

I CORINTHIANS

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**Grades 9-12
Year 4
Quarter 4**

DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

I Corinthians 1-2

Lesson Aim

To help students see that running the church like a secular organization leads to disunity and dissension.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:1 - "Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that we all possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up."

Lesson Background

The epistle of I Corinthians probably contains more treatment of practical issues and less doctrine than any other of the epistles written by Paul to the churches with whom he had contact.

The city of Corinth is located on the isthmus separating Attica from the Peloponnesus. It thus is very strategic both for military and commercial purposes. The founding of the city is shrouded in antiquity, and its origins go back more than 5000 years. By the time of the Trojan War (c.1200 B.C.), Corinth was a city noted for its wealth. Along with the rest of Greece, the city was subjugated by Philip of Macedon and ruled by his son, Alexander the Great, in the fourth century B.C. Later, an attempt by the city to assert its independence led to its destruction by the Roman general Lucius Mummius in 146 B.C.

The location, however, was far too valuable to leave barren, and the city was rebuilt under orders from Julius Caesar in 46 B.C. As a Roman colony, it was resettled largely by Roman soldiers and mercenaries. The wide-ranging commerce attracted to the city soon brought people from all over the world, including a number of Jews, though the city remained largely Gentile in its population.

The Corinth of Paul's day was a proud and wealthy city. It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia, the gateway to the Peloponnesus, and the center of commerce from East to West in the Empire. The city boasted a temple to the Greek goddess Aphrodite that employed over a thousand cult prostitutes. Like any port city, it tended to have a reputation for immorality of all kinds. In fact, the Greek verb "to corinthianize," coined by the glib playwright Aristophanes in earlier years, meant to engage in loose living. The city also sponsored the Isthmian Games, similar to the Olympics, which were held in the Temple of Poseidon outside the city and attracted some of the best athletes in the Graeco-Roman world. Though they lacked the reputation for philosophical acumen enjoyed by the Athenians, the Corinthians prided themselves on their worldly wisdom. Both the pride and the immorality of the city play prominent roles in the first letter written by Paul to the church in Corinth.

Paul first arrived in the city of Corinth about A.D. 51, during his second missionary journey. It was there that he met Aquila and Priscilla, and he worked with them at his job of tentmaking while preaching in the local synagogue. The Jews violently rejected his message, however, so he turned to the Gentiles, setting up headquarters in the house of Titius Justus, a God-fearing Gentile, right next to the synagogue. A few Jews and many Gentiles believed, and Paul remained in the city for a year and a half. The Jews eventually stirred up trouble, however, bringing Paul before the Roman proconsul Gallio, the brother of the famous philosopher Seneca. The Jews wanted Paul tried as a Gentile, insisting that his teachings were a violation of Jewish law, but Gallio refused to hear the case, insisting that it was an internal Jewish matter, and therefore not subject to Roman punishment (the Jews enjoyed official protection in the Empire; as long as Christianity was considered a Jewish sect, it shared that protection).

Paul eventually left the city, but this was not his last contact with the Corinthians. The tendency of the church to compromise with the worldly practices of their city appeared rather early in the church's existence, and Paul wrote a letter to warn them against this shortly after the end of his first visit (I Corinthians 5:9). This letter, which has not been preserved, apparently was misunderstood by the Corinthians. After this, Paul received two delegations from Corinth, one sent by Chloe, either from her family or from her house church (I Corinthians 1:11), and another composed of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (I Corinthians 16:17), sent by the church as a whole. The first delegation informed him of the divisions and immoral practices going on in the church, while the second brought to him a series of questions from the church, along with a letter (I Corinthians 7:1). It was in response to these delegations that he wrote I Corinthians. This occurred while he was in Ephesus during his third missionary journey, probably in the spring of A.D. 57.

The response to I Corinthians was not good. As a result, Paul decided to visit them personally again, but the visit was not well-received (II Corinthians 2:1) - in fact, it is easy to get the impression from Paul's later correspondence that they nearly ran him out of town. He immediately sent off another letter, which again is lost to us (II Corinthians 2:3-5). This rather harsh missive apparently did some good, for Paul's tone in II Corinthians is largely positive, though he still must chastise his critics. His final contact with the church was a visit to pick up the money collected for the poor in Jerusalem, which he made after his third journey, prior to his arrest.

The contentious nature of the Corinthians was not cured by Paul's contact with the church. The earliest non-canonical writing known to us, the letter of I Clement, written about A.D. 95, was addressed from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth, admonishing them for their rebellious attitude toward their elders. Divisiveness and an independent spirit apparently still characterized the church forty years after their contact with Paul.

The book before us may easily be divided into two sections. The first six chapters contain Paul's response to the report received from the house of Chloe, while the remaining ten chapters give us Paul's

answers to the questions raised by the Corinthians themselves. We will be covering the entire book with the exception of Paul's closing remarks in chapter 16. In covering the first four chapters, which deal with division in the church, we will take two chapters per week, but thereafter will cover a single chapter each week.

Lesson Procedure

Teenagers are quick to spot hypocrisy in the lives of adults. The presence of false fronts often turns teenagers against the church. Begin the class by asking your students to list some of the things about the church in general (not your specific congregation) that "turn off" high school students. The list you get should be rather interesting, and will surely include the standard objections to formality in clothing and stuffiness in music, boring meetings, strict rules, etc. After the list has been compiled, start analyzing the objections that have been raised in the light of a single issue - whether the standards, values, practices, and methods of the church should conform to those of the world. Be sure to point out that some of the things to which your students object are the result of worldly practices and values in the church, but that some of your students' objections are also based upon their own worldly practices and values. Explain that when the church starts to do things like the world, it is disastrous for the church. No better example of this can be seen than that provided by the church at Corinth.

Today we will be covering the first two chapters of I Corinthians, and we will be doing so largely through inductive Bible study. Rather than telling the students what the passage says, allow them to discover the teaching of Paul in these chapters by themselves. Before doing this, however, go over some of the material from the Lesson Background to familiarize the students with the setting of the book.

Have the members of your class begin their inductive Bible study by taking a sheet of paper and dividing it into two vertical columns. Above the first column they should write, "What the World Considers Important," and above the second, "What God Considers Important." Working independently, they should then read through I Corinthians 1:10-2:16 and write in each column what they find about worldly wisdom and godly wisdom, along with the numbers of the verses containing the information. The result should look something like this:

WHAT THE WORLD CONSIDERS IMPORTANT

1:12 - following popular celebrities
1:19 - wisdom, intelligence, and philosophy
1:22 - miraculous signs
1:25 - human strength
1:26 - influence and noble birth
1:28 - being "somebody"
1:29 - human pride
2:1 - eloquence
2:4 - persuasive speech
2:6 - wisdom of rulers
2:13 - words of human wisdom

WHAT GOD CONSIDERS IMPORTANT

1:10 - unity among Christians
1:13 - following Christ, not men
1:17 - the power of the cross
1:27 - God's choice
1:28 - being "nobody"
1:31 - boasting in the Lord
2:2 - the Gospel
2:4 - the power of the Holy Spirit
2:7 - God's secret wisdom
2:10 - what the Spirit reveals
2:14 - things understood by the Spirit of God
2:15 - discernment given by the Spirit of God

Having completed the inductive study, have your students share what they have discovered and list the results on the board. When this has been done, ask the students a series of questions, which they should answer from the lists they have compiled.

Why are the two columns mutually exclusive? They should be able to see that those who value the entries on the left will see little merit in the ones on the right. As Paul said, such things are foolishness to the wise men of this world. On the other hand, when people understand the wisdom of God, the wisdom and eloquence of this world appear as shallow and meaningless.

What happens when the church operates on the basis of the left column? The result would be exactly what happened in Corinth - division and bickering. The Corinthians were divided, not by essentials of the faith, but by things the world considered important. Some preferred the eloquence of Apollos, some liked the earthy simplicity of Peter. Some fought for adherence to the old traditions they had known as Jews, while others fought just as hard for the rights they were sure belonged to them by virtue of their Christian liberty. Some gloried in following human leaders, while others acknowledged only Christ and would not submit to the authority of those leaders set apart by the church.

What is the key difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God? The two differ primarily in their sources. The wisdom of the world comes from man himself, and no matter how intelligent or eloquent the man may be, he is blinded by his own sin and rebellion against God and thus cannot see the truth. Godly wisdom comes from the Holy Spirit, who indwells all believers and gives to them the mind of Christ. The Christian may thus read and understand the Word of God and be guided by the Spirit in applying it to his life and the life of the church.

Conclude the lesson by going back to the original list of things in the church that your students said tended to turn off teenagers. Go through the list again, noting how the items on the list relate to the contrast between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom. Help your students to see that, while it is true that many adults find it too easy to import the values of the world into the church, teenagers face the same problem, and must examine their own values to determine whether they have their source in the wisdom of this world or in the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

DIVISION IN THE CHURCH

1. What was the ethnic and religious makeup of the church in Corinth?
2. What was the nature and extent of Paul's contact with the Corinthians?
3. Why were the Corinthians divided into warring factions in the church? What sorts of things divided them?
4. What is the main difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom?
5. List some things that the world considers important that God does not value highly. Why do you think that God does not often choose to use the wise men of this world to accomplish His work?

MORE ON CHURCH DIVISIONS

I Corinthians 3-4

Lesson Aim

To demonstrate to students the importance of using divine wisdom instead of worldly wisdom in the affairs of the church and in all of life.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:2 - “The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know.”

Lesson Background

Last week we began to look at Paul’s dealings with the Corinthian church in response to word he had received of divisions in their midst. We focused on the distinction between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God and saw how reliance on the former had led to the schisms within the church at Corinth. Today we will be looking at the third and fourth chapters of I Corinthians, where we find Paul continuing to deal with the same subject. These chapters contain three basic points that we will be examining this week.

The first involves the infantile behavior of the Corinthians. The early verses of chapter three have often been misinterpreted to suggest that one who shows no evidence of Christianity in his life may still be a Christian, albeit a “carnal” one. Your students must understand that no one may rightly consider himself a Christian who is devoid of the fruit of the Spirit, but that all Christians struggle constantly with fleshly behavior and attitudes in certain areas of their lives. These struggles come when we depend on the worldly wisdom we saw Paul speaking against last week.

The second concerns the unity of God’s work as carried on through His messengers. The Corinthians may have been divided over their allegiance to Paul, Apollos, and Peter, but these men were fully united in carrying out the work of God. As Paul contrasts the pride of the Corinthians with the humility of these men they insist on making the basis for their divisions, the petty squabbles that stem from the use of worldly wisdom in the church are exposed for what they really are.

The third point we will consider today is the matter of humility. Paul’s exhortation to the Corinthians about their need of this virtue is a sound reminder to all of us concerning the true source of jealousies and disputes within the church.

As we noted last week, young people are keen and often critical observers of the adults in their churches. Divisions in the church might not be a major concern of theirs at the present time, but if your church is one where a significant amount of disunity is visible, you can be certain that, not only are the teens aware of it, but it may be turning them against the Gospel. High school students themselves are not immune to divisions and petty disputes, of course. The parties following Paul, Apollos, and Peter are paralleled in every high school and many church youth groups by cliques into which teens so easily fall. The major applications of today’s lesson, then, will concern not only unity in the church, but also the problem of cliques among Christian teenagers.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students if they consider cliques to be a problem at school or at church. If they do (and if they are normal teenagers, they will), ask them why cliques are bad and what problems they cause. Next, ask them if they think cliques are a problem with adults (any observant group of young people should be able to answer this in the affirmative). Then remind them of what was covered last week concerning divisions in the church at Corinth. Note that, in this week’s lesson, we will examine what Paul has to say about understanding and dealing with cliques, both in the church and elsewhere.

1. Cliques are for Babies

In I Corinthians 3:1, Paul indicates that the divisions of the Corinthians are an indication of spiritual immaturity. Have your students read verses 1-4 and ask them to describe spiritual immaturity. Of what does infantile behavior consist? The answer to this question is to be found in verse 3. The Corinthians are acting like babies because they are not acting like Christians! Spiritual immaturity manifests itself in worldly behavior.

