiritual refreshment in people far beneath him in spiritual stature. Ah, we need to learn to open our hearts to those around us far more than we do. We may be denying ourselves the gracious comforts of the Lord Himself by thinking that those less advanced than we are have nothing to give us. Love is the link, and where love is, the veriest babe in Christ can minister to God's giants with acceptance. Think of the forgiven woman's anointing of Christ in Luke 7:36-50.