At this point, you as the teacher will have to be very careful. Many interpreters of this passage have concluded that spiritual immaturity (“carnality” in the KJV) refers to a condition in which a Christian is indistinguishable from an unbeliever in his manner of living. This teaching has been the cause of the spiritual destruction of many over the years. How many people do you know who are convinced that they are Christians because of a decision made long ago that has borne no visible fruits in their lives? How many people encourage the false security of loved ones by thinking of them as “carnal Christians”? The important thing to note is that Paul describes the Corinthians as babies, not because their lives are indistinguishable from those of unbelievers, but because they are worldly in the sense of dividing themselves into cliques. As Paul indicated in chapter one, the Corinthians are in many ways laudable in their spirituality, yet their divisiveness is of the flesh, unrelated to the life of the Spirit of God. Carnality must thus be viewed as an aspect of a person’s life, not as its overriding characteristic. A Christian may be carnal in some areas of his life, but there is no such thing as a carnal Christian.

In applying this teaching specifically to the problem of cliques, ask your students why Paul describes divisions in the church as resulting from worldly or non-Christian thinking and attitudes. They should be able to recognize that people who divide themselves into cliques are focusing on matters of little importance while ignoring the fundamental unity of all Christians in Christ. What are the practical implications of this? Ask your students to think of some ways that cliques in which they are involved may be broken down. How should a Christian treat others who do not come from the same background as himself, or who do not share his interests? How do the truths of the love and unity that should characterize the Body of Christ override the petty reasons for which we tend to band together to the exclusion of others?

2. Cliques Hinder God's Work

Divide your class into two groups, assigning one group to read I Corinthians 3:5-17 and the other to read I Corinthians 4:1-13. In reading their assigned passages, ask them to consider the question of how cliques hinder the work of God in the church and in the world. When the groups come back together to discuss their findings, be sure to bring out the following ideas:

A. I Corinthians 3:5-17

The first group should be able to see that the work of God is intended to be a unified whole. Paul and Apollos were not ministering in competition with each other, but were each contributing to the overall purpose of God in the world. Neither one could function effectively in isolation. Each one contributed something unique and essential.

Paul and Apollos, of course, were not the only ones contributing to this building that God is constructing. The church is the building, and every Christian is involved in constructing it. Those who foment divisions in the church are not building up, but tearing down the work of God. Verses 16-17 are often used in reference to individuals, but in the context Paul is speaking of the church as a corporate entity (though he later uses the same image in reference to individuals in chapter 6). Because divisions imply opposition to those not part of one's group, those who take part in cliques are tearing down other Christians, and thus hindering the work of God.

B. I Corinthians 4:1-13

The second group should be able to see that divisions hinder the work of God because they involve applying human standards to spiritual things rather than judging them according to the standard of God's Word. Men may align themselves with others on the basis of shallow things such as background, race, culture, or common interest, but such things are insignificant in the context of the unity of the Body of Christ.

Paul also points out in these verses the connection between divisions and pride. Those who form themselves into little groups and exclude others in the process are simply seeking to make themselves look good at the expense of others. There is no room for such pride among Christians. Paul's point is particularly strong when he contrasts the haughty spirit of the Corinthians with the humility of the apostles. Such a comparison makes the pride of the Corinthians appear in all its ridiculous pomposity.

3. Cliques Come from Pride

This leads us to the third major point to be considered today, one that is brought out by Paul in the closing paragraph of each chapter (3:18-23 and 4:18-21). At the end of chapter 3, he reveals the pride of the Corinthians for the foolishness it is. The wisdom of this world should never be thought of as a useful

supplement to the work of God. The two are completely at odds, and any Christian who seeks to do the work of God by means of worldly wisdom will demonstrate himself to be a fool and harm the work of God in the process.

At the end of chapter 4, Paul issues a strong warning. He tells the Corinthians that he is planning to visit them soon, and that he will then test the leaders of these cliques in the arena of spiritual power. He knows they will never measure up. Similarly, those who encourage divisions in the church may make themselves look good for the time being, but the absence of spiritual power will ultimately devastate the church where such divisions exist.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by having each student write privately, on a piece of paper, what steps they plan to take during the week to break free from the cliques that are part of their lives, whether they be in church, in school, or in their neighborhoods. Then have each one pray silently for God's help in living lives that demonstrate the unity of God's people.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

MORE ON CHURCH DIVISIONS

1. What is a clique? Why do people tend to form them?
2. What is carnality? Why is it impossible for a Christian to be completely carnal?
3. Why does Paul say that cliques come from Christians who have worldly attitudes?
4. Why does Paul say that Christians who form cliques are hindering the work of God?
5. Why is humility necessary in order to avoid being drawn into cliques?

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

I Corinthians 5

Lesson Aim

To present to students the necessity, procedures and positive goals of church discipline.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:3 - "But the man who loves God is known by God."

Lesson Background

We can only speculate as to the distinctive characteristics of the factions into which the Corinthians had divided themselves in Paul's day. Many have suggested, however, that the Pauline faction was a group of libertines who had taken to extremes Paul's teaching concerning freedom from the law. In the same way that he had dissociated himself from such people in the letter to the Romans (especially chapter 6), so he does here. In so doing, he focuses on one particularly outrageous example of open sin in the congregation - one in which a man was living openly with his stepmother. Paul's insistence that the man be excommunicated seems harsh to many modern ears, but it is the task of the teacher today to help the students in the class understand the necessity of church discipline for the health of the church and the ongoing work of God in the world.

In order to accomplish this, we are going to range beyond the confines of the passage before us. We will look first at three general areas - the need for church discipline, the method of church discipline, and the purposes of church discipline. Having discussed these matters in general, we will then return to I Corinthians 5 and apply what we have learned to the particular situation with which Paul is dealing in this passage. By making frequent analogies with the family, the teacher should be able to help students see church discipline as a normal part of a healthy church in the same way that parental discipline is a normal part of a healthy

family. Furthermore, students should see the need to participate positively in the edification of others in the church.

Lesson Procedure

Open the class by asking students whether they consider discipline to be a necessary part of family life, and if so, why? They should be mature enough to realize that discipline is essential, and to give a number of good reasons why this is so. Be sure to point out that discipline is a mark of love, not animosity, and that the absence of discipline in a family is an indication that the parents really do not care about the children.

Ask next about discipline in the church. Do your students think it is necessary? Why or why not? Of what does discipline in the church consist? The answers your students give will depend largely on the experience they have had within the church in relation to this subject. Those who have seen church discipline administered in a biblical way will be able to give sound answers, while those who have seen only its negative aspects, or, worse yet, have never seen it at all, will have serious misconceptions. Those who have never seen biblical church discipline will in all likelihood have a very negative picture of it, couched largely in terms of excommunication. Our individualistic society finds discipline of any kind hard to accept, but church discipline is particularly distasteful because Americans have been conditioned to believe that, in the area of religion, no one should tell anyone else what to believe or how to live. If your students are well-versed about church discipline, you may perhaps want to deviate from the lesson described below and go through more of a verse-by-verse treatment of I Corinthians 5. For those who are largely ignorant, however (and I fear this will be the majority), a general treatment of the subject of church discipline is needed.

1. Why is church discipline needed?

Return at this point to the analogy of the family. The church is also a family, with Christ as its Head. He has designated certain people to maintain order in His family. These men, of course, are the elders. They need to exercise discipline in the church for the same reason parents need to exercise it in the family, namely, because church members are sinners, just like children are. Discipline, whether in the family or in the church, involves two elements - training and punishment. Those who are young need direction from those who are more mature, and this direction includes punishment in order to prevent straying into wrong paths.

2. How is church discipline to be carried out?

The clearest blueprint found in Scripture for the carrying out of church discipline is in Matthew 18:15-20. Your students should be able to outline very easily the four steps mentioned by Jesus in this passage. As they do so, however, make note of the following points:

Church discipline begins on the informal, personal level. It is the responsibility of every Christian to keep short accounts with other believers. Conflicts are to be resolved immediately, not allowed to fester and turn into grudges and bitterness. In the same way that children in a family must learn to cooperate and share with one another so that every potential conflict does not lead to a spanking by the parents, so members of a church must be able to resolve conflicts among themselves. In a healthy church, the vast majority of conflicts will be resolved at this level and punitive discipline will rarely be necessary.

The second step involves bringing in one or two others to help mediate the dispute. Obviously, these are to be people who are respected by both parties, not friends of one person who are likely to render

prejudicial advice. In the same way that older brothers and sisters can help settle disputes among their younger siblings, so those who are mature in the church can help the younger Christians who are struggling.

The third step, “telling it to the church,” while implying activity on the part of the congregation as a whole, must also include involvement by the elders. It is the elders who hear the matter, seek to intervene, and ultimately bring it before the church as a whole.

The final step is excommunication. This excludes a person from membership in the church and implies that the church believes that the person in question is not a Christian. Contrary to what is taught by the Catholic Church, excommunication does not send a person to hell, but rather renders the judgment of the church that hell will be the person’s destiny if he does not repent. Mercifully, such a serious matter is not left exclusively in the hands of sinful men. The solemn power of excommunication spoken of in Matthew 18:18 is backed up by the promise of the following verses, affirming that such decisions will be made in the presence of Christ and in the power of his Spirit. The Body of Christ, acting in unity in the presence of God, is able to make such solemn judgments because they do not make them alone.

3. What are the purposes of church discipline?

Church discipline has several purposes, which may be enumerated as follows:

A. To build up the people of God

In the same way that the training received in the family strengthens children and prepares them to stand on their own, so the discipline exercised in the church helps Christians to grow as they help one another to conquer the sins that cause conflicts among them.

B. To promote the unity of the Body of Christ

In the same way that sin divides a family, sin divides the church. In the same way that punishment of disobedience allows a child and his father to hug one another and feel close, so discipline in the church brings God’s people together. As people help one another, they grow in love for one another. If sin remains untouched, however, the church will fall apart as individual relationships are severed without ever being mended.

C. To keep the church pure

Sin destroys the church from within, and the work of God cannot be effectively carried out unless the church is dealing with sin on a continual basis. The church will never be without sin in this world, but that does not mean we should not strive for holiness.

D. To keep a good testimony before the world

In the same way that the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira enhanced the testimony of the church, so the exercise of church discipline will send a message to the surrounding community that God’s people are different. The love and unity that accompany church discipline will accent that difference even more.

E. To restore the sinner

The ultimate goal of church discipline, even when it goes all the way to excommunication, is to bring the sinner back to God. The private guidance of a friend can bring great help; so can the public admonition of the church. Many over the years have been forced to confront their sin only when publicly excluded from the church. Though such an experience is painful, it has produced genuine repentance in many.

Conclusion

Having gone through these general principles of church discipline, close the lesson by turning to I Corinthians 5 and discussing the particular case described there in the light of these principles. Describe the situation for your students. Ask them why excommunication was essential, and what Paul hoped would be accomplished by it. Be sure to point out, based on II Corinthians 2:5-11; 7:8-13, that it appears to have had the desired results. Show how the principles discussed by Paul in verses 9-13 fit together with those discussed earlier in the lesson. Conclude the lesson by challenging your students to show the kind of love to one another that church discipline in its full sense requires.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

1. Why is discipline necessary for a healthy family? Why is it necessary for a healthy church?
2. What are the positive aspects of discipline in the family and in the church?
3. What are the four steps of church discipline outlined by Jesus in Matthew 18:15-17?
4. Why did Paul insist that the man described in I Corinthians 5 be excommunicated from the church?
5. Why should Christians not treat those who are not living like Christians as if they were? What effect would such behavior have on the church? on the testimony of the church in the surrounding community?

THE FRUITS OF PRIDE

I Corinthians 6

Lesson Aim

To help students see the devastating effects of pride in the lives of both individuals and the church as a whole.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:4 - “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one.”

Lesson Background

In the sixth chapter of I Corinthians, we arrive at the conclusion of Paul’s response to the report he received from the house of Chloe. He continues here to deal with ethical matters, namely litigation and fornication in the church. These problems are of a far more general and widespread nature than the matter of incest he discussed in chapter five. Yet the same root of pride is behind both of these problems. The pride that makes the Corinthians think themselves superior to their brothers moves them to take one another to court rather than trusting the judgment and discernment of their fellow Christians. The same pride makes them disdainful of the moral standards that other Christians think important. The Corinthian church makes it abundantly clear that pride is the root of much evil.

These problems were not unique to the Corinthians, of course. We live today in perhaps the most litigious society the world has ever known; in addition, the devastating effects of the moral revolution of the 1960s have plunged America into immorality on a scale that, while it may not be unprecedented, has certainly enveloped the church to an extent previously unknown in American history. Consequently, today’s chapter

could very well have been written directly to the church of the twenty-first century. Students should have no trouble recognizing the timeliness of the issues with which Paul deals. While they may not be in a position to appreciate the problem of lawsuits, they certainly will be able to identify with Paul's concerns about immorality.

Today's lesson will be divided into two sections corresponding to the two problems Paul addresses in the chapter. While the first may not be a pressing issue to your students, it has the potential to teach them some important lessons about resolving conflicts among Christians and can easily be tied in with the lesson taught last week on church discipline. The second part is of more obvious concern to teenagers, and Paul's words provide a much-needed corrective to the hedonism being preached by the world in which your students must live.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reading or summarizing a few online, newspaper or magazine articles you have collected during the week. Find articles about recent lawsuits (the more absurd, the better), particularly if those lawsuits involve churches or Christian groups. Also include articles, if any are available, about church leaders who have recently been involved in immorality, or features about people with patently immoral lifestyles who during the interview make some profession of Christian faith.

1. Litigation (verses 1-11)

After indicating that you will return to the articles dealing with immorality later in the lesson, ask the students if they think it is ever necessary for Christians to take one another to court. Be sure they understand that the issue here is civil action, not criminal charges. Those familiar with the passage before us today may say that such a thing should never be done, but don't allow them to give a facile answer without thinking about it. Challenge them with examples of intransigence or cases where those faithful to God are being harassed by those whom they consider to have departed from the truth. It is likely, however, that such challenges on your part will not be necessary, since you will probably find several students in your class who are able to come up with a significant number of hypothetical situations in which Christians must seek legal remedies for injustice. At this point, turn to the passage.

Have your students read verses 1-11, then ask them how Paul answers the question they have just been discussing. They should be able to see clearly that Paul strictly forbids Christians taking one another to court. The key, of course, lies in the reasons that he gives for his prohibition. Note the following:

- verses 2-3 - The first reason Paul gives is that Christians will in the future be given much more weighty matters to judge. Though he does not elaborate on the specifics, the point is that those who are to reign with Christ should be able to rule their own affairs.
- verse 4 - Paul suggests that even those of lowest reputation in the church should be capable of rendering such judgments more wisely than unbelievers. The reason for this is simple - Christians possess the Holy Spirit, a resource of wisdom unavailable to unbelievers.
- verses 5-6 - The behavior of the Corinthians is shameful because, despite their pride concerning the great gifts found in their church, they are implying that there is not a single person in their midst wise enough to arbitrate disputes among them satisfactorily. Instead, their pride makes them unwilling to submit themselves to the judgment of others. Such individualism not only denies the

unity that is supposed to characterize the Body of Christ, but also shames the church before the world.

- verses 7-8 - The very fact that they are taking one another to court is seen by Paul as a defeat. This is true for two reasons. The first is that their church discipline obviously is not working properly (at this point, remind your students about what was discussed last week regarding church discipline). Disputes are not being handled in the early stages in an edifying manner. The second is that the Corinthians are obviously thinking of themselves before their brothers. They are willing, not only to gain at the expense of their fellow Christians, but even to cheat other believers and take advantage of them.

Having studied Paul's argument, return at this point to the articles and examples discussed at the beginning of the lesson. Ask how the teaching of this passage illuminates the procedure that should be followed in each of the cases under consideration. Close the section by emphasizing the connection between pride and an insistence on personal rights. Paul makes it clear that one who really wants to live like a Christian will be willing to set aside his own rights and to be taken advantage of rather than bringing the name of Christ into open shame. Note also that selfishness and covetousness are at the root of such disputes, and that there is no room for such attitudes among Christians.

2. Fornication (verses 12-20)

Begin this section by presenting the following rationale for sexual freedom: "Sex is a natural physical drive, no different from the desire for food or water. The satisfaction of such a drive cannot be immoral unless someone else is harmed by it." Ask your students if the argument sounds familiar. Then add the following: "For the Christian, the body is of no lasting spiritual significance. It is the soul that is important. Consequently, it does not really affect a person's spiritual life if he indulges his sexual drives." Your students should be able to recognize the fallacies in these two arguments, which were the two used by the Corinthians and are very similar to some of the excuses forwarded by those today who favor sexual license.

In verses 12-14, Paul gives four principles that must be considered when dealing with any ethical issue. The first is the principle of edification. We should ask, "What is good about it?" instead of defensively asking, "What's wrong with it?" The second principle is that of mastery. If it controls my life and my time rather than me being able to control it, it is wrong. The third is the principle of stewardship, which says that the body belongs to the Lord by right of creation and should be used for His glory. The fourth is the principle of redemption, which says that the Lord cares about the Christian's body enough to have redeemed it, and therefore it should be used appropriately. This is further reinforced by the promise of the resurrection of the body, about which Paul will have more to say in chapter fifteen. Be sure your students understand how these four principles answer the arguments raised in the previous paragraph.

In verses 15-17, Paul turns specifically to the problem of sexual immorality. Two points are to be noted here. The first is that sexual union involves more than the joining of two bodies. The notion that sex is no more than physical, tragic in its implications, is not unique to the twenty-first century. The broken lives of many attest to the falsity of the idea that sex is a purely physical act. The second point to be noted is that Christians have been incorporated into the Body of Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. This union is far more basic and foundational than anything of a physical nature. Consequently, any physical union must be in congruence with, rather than in contrast to, the mystical union of believers in the body of Christ. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 5 that the marriage bond is such a congruent union, but it is equally evident here that immoral liaisons are a contradiction of the purity of the believer's union with Christ and other Christians. Therefore, while sex outside of marriage is wrong for all, it is particularly repulsive in the lives of believers.

Verse 18 presents a further argument, namely that immorality is self-destructive, opposing the very self-love that is inherent in each of us. Whether Paul alludes here to sexually-transmitted diseases is not the issue, but he could well have had such things in mind.

He closes the chapter by applying to the individual the same argument he used for the church as a whole in 3:16-17. The body of the Christian is not insignificant, neither is it his to do with as he chooses. It is the temple of the Holy Spirit, the equivalent of the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament temple, the dwelling place of the shekinah glory, the very presence of God. How can such a holy place be used for sexual immorality? The Christian's body has been purchased from the slave market of sin, and now is to be devoted to its new owner - Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the four basic principles found in verses 12-14. Encourage the students to make moral decisions in the light of these things rather than asking the all-too-typical question, "What's wrong with it?"

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE FRUITS OF PRIDE

1. How do both of the problems discussed by Paul in I Corinthians 6 stem from the pride of the Corinthian Christians?
2. How do the principles of church discipline discussed last week provide a solution to the problem of Christians taking one another to court?
3. List the reasons Paul gives for saying that Christians should not bring lawsuits against one another.
4. What are the four principles given by Paul in verses 12-14 to help Christians deal with moral issues? How do these apply to the question of sexual immorality?
5. Why is it impossible to look at sex as a purely physical act?
6. Why is it important that Christians understand that both the church as a whole and Christians as individuals are the temple of the Holy Spirit?

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

I Corinthians 7

Lesson Aim

To teach students that marriage and Christian service are intended to work together rather than conflicting with one another.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:5 - “For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’) . . .”

Lesson Background

The seventh chapter of I Corinthians begins the second major section of the book, in which Paul addresses questions raised by the Corinthians themselves in a letter sent to him. This chapter is enormously controversial in many ways and has been subject to many different interpretations. In our coverage this week, we will seek to sidestep much of the controversy while at the same time focusing in on the basic principles communicated by Paul to the Corinthians.

The chapter before us today falls into two major sections, the first dealing with married Christians (verses 1-24), and the second dealing with single Christians (verses 25-40). Though your students are single, it will not be long before many of them are contemplating marriage, so Paul’s instructions to both groups are important for your students to hear. They need to understand what God considers important in making decisions about marriage.

The instructions given by Paul focus on two important ideas. The first of these is the sanctity and permanence of marriage. The second involves the relationship between marriage and Christian service. Since misunderstandings concerning these things abound, even in the church, Paul’s teaching on this subject

is particularly timely. Your students must understand that marriage is a holy union, not a social convention. Too many people set themselves up for divorce by entering marriage while considering divorce a live option. Such marriages usually fail. Another serious problem in the church occurs when believers marry unbelievers. Paul makes it clear in this passage that such a marriage is not an alternative for a Christian. As far as the relationship between marriage and Christian service is concerned, too many Christians set the two off against one another, neglecting their marriages to serve Christ or using marriage and family as an excuse for neglecting the church. Your students must recognize that these things ought not to be.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students which they consider to be a higher spiritual state, singleness or marriage. If they answer too quickly or easily, remind them that Jesus and Paul were both unmarried, and that many of the marriages recorded in Scripture dragged down those who were involved in them (David and Solomon come readily to mind, and Moses' marriages appear to have been no prize). After the discussion has reached a good stopping point, indicate that Paul was asked this same question by the Christians in Corinth and gave an answer to it in I Corinthians 7. Have them turn to the chapter to begin the study.

1. Instructions for Married Christians (verses 1-24)

Although your students are not yet married, what Paul has to say in this section is important for them because it tells them how they should view marriage. Too many Christians have bad marriages because they don't understand what God intends marriage to be.

A. Sexual Conduct in Marriage (verses 1-9)

In the late fourth century, the church father Jerome became an open advocate of the benefits of asceticism. This popular preacher encouraged all he met in the city of Rome to adopt a flesh-denying lifestyle. Unfortunately, the ones who listened most enthusiastically to his message were a group of married women in the Roman church. When their husbands found out that Jerome had convinced their wives to live lives of ascetic denial, they ran the preacher out of town!

Too many people over the years have fallen prey to the idea that sexual abstinence is a higher spiritual state than participation in sexual activity. This has led not only to the encouragement of celibacy and monasticism in the Catholic Church, but also to a great deal of guilt in connection with sex on the part of many Christians. In this paragraph, Paul makes it clear that celibacy is not for everyone and that sexual abstinence in marriage is downright foolish. We will look more at Paul's teaching on celibacy in the last section of the chapter, but at this point we should note that he does not treat it as a higher spiritual state, but says that different people have different gifts - some have been intended for marriage, while others are designed to live single lives. Within the context of marriage, however, asceticism is not an option, except for short periods and by mutual consent. The reason for this is that sexual temptation is extremely powerful, and could easily lead someone astray in the face of prolonged abstinence.

For your students, verse 9 is perhaps the most important one in this section. While Paul says that sexual abstinence is not good because of the power of sexual temptation, such a statement is made in the context of marriage only. No one can use the power of the sexual drive as an excuse for sexual activity outside of marriage. The only two alternatives Paul offers are marriage and "burning with passion" - a reference to suffering the pangs of abstinence without yielding to them.

B. The Problem of Divorce (verses 10-16)

The issue of divorce in the Corinthian church was a complicated one. The reason for this is that many of the Corinthians were new converts (the church had been in existence for less than ten years), and many of these new converts were married to spouses who had not become Christians. The teaching of this section must be seen as directed toward such people. It can never be taken as an excuse for a Christian to marry an unbeliever.

In verses 10-11, Paul addresses Christian couples in the church and makes it clear that they are not to seek divorce. This is not intended to contradict Jesus' teaching on the subject, but simply to reinforce the basic principle emphasized by Jesus, namely the sanctity and permanence of marriage. Too many Christians set themselves up for broken marriages because they enter marriage with the idea in the back of their minds that divorce is an option "if things don't work out." At this point, ask your students why such marriages are programmed for failure. They should be able to see that such a mindset undermines commitment and trust and saps any motivation to adjust and work through problems in the marriage. Divorce is too readily viewed as the easy way out, and the couple never puts in the effort needed to sustain a marriage.

In verses 12-16, "the rest" to whom Paul speaks are those who, by virtue of conversion after marriage, are married to unbelieving spouses. The teaching of Paul for such Christians is that they are not to sever the marriage bond as long as the unbelieving spouse is willing to continue in the marriage. The two reasons Paul gives for this command are that the unbelievers in the family will benefit from the godly influence of the believer in the home, and that God may use the testimony of the believer to save the unbelieving spouse. [NOTE: Verse 14 is the basis of the "covenant family" doctrine, but I would not advise discussing it with your class at this point. There are too many other valuable lessons in this chapter.] If, however, the unbeliever insists on terminating the marriage, the resulting divorce would be legitimate, and the unbeliever would be free to remarry (see the use of the term "bondage" in Romans 7:2). Be sure to reemphasize that these instructions are not for the benefit of believers who sinfully marry unbelievers.

C. The Basic Principle (verses 17-24)

This paragraph, at first glance, may appear to be out of place in a chapter dealing with marriage. Ask your students to isolate the basic principle Paul enunciates in this paragraph, and then apply it to the preceding discussion. They should be able to see that different Christians are called to different lives and different ministries. No Christian should seek to force others to conform artificially to the lifestyle that is his own, whether it be marriage or singleness, or whether it be a particular cultural expression of Christianity. Christians will serve Christ best when their focus is on their relationship to Christ rather than on the details of their external circumstances.

The important application for your students here is that no Christian should ever panic about his or her singleness. Too many young adults allow their singleness (and their desire to terminate it) to destroy their service to God. Our eyes should be on Christ, not our circumstances. The will of God is to live a godly life and to serve the Savior, not to divert all attention to seeking the "right one for me."

2. Instructions for Single Christians (verses 25-40)

The instructions given by Paul in the second part of chapter 7 have often been misunderstood in the history of the Church. They have been used both to advocate celibacy and to accuse Paul of misogyny! They have been used to forbid absolutely the marriage of the clergy, in blatant contradiction to the words of Paul in I Timothy 4:3, and they have been dismissed as no more than the opinion of a confirmed old bachelor, in

opposition to Paul's own words in the last verse of this chapter. If we are to understand Paul's words correctly, however, we must take account of their historical context. The key phrase is found in verse 26 - "the present crisis." His strong advocacy of celibacy must be conditioned by the meaning of this phrase. Many have suggested that Paul was here referring to the immanence of the Second Coming. If that were the case, however, he hardly would have advocated marriage for those who have lost husbands at a young age in I Timothy 5:14. It is much more likely that Paul was referring to a situation that particularly concerned the church at Corinth, such as a period of persecution that was looming on the horizon. Under those circumstances, it would clearly be beneficial to be without the extra burdens and responsibilities imposed by a family. Not only would the freedom of being single allow for more attention to be given to service, but it also would permit easier movement from place to place and remove the temptation to deny the faith in order to preserve one's life for the sake of one's family. Singleness is seen as better by Paul, therefore, not as a general principle, but because of the difficult circumstances that the Corinthians were going to face in the near future, and which Paul faced continually.

Conclusion

The last two verses of the chapter provide a good summary of the basic ideas Paul has presented in the preceding verses. Four key ideas come out. Use them to conclude and summarize the lesson.

1. Marriage is permanent, and the marriage bond may not be broken, even for allegedly religious reasons.
2. When the marriage bond has been broken, either by death (stated) or by those things said in Scripture to sever it (implied), the person is free to remarry.
3. There is no justification for a Christian to marry an unbeliever. A Christian may be a witness to an unbelieving spouse, but this is no excuse for "missionary dating."
4. When the church faces times of great stress, there is good reason to consider refraining from marriage.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

1. Name two reasons why the questions surrounding the matters of marriage and divorce were particularly important for the members of the church in Corinth to resolve.
2. What are some of the reasons why some people think that marriage is a higher spiritual state than singleness, or that singleness is a higher spiritual state than marriage?
3. Why is it dangerous to impose celibacy on anyone?
4. Why should Christians not marry or even date unbelievers?
5. Under what circumstances does Paul advise Christians not to marry?

MEAT OFFERED TO IDOLS

I Corinthians 8

Lesson Aim

To teach students the principles necessary to deal with those issues that are matters of Christian liberty.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:6 - “. . . yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and for whom we live.”

Lesson Background

The eighth chapter of I Corinthians begins a section of the book in which Paul deals with the question of Christian liberty. The discussion occupies three chapters in the book, and thus will be the subject of our next three lessons. You may recall (but your students may not) that in our study of the book of Romans last summer we spent a lesson on Christian liberty when we covered Romans 14. It will certainly do no harm to go over the subject again, especially since issues of Christian liberty are difficult for young people to sort out while living in a world that encourages complete license. The chapter before us today sets out the basic principles we need to deal with matters of Christian liberty, while the next two chapters give examples to help us see how and how not to apply those principles - the positive example of Paul himself in chapter nine and the negative example of Israel in the wilderness in chapter ten.

Christian liberty can be a problem for teenagers (and for adults as well) in two areas. The first involves the tendency to use Christian liberty as an excuse for sin. In order to counteract this, students must be clearly shown to what issues the principles of chapter eight do and do not apply. The second problem that

frequently arises in connection with this subject is legalism, involving the prohibition of certain types of behavior that are within the bounds of Christian liberty. Because of the prevalence of this problem, it is important that students understand the proper attitude that is to be taken toward those who differ concerning one of these questions.

One further comment should be added for the benefit of the teacher. We cannot afford to sit back smugly and think that legalism is a problem faced only by fundamentalists. The Reformed community has its share of legalisms, though they often involve certain church practices rather than the typical “worldly” matters over which fundamentalists tend to get upset. If this lesson is to have real impact on your students, the applications you make must come from your own church situation. Be sure not to spend the entire lesson taking broadsides at other Christians. Instead, concentrate on those areas where your church and your students struggle with the question of Christian liberty.

Today’s chapter is short, so the material will not be divided up into sections for purposes of our study. Instead, have the students read the entire chapter at the beginning of the hour, then conduct the lesson as a question-and-answer session.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students how a person can tell the difference between those questions that should determine fellowship among Christians and those that should not. In order for Christians to fellowship together and work together, what must they agree about? In what areas should they be free to differ? They certainly will recognize immediately that Christians should be able to differ on non-essentials while requiring agreement on the fundamentals of the faith. Be sure not to let them get off the hook that easily. Press them to give specifics, indicating what they consider to be essentials and what they mean by areas in which Christians may legitimately differ. After they have struggled with this question for a while - long enough to reveal disagreements among themselves about what is essential and what is not - assure them that this question is a very difficult one about which Christians have debated for many centuries. Often the Church has been tempted to go to one extreme or the other. Some have defined just about everything as of the essence of the faith, thus sanctifying their own ideas and sacrificing unity for the sake of purity. Others have been so flexible that they have been willing to compromise the basic doctrines of Scripture, thus destroying the purity of the Church for the sake of unity. Balance in these matters is not easy to maintain.

The Corinthians struggled with this problem as much as churches do today. Some in the church insisted that all Christians follow their narrowly-defined code of morality, which in its specifics had little relationship to the teachings of Scripture. Others maintained that their freedom in Christ allowed them to do almost anything, and were scornful of the hyperactive consciences of the others. This generated an explosive situation, which Paul begins to address in I Corinthians 8. Have your students read the entire chapter to themselves, and then pose the following questions to the class as a whole.

1. What is the specific issue raised by the Corinthians?

The issue raised by the church was that of meat offered to idols, but Paul uses this as a springboard to deal with a much larger question, that of Christian liberty and its proper uses. Corinth was a pagan city with a very cosmopolitan population. As was true with most large Roman cities, it was full of idolatry of all sorts. It was customary that when a sacrifice was offered in a pagan temple, it would be divided into three parts. One part would be burned on the altar, one part given to the priest, and one part returned to the person who had made the offering. The Corinthian Christians thus could hardly avoid contact with such meat. This is the meat that would be eaten at civic festivals, brought home and served for dinner by their non-Christian

friends, and sold, often at a reduced rate, in the marketplace (the priests often had more than they could eat themselves, and would sell the extra to raise money for the temple). The question asked by the Corinthians - one that obviously had caused serious division in the congregation - was whether or not Christians may in good conscience eat such meat.

2. To what class of issues do the principles enunciated by Paul properly apply?

It is often thought that the principles found in this chapter and in the parallel passage in Romans 14 apply to “gray areas.” Strictly speaking, this is not true. There really are no such things as gray areas. Everything is either right or wrong, because it either honors God or dishonors Him. What we must recognize, of course, is the enormous complexity of categorizing different actions. There are some actions that are clearly proclaimed to be sinful by the Word of God. About such matters there can be no dispute. On the other side, however, it is virtually impossible to state categorically that a particular action is good, since an action is judged, not only on its own merits or on the results that it produces, but on the attitude of heart of the person performing the deed. Thus even an act of worship can be sin if it is done with a wrong attitude. Can your students think of any examples of such sin in Scripture?

Another factor must be considered here as well. We are not only talking about actions that are judged to be right or wrong on the basis of the motive of the one performing the action, we are also talking about actions that in themselves are thought to be right by some and wrong by others, yet are not classified specifically as wrong by the Word of God. In other words, these are matters that involve the application of the principles of Scripture, but where Christians disagree on the application of those principles. Notice that the question of meat offered to idols fits this description perfectly. Paul states clearly that there is nothing wrong with eating the meat. But it is equally clear that some Corinthians think it is wrong. Ask your students to come up with a list of matters over which Christians differ today that would fit into the same category. They will undoubtedly come up with a quick list of questionable practices (smoking, drinking, dancing, etc.), but make sure they also include some church practices in their list (most notably for many Reformed congregations, the manner in which the Sabbath is to be observed fits in here).

3. What do knowledge and love have to do with these problems?

In the first three verses of the chapter, Paul establishes a contrast between knowledge and love. This is not done because knowledge and love are in opposition to one another. Paul makes it clear in Ephesians 4:15 that truth and love are inseparable - there can be no real truth without its application in love, nor can there be any real love unless it is grounded in truth. The apparent contrast here is based, not in truth, but in the supposed “knowledge” that the Corinthians are using to beat one another over the head about this question. It is clear that the Corinthians not only differed over the rightness or wrongness of eating meat offered to idols, but that each side was also firmly convinced that it was right and the others were sinfully in the wrong. True knowledge leads to humility and unity, not to arrogance and divisiveness. In the application of the principles of Scripture, love must be the determining factor, not supposed “knowledge.” In matters such as this, people are more important than the rightness or wrongness of actions. The application of principle is to give way to the importance of showing love for fellow believers. Your students must understand that while the authority of the Bible is absolute, the authority of one’s opinions about it is not. We must be humble enough to realize that we are all fallible interpreters of an infallible text.

4. Who were the strong and weak brothers?

Give your students a shot at this one. Too many people today seem to think that it is those with the hyperactive consciences who are the stronger, more spiritual Christians. Paul, however, makes it clear that those who feel the behavior in question is wrong are the weak, while those who can engage in it with a clear conscience are the strong. It must also be noted that both sides in the dispute in Corinth had wrong attitudes. While the strong were right in their assessment of the behavior and the weak were being unnecessarily scrupulous, both had negative attitudes toward those with whom they differed. The weak viewed the strong as loose-living sinners who had never broken with their pagan roots, while the strong viewed the weak as super-pious snobs who sought to force their pharisaical values on everyone else while at the same time living lives of constant fear and guilt. The strong despised the weak, and the weak condemned the strong.

Though we often think of this question as more readily applying to our fundamentalist brethren, does it not apply to us as well? On the one hand, we often look down on fundamentalists for their lists of do's and don't's. But we at the same time have our own legalistic squabbles, whether it be over Sabbath-keeping, holidays, or the application of the Regulative Principle (which is itself an application of Scripture). We have our own strong and weak to look toward in these matters.

5. What is a stumblingblock?

As it is used in this passage, a stumblingblock is that which causes someone else to sin. It is not something that causes offense - an infelicitous KJV translation that has led in many cases over the years to the tyranny of the weak in many churches. Ask your students how the fact that someone engages in behavior that is thought by someone else to be sinful can cause that other person to sin. The sin occurs when, through the influence of the stronger brother, the weak brother does something that violates his own conscience. A person who violates his own conscience sins, even though the behavior may not be in itself sinful. This is true because a person who does something that he believes to be wrong is showing an attitude of rebellion against God, even if his judgment of the behavior in question is erroneous. Thus a strong brother may influence a weak brother to sin by his lack of sensitivity to the weak brother's (admittedly hyperactive) conscience. Have your students discuss what specific steps they might take to ensure that they do not cause someone else to sin as they exercise their liberty as Christians.

6. How are such issues to be resolved?

The key factor in resolving such conflicts is the primacy of love within the body of Christ. It is vital to notice that Paul does not say that all Christians must agree on issues of this sort. It is not necessary for the church to have total agreement on these issues in order for there to be unity in the body. The attitude of the strong brothers should be one of loving concern and sensitivity for those who are weak. This sensitivity should include sufficient love for the weak so that they would be willing to forgo activity that is completely moral in order to avoid leading the weak into sin. The weak, on the other hand, must show love to their stronger brothers in two ways. One is by refusing to condemn those who differ from them in applying the principles of Scripture. The other is to be open to instruction from the strong. Pride makes people unteachable. The weak will remain weak, their consciences bound about matters that are not sinful, as long as they arrogantly refuse to open themselves to the instruction of the strong. Each must give priority to deferring to the other.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson with a general summary of the questions covered, especially emphasizing the priority of love in dealing with other believers. Decisions on whether to engage in certain kinds of activities must progress beyond “What’s wrong with it?” Students must learn to ask not only, “Is it edifying to me?”, but also, “What effect will it have on the other people around me?” Honest answers to that final question may sometimes lead the conscientious Christian to abstain from something, even if it is perfectly acceptable in itself, out of concern for his weaker brother.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

MEAT OFFERED TO IDOLS

1. Why was the issue of meat sacrificed to idols a problem for the Corinthian church?
2. Which group in the church did Paul refer to as the stronger brothers? Which were the weaker?
3. Which group, the strong or the weak, was right in its attitude toward the practice in question? In what ways were both wrong in their attitudes toward each other?
4. Which is more important, the unity of the church or its purity? Why?
5. Is it true that there are some things that are neither right nor wrong? Why or why not?
6. Under what circumstances might it be a sin to do something that is not wrong in itself?

THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL

I Corinthians 9

Lesson Aim

To stimulate students to follow the example of Paul in giving up their own rights for the good of others.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:7 - “But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.”

Lesson Background

After outlining the basic principles involved in the issue of Christian liberty in chapter 8, Paul now illustrates those principles using the example of his own life. The defense of his apostolic ministry here is not of the same character as that in II Corinthians. In that later epistle, he is defending the legitimacy of his apostleship against those who were attacking him, perhaps even because of the content of this first letter. Here he is using his own apostolic conduct as an example of the kind of selfless love to which he was exhorting the Corinthians in their conflict over Christian liberty. The main thrust of the chapter is Paul’s willingness to forgo his legitimate rights and allowable preferences for the good of others.

Far too much of the discussion surrounding matters of Christian liberty is essentially self-centered. Like the society around us, we are primarily concerned with our rights. We have been conditioned to think that the rights of the individual are of paramount importance, and that anyone who refuses to fight for his rights is a “wimp.” The Christian perspective, here represented by the attitude of Paul, is radically different. In questions of Christian liberty, the love of a believer for his brothers and sisters in Christ takes precedence

over his own rights and preferences. The question, “What’s wrong with it?”, must not only give way to the question, “What’s edifying about it?”, but must also yield to the query, “Will it harm any of my brothers or sisters?”

In today’s lesson, we will spend some time looking at the examples given by Paul from his own life in this chapter. After deriving some important principles from these examples, the students will have the opportunity to come up with some examples from their own lives of situations in which love requires the setting aside of lawful behavior. After the students’ examples have been discussed, the lesson will close with an application drawn from the closing verses of the chapter. The emphasis today should be placed on the kind of attitude that does not shrink from denying oneself for the sake of others.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking the students to list some of the rights granted to American citizens by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In addition to these, the Declaration of Independence also mentions that “all men are created equal, and have been endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Ask your students if they think the concept of rights expressed in these foundational documents is biblical. Ask them if they think there are other rights they possess besides those enumerated above. After the discussion, point out that such a focus on rights is characteristic of our society (be sure to mention some of the more outrageous “rights” people have claimed in recent years, including the “right” to abortion and same-sex marriage), but is not characteristic of Scripture. Jesus certainly did not insist on his rights, and neither did Paul. Many conflicts within the church over issues of Christian liberty stem from people’s insistence on their rights (have your students relate this to last week’s lesson). In chapter nine of I Corinthians, Paul uses himself as an example of the kind of love and concern for others that keeps Christian liberty from becoming a point of conflict. He makes it clear that he is willing to give up his rights for the good of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

1. The Rights of Ministry (verses 1-18)

The best example that Paul can give of a love that sets aside one’s own rights for the benefit of others is that of his own conduct as an apostle. The Corinthians were so wrapped up in defending their own rights (the right to eat meat offered to idols, for instance) that they failed to consider that there are times when rights should purposefully be given up.

Have your students read verses 3-6 and list three rights that legitimately belonged to Paul as a minister of the Gospel. They should be able to see that, as one who had been set apart by the Lord for the ministry, Paul had the right to be supported by the church financially, to have his food and lodging provided, and to take a wife and family with him in his travels. Apparently the other apostles, along with the believing brothers of Jesus such as James and Jude, were enjoying these privileges. Paul and Barnabas, in fact, were the only ones who were not taking advantage of the support that could legitimately have been theirs from the churches to which they ministered.

Why does Paul mention these things? It is certainly not to raise himself above the other apostles by suggesting that his dedication to the ministry is any greater than theirs, nor is it to display his holiness before the people of Corinth. What, then, was Paul’s motive in speaking of these matters? Have your students see if they can find out from verses 12-18. They should note the following:

- verse 12 - Paul did not exercise his rights in order to avoid hindering the work of the Gospel. He is not implying by this that those who did accept the support of the churches were hindering the

Gospel, but he is recognizing that money was a sensitive issue. In Paul's day, as in ours, many frauds were traveling around and making a rather prosperous living by preaching. Paul had no desire to be lumped with them in people's minds; he thought that would be just one more hurdle for the Gospel to overcome.

- verse 15 - Paul is not subtly hinting around in order to get the Corinthians to support him. He flatly states that he does not want their money, even if they wanted to contribute to his work. In chapter 16, when he does ask them for money, it is for the poor and not for his own support.
- verses 16-17 - Paul is not saying these things in order to increase the esteem in which he is held by the congregation. He does not consider his rejection of his rights to be praiseworthy. Instead, he insists that he could not be happy living in any other way. Those who give their lives to the service of Christ are not martyrs, but live lives of greater fulfillment than those who live for themselves.

2. The Privileges of Liberty (verses 19-23)

Paul's refusal to exercise the prerogatives of his apostleship is not the only example of his life of love and concern for others. With regard to the Christian liberty issues specifically raised in chapter 8, Paul also passes up his rights in order to enhance his ministry. In matters of Christian liberty, he defers to the preferences of those among whom he ministers in order to be able to deal with them more effectively.

In these verses, Paul says that he is able to blend in with Jews, with their legal scruples, or with Gentiles who have recently been converted from paganism and thus may be hesitant about practices that bring back bad memories of their past lives. He is a strong brother willing to be enslaved to the weak in order to minister to them more effectively. He can get along in any group of Christians without having their differences become a point of contention. This does not mean, however, that he takes an "anything goes" attitude toward questions of behavior. His flexibility is always limited by the law of Christ.

Ask your students what Paul means by verse 23. In what sense does his conduct in these matters of Christian liberty affect his own participation in the blessings of the Gospel? He is not saying here that his salvation is maintained by his show of love to others, but he clearly recognizes that one who is not willing to forgo his rights and privileges for the sake of others is not living up to his profession, and thus may legitimately question his Christianity.

3. The Discernment of Priority (verses 24-27)

Paul closes the chapter by using several sports images, drawn from the Isthmian Games held every other year outside Corinth, to illustrate the value of discipline rather than indulgence in matters of Christian liberty. The Christian is not like the marathon runner whose main goal is to finish. The Christian life requires maximum effort, doing whatever is necessary (within the rules, of course) to succeed. The discipline of the runner and boxer is nothing to that of the Christian, since the former seek only a temporal reward. The commitment of the Christian may even require him to turn his blows against his own body - not like the medieval flagellants, but in the sense of denying himself, for the good of his ministry, those things that are lawful. Proper use of Christian liberty is thus essential for Christian ministry.

Conclusion

Close the lesson by asking students to think of situations in which love for other Christians might require them to set aside their rights. Focus especially on the areas of Christian liberty mentioned last week. Be sure your students understand that something may be both right and personally edifying, yet the primacy of love for our brothers and sisters in Christ may require that a Christian refrain from such behavior. Are your students willing to deny themselves for the sake of other Christians? If they are not, they place themselves in danger of disqualification, i.e., they have good reason to question the legitimacy of their profession of faith.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT THE EXAMPLE OF PAUL

1. How does I Corinthians 9 relate to the theme of Christian liberty introduced by Paul in I Corinthians 8?
2. What were the rights to which Paul was entitled by virtue of his work in preaching the Gospel?
3. Why did he not insist on these rights?
4. In I Corinthians 9:19-23, how could Paul “become all things to all men” and yet still be “under Christ’s law”? Where did his flexibility end?
5. How is the self-denial of a Christian like that of an athlete? How is it even more severe?
6. What are some areas of your life where your love for other Christians may require you to give up your rights?

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

I Corinthians 10

Lesson Aim

To help students see the importance of learning from history, particularly in the area of the abuse of liberty.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:8 - “But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.”

Lesson Background

As we study I Corinthians 10 today, we reach the conclusion of Paul’s discussion of the problem of meat sacrificed to idols. In chapter 9 we saw that he used his own apostolic ministry as an example to the Corinthians of how such matters should be handled. That example was positive, in the sense that Paul was encouraging the Corinthians to follow his example. In this chapter, we find him using a negative example - that of the Israelites in the wilderness. This negative example is valuable to your students for several reasons. First of all, it provides clear evidence for the value of the study of history. There is solid truth in the axiom that he who fails to study history is doomed to repeat it. The lessons of the past are intended for our instruction. While this is true specifically with regard to the historical narrative of the Old Testament, it is equally valid for history in general, since God is sovereign over all history, not just the history of the Bible. As we saw in the unit on Church History earlier, there is much to be learned from observing the workings of God in His people and in the world in ages past.

The second benefit of this negative lesson provided by Israel in the wilderness is its direct application to the matter of Christian liberty. As we will see, one of the dangers of Christian liberty is the potential for being seduced into immorality through its exercise. The Israelites certainly fell into this trap, and many of

the Corinthians had done the same. Your students need to be able to distinguish between liberty and immorality, and resist the latter while exercising the former.

Paul concludes the chapter with a summary of the Christian liberty issue, in which he gives two key principles along with some very practical advice. Your students should be able to apply this advice to some of the struggles they face over similar questions today.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by asking the students what benefits are to be gained from the study of history. After the obligatory response by your class clown, who will immediately shout out, “None!”, remind them of some of the issues discussed in the unit on Church History. Hopefully they will be able to explain that the examples of the past, both positive and negative, provide useful warnings and encouragements, while the knowledge of the past also gives insight into the workings of God in the world. Point out that in the passage before us today, Paul uses the lessons of history to illustrate his teaching about Christian liberty. Last week, we saw him give a positive illustration of how Christian liberty was to be practiced - his own apostolic ministry. Today, we will look at the negative example he provides for us - that of Israel in the wilderness.

1. The Example of Israel (I Corinthians 10:1-13)

Israel in the wilderness, like the church in Corinth, was a group of professing believers. They participated daily in the blessings of God, but God’s judgment of them showed that they were not all what they professed to be. In verses 6-10, Paul gives five examples that tie together the experience of Israel in the wilderness with the problems faced by the church at Corinth. Each one of the incidents to which Paul alludes has a bearing in one way or another on the situation in Corinth.

Assign each one of the incidents to a student or group of students in your class. Have them relate the incidents to the issue of Christian liberty and the problems it had produced in Corinth. The incidents are as follows: verse 6 alludes to Numbers 11, verse 7 to Exodus 32, verse 8 to Numbers 25, verse 9 to Numbers 21:4-9, and verse 10 to Numbers 16. Have the individuals or groups report back to the class about their conclusions. They should be able to pick out the following ideas, following the lead provided by Paul’s exhortations in I Corinthians 10:

- verse 6 (Numbers 11) - The incident of the quail shows that Christian liberty can easily produce covetousness. Those who set their attention too much on the things of this world, even those things that are good, can be swept up in the sin of covetousness. Do your students insist on the worldly things to which they have a right to the extent that they make having those things a priority in their lives?
- verse 7 (Exodus 32) - The incident of the Golden Calf shows that participation in worldly practices can often lead to the worship of false gods. We, of course, do not bow down to golden calves, but we easily are led into the worship of materialism and hedonism by partaking of the legitimate things and pleasures of this world.
- verse 8 (Numbers 25) - The seduction of Israel by Moab shows graphically how Satan can destroy the testimony of the church without ever touching its doctrine. How many Christian leaders are your students aware of who have brought shame to God through involvement in sexual immorality? The pervasiveness of sex in our culture can be a matter of serious temptation to Christian young people

who are overly zealous in the exercise of their Christian liberty. [I don't know what position your church takes with regard to dancing, but this might be a good time to talk about it.]

- verse 9 (Numbers 21:4-9) - The incident of the brass serpent shows the danger of not following and respecting the leaders God has established. The Corinthians were rejecting the leadership of their elders by their insistence on their rights in matters of Christian liberty. Christianity is not intended to be an individualistic religion. God's Church is not a democracy, where each person is free to act on his own independent of other Christians. Those who do so test the Lord's patience, often with devastating results.
- verse 10 (Numbers 16) - The rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram is very similar to the schism that was tearing the Corinthian church apart. Those who put their own rights ahead of the needs of others inevitably divide the Body.

In the matter of Christian liberty, then, we need to learn from history - not only the history of the Israelites in the wilderness, but also the history of the church in Corinth. Paul finishes the paragraph by issuing both a warning and an encouragement. Those who profess to be Christians should not take their standing for granted, but must continually evaluate themselves and their behavior. No one can make the excuse that his situation is unique, for all Christians face the same temptations, and God provides help for all who seek it.

2. The Difference Between Liberty and Immorality (I Corinthians 10:14-22)

As the examples already given by Paul indicate, Christian liberty brings with it certain temptations of which we all must be aware. The Corinthians had succumbed to these temptations, and their use of liberty had led them into sin. Their confident partaking of meat offered to idols had brought them face to face with a boundary that they had been unable to avoid crossing. Though eating meat offered to idols was not wrong in and of itself, participation in the revelry associated with the feasts held in the idol temples was clearly sin. Help the students to understand Paul's reasoning by going through the paragraph as follows:

- verses 14-18 - Paul first establishes the point that participation in a religious feast symbolizes unity both with the deity and with the other worshipers. One may not engage in a feast in honor of an idol without acknowledging both the validity of the god being worshiped and affirming a unity with the worshipers of that deity.
- verses 19-22 - This is true even though the idol does not in fact represent a god at all. Though the god may not be real, the worship of such false gods is demonic in origin and power, and a Christian may not participate without being tainted by it. This is terrible, both because of the impossibility of serving two masters (God and demons are totally incompatible) and because of the jealousy to which such infidelity stirs the righteous and holy God.

Before leaving this section, your students need to consider its practical implications for their lives. Ask them to consider in what ways the line between Christian liberty and idolatry may be a fine one in our day. In what ways can the exercise of Christian liberty be a danger to the strong brother who indulges with no twinge of guilt as well as to the weak brother who may be encouraged to act against his conscience? Make sure your students understand that areas of liberty can seduce into sin because there is always the desire to want more and go farther.

3. Final Summation Regarding Christian Liberty (I Corinthians 10:23-33)

Paul now brings together the warnings and exhortations he has already presented concerning this issue of Christian liberty. He begins by presenting two fundamental principles for dealing with questions of Christian liberty in verses 23-24. In making decisions about such matters, one should always consider whether such behavior would be profitable to himself and edifying to others, especially in terms of accomplishing spiritual good. It is, of course, not at all unusual for us to consider whether a certain type of behavior would be personally beneficial, though the decisions we make on such matters are often pitifully short-sighted and subject to rationalization. Unfortunately, we less often ask ourselves if our choices will be helpful or harmful to others. As Paul indicates in verse 24, the second question is really more important than the first - a Christian is to show his love for others by putting their welfare before his own and by considering what is edifying to them before determining questions of personal profitability.

Have your students examine the practical advice Paul gives to the Corinthians in verses 25-30. What does he say about eating meat offered to idols? He first says that, for the sake of one's own conscience, if a person encounters meat of unknown origin, whether in the market or in the home of an unbeliever, he should not ask where it came from. This is not dishonest, because the meat has its ultimate origin in God, wherever it may have been since then. However, if someone makes the point of mentioning that the meat was offered to idols, it is better to refrain, both for the sake of one's testimony before unbelievers and to avoid wounding the tender consciences of other Christians. This is not intended to be a dictatorship by the weak - they have no right to criticize the strong - but a matter of consideration of one believer for another.

How does this apply to your students? They should not make an issue out of matters of Christian liberty, either with unbelievers or with other Christians. Should the question be raised by others, however, action should be taken with regard to the testimony of the believer before non-Christians and out of concern for the consciences of other believers.

Paul then summarizes the matter in verses 31-33, where he states that all must be done to the glory of God. This is the ultimate standard for matters of Christian liberty. This not only means that a person should choose to do those things in which he may glorify God, but also that he needs to be concerned as to whether or not the impact of his behavior on the lives of others will bring glory to God. The Christian has no right to cause another brother to sin or to scandalize an unbeliever, no matter how much he thinks his behavior in and of itself is glorifying to God.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

1. In I Corinthians 10:6-10, Paul alludes to five incidents from the wilderness wanderings of Israel. Name the five incidents and indicate where they are found in the Bible.
2. What do the five incidents mentioned above have to do with the problem of Christian liberty, especially as it concerned the Corinthian church?
3. Why does Christian liberty often produce a temptation to immorality? How can such a temptation be avoided?
4. What are the two key principles Paul gives for making decisions on matters of Christian liberty in I Corinthians 10:23-24? Which is more important, and why?
5. Why does the commandment to glorify God in all things require that we consider the needs of others above our own rights?

ORDER IN WORSHIP

I Corinthians 11

Lesson Aim

To show students the importance of worshipping God in His way rather than following the ways of the world around us.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:9 - "Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumblingblock to the weak."

Lesson Background

The eleventh chapter of I Corinthians begins the third and last section of the book, in which Paul responds to specific questions raised by the Corinthians themselves. The first question he addresses involves the conduct of public worship. His instructions on this subject are contained in chapters 11-14.

In chapter eleven, Paul deals with two problems that were disrupting the worship of the church in Corinth. Unfortunately, both of these were closely associated with the culture of the first-century Roman world and have only limited connection to church practices in twenty-first-century America. The instructions given by Paul have universal applicability nonetheless, simply because in discussing the problems faced by the Corinthians, he enunciates principles that continue to be meaningful in the church today.

The two specific problems with which Paul deals in this chapter are the veiling of women and the communal meal associated with the Lord's Supper. The veiling of women was a common practice in the Middle East of Paul's day, even as it continues to be in some places today. The concept is completely foreign to modern Americans, however. The *agape* feast held in connection with the observance of the

Lord's Supper is not something practiced by many churches today, but it was common in the first century. It is not surprising, then, that many have struggled today with the proper application of this chapter. Approaches range from those who ignore the chapter as irrelevant to those who absolutize the practices of the first-century Mediterranean world. Your students are likely to tend in the former direction. If this lesson is to have value for them, the focus must be on the principles set out by Paul for dealing with cultural questions in worship, as well as for showing love and respect to other members of the Body of Christ.

In the lesson, I will attempt to give sufficient background information to allow the students to understand the issues involved in the chapter, but the lesson must focus on application. Students must learn what it means to glorify God through absolute obedience to biblical precepts as well as through enlightened adaptation of cultural practices.

Lesson Procedure

Start class by asking your students if they have ever seen Mennonite or Amish women (or others) who wear small lace caps whenever they are in public (in our area of Pennsylvania, such people are common). Do they know any women who wear hats in church as a matter of conscience? Why do people do such things? After you give an opportunity for student response, indicate that the source of such practices among some Christians is the passage before us today - I Corinthians 11. Aside from the curiosity stimulated by the behavior of some Christians, however, your students will probably not see a great deal of relevance in this passage. Point out at the very beginning that there are some useful applications here that have little to do with the wearing of hats in church.

1. The Covering of Women (verses 2-16)

One of the most difficult problems associated with the first half of this chapter is the matter of figuring out the precise nature of the issue with which Paul is dealing. Is he talking about hair or hats?

A. The Issue

Ask your students to read verses 2-16, and then ask them what exactly Paul is talking about when he refers to a woman covering her head. Explain that some think he is talking about hair, while others insist he has a veil or hat in mind.

Those who favor the hair interpretation point out that Paul does refer to hair as a covering in verse 15, and that the problem thus involved either women who wore their hair in a masculine way (first-century unisex?), or women who allowed their hair to fly around in an unkempt fashion during ecstatic worship experiences (another area where the Corinthians had problems), which was seen as a violation of the husband's authority, since according to Numbers 5:18, such a woman bore the disgrace of marital infidelity.

Others point out that the wearing of veils by women was common in the Middle East of the first century just as it is today. The veil was a sign of submission to one's husband, and to go without one in public was considered shameful. We know from other places in the book that women in the Corinthian church were participating in worship equally with men. Their concept of liberty in Christ apparently extended to clothing as well.

I believe the second view to be the correct one. To begin with, Paul makes a distinction between the cutting of the hair and the absence of a covering in verse 6. He also indicates in verses 4-5 that men do not

have the covering in question; if hair were in view, they would simply be said to have less of it. We must recognize, however, that the prohibition here is a cultural one. It is because of the significance accorded to veils in the culture of first-century Corinth that Paul prohibited women from going about unveiled. To absolutize such a culturally-conditioned taboo would be as foolish as insisting that, because the Israelites in the Old Testament were forbidden to boil a kid in its mother's milk, that meat and dairy products may never be eaten in the same dish (the source of the kosher dietary prohibition among Jews).

B. The Application

What, then, is the significance of Paul's discussion here for your students? It does not teach (at least in my opinion) that women must wear hats in church. Nor does it provide a basis for regulating the hair length of young men (this was a more serious issue decades ago when long hair was the fashion, of course; suffice it to say that, while Paul indicates that "the nature of things" shows that men should have short hair and women long hair, he does not attempt to define the terms "short" and "long," which must thus be understood as relative in nature). It does, however, indicate the seriousness with which we should take the role differentiation taught by the Word of God. Paul even says that women who throw off the symbol of their husbands' authority scandalize the angels in the process! Sex roles, while having certain cultural components, are not purely a matter of social convention. Feminism in America is not just an attack on tradition, but an attack on the sex roles designated by God. Far more than being concerned about whether or not women wear hats, the young people in your class need to understand the serious consequences of rejecting God's order for men and women in society.

2. The Conduct of the Lord's Supper (verses 17-34)

This passage is a very familiar one, and brings out a problem in the Corinthian church that was far more severe than the one discussed in the first half of the chapter.

- verses 17-22 - The problems manifested in the Corinthian observance of the Lord's Supper were fairly basic ones, but not really associated with the Supper itself. Rather, they involved an abuse of the pre-celebration meal, or *agape* feast. In the first century, Christians would often enjoy a communal meal together, culminating in the observance of the Lord's Supper. But what was intended to convey the unity of the Body of Christ became in Corinth something that underscored the already serious divisions in the congregation. The problem seems to have been twofold. First of all, the factions within the church would stay to themselves, refusing to eat with those in the other groups. Secondly, the rich would gorge themselves and get drunk during this "love feast" while the poor members of the congregation sat by with nothing to eat. Thus the celebration of the Lord's Supper was illustrating precisely the opposite of what it was supposed to show.
- verses 23-26 - Paul here repeats for the Corinthians the proper procedure connected with the observance of the Lord's Supper, in a fashion very similar to that found in the Gospel accounts. He relates the occurrence at the Passover *Seder* the night before Jesus died, and indicates that its continued observance is a memorial of Christ's death that is to be practiced periodically until He returns.
- verses 27-32 - Paul now warns them of the consequences of their behavior. The unworthy manner of eating and drinking clearly refers to the disunity and lack of love for one another shown by the Corinthians. A person's relationship with God cannot be right if he abuses or disdains his brother. The solution to this is self-examination; the alternative is judgment, not in an eternal sense, but in the disciplinary sense described in verse 30.

- verses 33-34 - The proper practice, then, is to eat the *agape* in unity and brotherly love, or not at all. If the Corinthians were unable to wait for one another and share together in a harmonious meal, they should eat the meal at home rather than polluting the Lord's Table with their factions and haughty behavior.

Depending upon how many students in your class participate in the Lord's Supper, you might want to spend some time discussing what sort of self-examination is necessary prior to taking part. Most will be aware that those who eat should be sure they are right with God before doing so; fewer may realize the importance of being right with the other believers in the congregation.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by tying together the two parts of the chapter. This can be done by emphasizing the importance of unity and order in worship. God is only honored when we do things His way, whether the issue be the roles of the sexes or the observance of the Lord's Supper. We cannot honor God by dishonoring one another, and we dishonor one another when we discard the principles given by God for how Christians should relate to each other. Loving God includes the exercise of loving leadership by men, the practice of loving submission by women, and the showing of loving concern for all, by all.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

ORDER IN WORSHIP

1. When Paul talks about the covering of women in the first part of I Corinthians 11, what sort of covering does he have in mind? What was the cultural situation to which he refers?
2. Of what was the covering a symbol? Why was that symbolism important for the Corinthian church?
3. Does Paul's teaching mean that women today must wear hats in church? Why or why not? Does it mean that boys should not have long hair?
4. What were the Corinthians doing during the Lord's Supper that Paul said was bringing God's judgment upon some of them?
5. Why is it just as important to be right with the other members of the congregation as it is to be right with God before taking the Lord's Supper?

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

I Corinthians 12

Lesson Aim

To show students the nature and use of spiritual gifts and encourage them to exercise their own gifts in the church.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:10 - “For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, won’t he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols?”

Lesson Background

The twelfth chapter of I Corinthians is the first of three chapters devoted by Paul to the third worship-related issue with which he deals in the book, namely, that of the exercise of spiritual gifts in the church. Chapter twelve talks about the nature of spiritual gifts, chapter thirteen about the motivating force behind spiritual gifts, and chapter fourteen about the abuse of spiritual gifts. The chapter before us today falls into two sections. The first deals with the distribution of spiritual gifts (verses 1-11), while the second addresses the complementarity of spiritual gifts (verses 12-31).

About forty years ago, the subject of spiritual gifts became somewhat of a fad in American evangelical churches. The corresponding emphasis on community is not only biblical, but was also appropriate to the mood of the country in the 1970s. Like any good thing, some churches took the Bible’s teachings on this subject to extremes, thus pushing all other concerns into the background. This tendency to overemphasize spiritual gifts to the exclusion of all else, in combination with the teachings generated by the charismatic movement, drove many churches in more recent years toward a reaction against the whole

area of spiritual gifts. Thus, the subject is not one about which one hears very often today in many evangelical churches.

We must recognize, however, that it is not healthy either to overemphasize or to ignore legitimate teachings of Scripture. Abuses of the Bible's teaching about gifts should not lead us to avoid the subject, but rather to work all that much harder to treat it biblically. The way your church has handled (or not handled, as the case may be) this subject will probably determine the extent to which your students are familiar with it prior to this week's lesson. If they know little of the matter, you will have to start with the basics - defining what a spiritual gift is. If your students are somewhat more knowledgeable, a definition is still a good place to start, but you won't have to spend as much time on it as you might with some other classes.

The major applications of today's lesson will lie in two areas. The first is the fact that all Christians have spiritual gifts, and that these gifts are for the purpose of edifying others. Thus no Christian has any excuse for not being actively engaged in service to God and other people. The second application involves the danger of comparing your gifts with those possessed by others. Comparison does not enhance the work of the church, but only causes bad feelings of jealousy, inferiority, and pride, which are not conducive to service and unity in the Body of Christ.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by reminding the students that Paul had already alluded to the fact in chapter one that spiritual gifts were a source of considerable pride among the Corinthians. In fact, it was probably one of the major causes of division in the church. Because the issue was one on which the Corinthians themselves loved to focus, Paul devotes three chapters to it, the first of which is before us today. Before we look at I Corinthians 12, however, we must deal with a preliminary question: What is a spiritual gift?

Open discussion to your students at this point. After allowing them to have input, which may or may not be accurate, use their comments to generate a definition of a spiritual gift. If their comments were on target, use them. If they were off base, note some of the common misconceptions implied by their attempts to define a spiritual gift. By the time you are finished, your students should know the following:

- A spiritual gift is from the Holy Spirit.
- Because only believers possess the Holy Spirit, only believers can possess spiritual gifts.
- Spiritual gifts are of grace, not earned by talent or ability. Otherwise, they would not be gifts.
- Spiritual gifts are given to individuals, and gifted individuals are given to the church. Gifts are thus for the benefit of others, and are not to be used for self-aggrandizement.

We are now ready to examine Paul's teaching on the subject of spiritual gifts in I Corinthians 12.

1. The Distribution of Spiritual Gifts (verses 1-11)

In this first section of the chapter in which Paul deals with the distribution of spiritual gifts, he makes two major points. The first is that the distribution of these gifts is divine, the second that it is diverse.

A. The Divine Distribution of Gifts (verses 1-3)

Because the Corinthians were taking such pride in their gifts and making them a source of division in the church, Paul begins by emphasizing the fact that spiritual gifts come from the Holy Spirit and are not earned by merit. It is the Spirit of God who sets believers apart from unbelievers and unites believers into one body.

B. The Diverse Distribution of Gifts (verses 4-11)

Verses 4-6 may seem repetitious, but they serve to emphasize that there is unity in the diversity of gifts given by the Holy Spirit. The variety of gifts have a common source, and thus are part of fulfilling a common purpose. The three words used to describe spiritual gifts in these verses also serve to illuminate the nature of those gifts. The first (verse 4) is *charismata* (from which we get the word “charismatic”), a word that emphasizes the gracious nature of the gifts. The second (verse 5) is the word *diakonia*, which indicates that the gifts are means of service in the church. The third word (verse 6) is *energemata*, which emphasizes the power being exercised by Christ through His Church. Spiritual gifts are thus gracious, not earned, are for the purpose of serving others in the church, and are a means by which the power of God is brought to bear on this sinful world.

In verses 7-11, Paul gives a few examples of spiritual gifts. The list here is not exhaustive, which can easily be seen by comparing it with other lists found elsewhere in Scripture (such as Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and even the end of this chapter). Note from verse 7 that spiritual gifts are given to all to be used for the benefit of all. [NOTE: At this point, your students may raise questions about speaking in tongues. Do not attempt to deal with that subject now. Tell them we will be covering it when we look at chapter 14 in two weeks.]

2. The Complementarity of Spiritual Gifts (verses 12-31)

In this section of chapter 12, Paul uses the famous analogy of the body, which he introduces in verses 12-13, to describe the church as God has designed it. Begin the section by drawing a human body on the board. Ask the students to suggest various spiritual gifts, either those mentioned here by Paul or those found elsewhere in Scripture, and match them up with various parts of the body (the gift of teaching could be the mouth, the gift of serving the feet, the gift of giving the hands, etc.). Now turn to the passage itself and discuss the applications Paul draws from his analogy.

In verses 14-19, Paul criticizes the dissatisfaction and jealousy of the members of the congregation who lack the more visible gifts. Not only does he point out the necessity of diversity in order for the body to function, he also makes it clear that the seemingly insignificant parts of the body are just as important as those that are more visible. Furthermore, the body has been put together by God. The members have no choice in the matter; for a Christian to separate himself from other Christians because of his perceived lack of certain gifts would be as foolish as if the fingers of your hand were to secede from the body because they could not see. Make sure your students understand the implications of Paul’s teaching here - every member of the church is important, and the church cannot function properly without the contribution of every member. No Christian has the right to complain about the gifts God has not given him; instead, he is responsible to use the gifts he has been given to edify others in the church. Too often, teenagers fail to recognize that passages such as this apply to them as well as the adults in the congregation (if they are Christians, of course). There is no reason why your students cannot be actively involved in serving God by serving others in the church, doing what God has given them the ability to do at this stage of their Christian experience.

In verses 20-26, Paul turns to the other half of the problem - the gifted members of the congregation who looked down on those who did not share their gifts. Those who in pride disparage the gifts of others are just as worthy of blame as those who are jealous of other people's greater gifts. The illustration Paul uses here is very much like the modern expression, "cutting off your nose to spite your face." The idea is that one part of the human body does not deliberately injure another part because all belong to the same body. In fact, those parts of the body that are weaker and less presentable in the eyes of the world are protected, covered up, and defended by the stronger parts of the body (somewhat like the athlete who compensates for injured joints by building up the muscle around those joints, or wearing protective equipment to shield the vulnerable area). It is therefore natural that the weaker members of the Body of Christ should be given the greatest attention, since they are most in need of care. Besides, those who are unusually gifted have received their gifts for just this purpose. The result, whether in the human body or in the church, is a smoothly-functioning unit. Paul illustrates what this means for the church in verse 26. When the church is functioning as a body, it will experience corporate joy and sorrow. Have your hands ever been glad when your head was aching? If your fingers write a brilliant essay or play a beautiful piece of music, do your toes step on them in spite?

In the closing verses of the chapter, Paul does something rather peculiar. After spending most of the chapter emphasizing the unity of the Body and the importance of all its members, he now turns and emphatically states that some gifts are greater and more important than others. This only makes sense in the greater context of this entire section of the book. The Corinthians were clearly focusing their attention on gifts of decidedly secondary importance, especially the gift of tongues. He therefore makes it clear that the gift of tongues is of minor importance compared to the gifts associated with the proclamation of the Word of God. No one gift is possessed by all Christians, so it is unrealistic to think that any single gift can stand as a measure of spirituality. If this is true of significant gifts like those of the apostles and prophets, how much more is it true of a minor gift like tongues? Therefore Paul concludes by stating that, if the Corinthians insist on coveting the gifts of others, at least they should set their sights on something important rather than squabbling over a gift that can be rather showy, but has limited value for edification of others, as we will see when we consider chapter 14. This is a lesson that has been hard for the Church of the past six decades to learn.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reviewing the definition of a spiritual gift compiled at the beginning of class. Ask the students to give thought during the coming week to their own gifts, and how they are using them to serve others in the church. Also encourage them to appreciate the variety of gifts in the church and to love those who possess these different gifts.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

1. What is a spiritual gift?
2. To whom are they given?
3. Does every Christian have one?
4. Is there any spiritual gift possessed by all Christians?
5. Are spiritual gifts given according to ability?
6. Why should those with the most limited gifts receive the most attention and care in the church?
7. Why does Paul describe the church as being like a body? What similarities exist between the church and the human body?
8. Why were spiritual gifts the cause of pride and jealousy in the Corinthian church? How can such disharmony be avoided?

THE SUPREMACY OF LOVE

I Corinthians 13

Lesson Aim

To teach students the difference between biblical love and the way the word is commonly used, and encourage them to show this love to others.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:11 - "So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge."

Lesson Background

The word "love" has a lot in common with the word "Christian." Both are used to describe such a wide variety of things that they have lost much of their meaning. In modern English usage, the word "love" can refer to intense enjoyment ("I love pizza!"), romantic infatuation ("I love her so much I can't stand it!"), and sexual activity ("making love"), among other things. In Jesus' day, the meaning intended by a person was a little easier to sort out because there are three different words in the Greek language that can be translated by the single English word "love." These three Greek words are *eros* (sexual or romantic love), *phileo* (the love of friendship or mutual interest), and *agape* (unconditional love). The third of these is the kind of love that is an attribute of God, and it is also the word used to describe the love feast held before the Lord's Supper in Corinth and many other early churches. It is also the kind of love with which Paul deals in the chapter before us today, I Corinthians 13. This love is supernatural, the fruit of the Spirit, and is commanded of all Christians in relationship to God and one another.

The thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians is one of the most familiar passages in the entire Bible. Standing on its own, it is a beautiful description of the virtue and character of love. In the context of Paul's

discussion of spiritual gifts, it is a rebuke to the pride and selfishness of the Corinthians and lays a foundation for the proper exercise of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the church. The chapter divides neatly into three parts, dealing with the necessity (verses 1-3), character (verses 4-7), and endurance (verses 8-13) of love. It is particularly important in dealing with your students today to treat this familiar chapter in the context of the discussion of spiritual gifts, as well as with frequent reference to the kind of love to which Paul is referring. Your students have heard so much about the wrong kind of love that they can hardly help but to have absorbed some misconceptions about the subject. You must show them what kind of love the Word of God commands, and why it is important.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the lesson by asking your students to list familiar phrases or sentences that illustrate the different ways in which the word “love” is used in the English language. After a sizeable list has been compiled, ask your students which of these kinds of love can reasonably be commanded. Which does the Bible require, if any? Then introduce I Corinthians 13. Since the chapter is so short, have your students read it aloud in several different versions of the Bible, if some are available. This may help your students to take a fresh look at the passage, since it is so familiar, particularly in the language of the King James Version. If your class is not already familiar with the material, you may want to share with them the information from the Lesson Background section about the different Greek words for love, emphasizing the volitional and unconditional nature of the love about which Paul speaks in this chapter.

1. The Necessity of Love (verses 1-3)

The Corinthians, as we saw in the last chapter, had taken much pride in their spiritual gifts, but were exercising them with a great degree of competitiveness, caring nothing for one another, which had produced arrogance in some and jealousy and depression in others. Paul thus begins by making it clear that spiritual gifts, no matter how great they may be, are meaningless apart from the exercise of love in their performance.

These verses omit no division of the gifts Paul mentioned in chapter twelve. Speaking gifts, serving gifts, and sign gifts are all included. He mentions first the gift that appears to have been the greatest source of contention among the Corinthians, the gifts of tongues. Some suggest that the reference to the “tongues of angels” implies ecstatic speech corresponding to no known human language, while others see it as a hyperbolic reference to a level of language facility unknown to man. Whatever Paul means by this statement, the implication is clear - the gift of tongues is simply empty noise when exercised without love. He then goes on to apply the same criterion to the gifts of prophecy, knowledge, faith, giving, and even martyrdom. The greatest preacher (dispute goes on over whether prophecy refers to supernatural revelation or edifying discourse on previously-given revelation; in my opinion, I Corinthians 14:29 favors the latter, since passing judgment on divine revelation would hardly be necessary), the most discerning interpreter of Scripture, the greatest visionary, the most generous giver, the boldest martyr is nothing apart from love.

Why is this true? In the church, all things are to be done unto edification; the motive is to build others up, not draw attention to the one who exercises the gifts. As a person concentrates on building others up and meeting their needs, he himself is encouraged because he sees his life bearing fruit in the lives of others. In the context of the entire church, he finds that others are ministering to him at the same time. It is important to note that the person who exercises gifts apart from love “is nothing” and “gains nothing.” Paul does not say that those around him will not profit. God has often graciously helped others by means of the gifts of self-centered men. The one who exercises the gifts gains nothing from this, however, because the fact that others are being helped serves only to build up his pride, and thus increase his sin.

2. The Character of Love (verses 4-7)

Have your students look over the definition of *agape* given by Paul in these verses. Then ask them to point out ways in which this definition sets Christian love apart from the type of love popularized by the culture around us. They should be able to see that the description given by Paul indicates that love is an action verb and is primarily volitional rather than emotional (or else it could not be commanded). They should also be able to see that love is other-centered rather than self-centered.

Paul, of course, is aiming his discussion at the problem the Corinthians were having over the issue of spiritual gifts. We should therefore concentrate on the application of these verses to that specific problem before trying to apply them more generally. The paragraph before us is built like a sandwich. Paul begins by telling us what love is, then what it isn't, before returning to what it is.

Love is patient and kind. It puts up with the shortcomings of others and compensates for the weaknesses of others. Anyone who seeks to exercise a spiritual gift in the church must do so with consideration for the ones to whom he hopes to minister. An insensitive person will never be able to reach others, no matter how great his gifts. One who serves must adapt to those he is serving, not expect them to adapt to him.

Love does not envy, nor is it boastful or full of pride. As we saw last week, the first of these was characteristic of those who lacked the more visible of the gifts in Corinth, while the last two were displayed by those who possessed such gifts in the church.

Love is not rude or self-seeking. Both were problems at the Corinthian *agape* feast (how ironic!), as we saw in chapter 11, and we will see next week in chapter 14 that they were also a problem in the worship of the church.

Love is not easily angered, nor does it keep a record of wrongs. The party spirit and schismatic behavior of the Corinthians showed their fundamental lack of love, as minor differences drove them apart and kept them apart. They not only took offense easily, but they found it impossible to reconcile to one another once offense had been taken.

Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Harking back to the body image of chapter 12, Paul said there that the Body could not function if it did not suffer and rejoice together. There is no place in the Body for one part to delight in injury suffered by another, and all should rejoice together when God is honored, no matter what instrument He chooses to use in the process.

Love always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres. This does not mean that love makes a person gullible or a doormat, but does insist that love accentuates the positive rather than the negative. Love will suffer rather than cause suffering, be deceived rather than deceive, think better of others rather than worse, and in general be vulnerable to others rather than building up high walls of self-defense.

At this point, ask your students to write down on a piece of paper (for their own sake, not to collect or share with the class) some of the ways in which their lives would change if they put into practice what Paul describes here. How would their lives be different if others around them were to do the same thing?

3. The Endurance of Love (verses 8-13)

The final quality of love that Paul chooses to emphasize is the fact that it never fails. This sets it apart from the spiritual gifts as well as other Christian virtues. The major contrast established by Paul in this

section of the chapter is between the current situation and a future situation in which things will be different. This future time is defined as a time when prophecy, tongues, and knowledge will pass away, when the partial will be done away with because the perfect has come, when knowledge will be full rather than partial. Some see this as a reference to the believer's experience in heaven, while others think Paul is talking about the time when the canon of the New Testament has been completed and the revelation of God to man is finalized. Several factors favor the first view. First of all, the context of Paul's discussion suggests that what he says in verse 8 is intended to refer to all the spiritual gifts. The second interpretation would require that only the gifts associated with the apostolic office be intended, but Paul has been talking about all the gifts in this chapter, not just the sign gifts. Secondly, it is doubtful that Paul was anticipating, as verse 12 would indicate on the second interpretation, that his knowledge of God would be qualitatively greater at some future time in his earthly life than it was at the time of this letter. It is far better to see this section as referring to heaven, where spiritual gifts will no longer be needed, since all will be perfect and none will need edifying. Even the great virtues will be needed no longer; faith will have no more "unseen" to believe, and hope will be realized, but love will go on forever.

Conclusion

Conclude the lesson by reminding your students of the kind of love that Paul is discussing in this famous chapter, then encourage them, if they are Christians, to put it into practice in their dealings with others. If they are not Christians, remind them that the kind of love described here is impossible. It is the love of Christ, and He enables only His children to put it into practice. They must therefore become His children by faith, rather than seeking to earn God's favor by doing the best they can to "love others."

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE SUPREMACY OF LOVE

1. List five different ways in which people commonly use the word “love” today. Then tell how each one of these differs from the definition of love given by Paul in I Corinthians 13.
2. Describe how the contents of chapter 13 relates to the material studied last week in chapter 12.
3. Why is Christian service useless if it is not done in love?
4. List the components of love given by Paul in I Corinthians 13:4-7 and show how Jesus practiced each one during His earthly ministry.
5. Why does Paul say that love will outlast all the spiritual gifts? Why does he say it is greater than faith and hope?

TONGUES AND PROPHECYING

I Corinthians 14

Lesson Aim

To show students the importance of order in worship through a discussion of Paul's instructions concerning tongues.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:12 - "When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ."

Lesson Background

This chapter concludes Paul's discussion of worship in the church and focuses on what seems to have been the spiritual gift with which the Corinthians were most preoccupied - the gift of tongues. From the preceding two chapters, we already know that those who spoke in tongues in the congregation were looking down on those who did not, not only deriving spiritual pride from their gift, but also making it a test of spirituality. Paul now trains all guns on this divisive practice, and in this chapter indicates that tongues are of limited value (verses 1-25) and require strict regulation (verses 26-40).

There are two issues often raised in connection with this chapter with which we must deal briefly in this background section. The first is the nature of tongues and prophesying, while the second is the question of the cessation of tongues-speaking in the church.

As far as the nature of tongues is concerned, the question that arises is whether the tongues under discussion were human languages unknown to the speaker and hearers or some ecstatic tongue that corresponded to no known human language. The incident in Acts 2 is often cited to support the former

position. Two factors, however, favor the latter as far as I am concerned. The first is Paul's positive assertion that tongues are unintelligible to the speaker and hearers alike (verse 2). In a cosmopolitan city like Corinth, people would at any given time be present who could speak many of the world's languages. The incident in Acts 2, quite in contrast to what Paul says here, indicates that what was spoken was understood by the hearers, though probably not by the speakers. It is also possible that the tongues in Acts 2 could have been ecstatic speech, but that the miracle of interpretation was done in the ears of the hearers (note the precise wording of Acts 2:6).

With regard to tongues and prophesying alike, it is clear that Paul does not consider them to be revelatory in nature. Those who spoke in tongues or prophesied were not received as those who spoke the words of God - this was by no means perceived by the church as being on the same level as the inspired revelation of the Scriptures. Paul's comments in verses 29 and 32 show that the messages conveyed by means of tongues and the words spoken in the act of prophesying were to be subject to the judgment of the leaders of the congregation with regard to their orthodoxy and appropriateness. Were these words on a par with inspired Scripture, such judgment would be both unnecessary and blasphemous. Thus we must conclude that the gifts discussed in this chapter were not revelatory in nature, but were means of exhorting, instructing, and edifying the church. In the same way that preaching today is to be compared with the written Word, and not simply accepted without question, tongues and prophesying were to be evaluated for the truth and orthodoxy of what was said by the speakers.

As far as the matter of the cessation of tongues is concerned, I myself am somewhat ambivalent. I have no difficulty seeing the validity of the argument that gifts of healing and miracle-working ceased with the deaths of the apostles, since such gifts are specifically associated with the apostolic ministry as confirming signs. The gift of tongues, however, is never specifically associated with the apostles in Scripture, and I must admit that I have always found the arguments for the cessation of the gift less than convincing. On the other hand, as a study of this chapter will make evident, much of what passes for speaking in tongues today is in blatant violation of the restrictions and conditions set forth by Paul in I Corinthians 14.

For your students, the issue of speaking in tongues is probably little more than a theological curiosity. Though they surely will have many questions, which you should try to answer to the best of your ability, be sure to focus on the general principles presented by Paul in this chapter with regard to worship. Those principles go far beyond the issue of tongues and help us all to worship God in a way that is pleasing to Him.

Lesson Procedure

Begin the class by asking if any of your students has ever seen or heard speaking in tongues. Have any students who have describe the experience. Point out that the practice has been a very divisive one in the Church in recent years and that it was also highly divisive in the Corinthian church in the first century. Don't present the background material directly, but keep it in mind in order to help you deal with the questions that will inevitably come up during class. Emphasize from the beginning the fact that Paul's treatment of speaking in tongues in I Corinthians 14 provides useful principles for our worship of God.

1. The Limited Value of Tongues (verses 1-25)

In the first major section of the chapter, Paul emphasizes the fact that the Corinthians are generating pride, jealousy, and division over something that is really very insignificant. The insignificance of the gift

is seen not only in the reasons given by Paul here in this chapter, but also in the fact that the gift is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament epistles.

The first nineteen verses of the chapter make one basic point - that tongues is the least of the gifts because it alone among the gifts lacks the capacity to edify when exercised in isolation.

- verses 1-4 - Tongues-speaking edifies no one but the speaker because no one but God understands what is being said. Even the speaker is not edified in terms of his understanding, but in his spirit, which may be uplifting, but is ineffable.
- verse 5 - Interpretation is a distinct gift from tongues. Not everyone who speaks in tongues can interpret, nor can all who interpret speak in tongues. Thus the tongues-speaker cannot edify others unless his gift is used in combination with the gift of interpretation.
- verses 6-12 - Paul now uses several illustrations to bolster his point, speaking of his own preaching, the use of musical instruments, and the common use of language. The Corinthians would not have been helped by his preaching at all if they could not have understood it. Music is meaningless unless it follows some intelligible pattern. The army bugler communicates nothing to the soldiers unless the correct pattern of notes is played. When people speak to one another, they communicate nothing unless they speak some language known to the other.
- verses 13-19 - Worship in the church is to involve the whole person and the whole body. One who prays, speaks, or sings with his spirit, but without understanding, benefits less than one who does these things with understanding. One who worships in a way that leaves out the other members of the congregation does less than one who produces that which benefits the others who are present.
- verses 20-25 - In this paragraph, Paul uses his second argument concerning the insignificance of tongues, which involves their effect on unbelievers. The quotation in verse 21 is from Isaiah 28:11-12, which speaks of the judgment God is about to bring upon the Northern Kingdom by means of the Assyrian invasion. The point made by Isaiah is that, because the people had not listened to the messages of the prophets, God was going to speak to them in another kind of language - the unintelligible tongue of the brutal Assyrians, through which God would communicate His words of judgment. The analogy Paul seeks to make is that any unbelievers who are exposed to tongues-speaking will think that the Christians are crazy, and will be even more hardened in their unbelief. Thus to them the gift of tongues is a sign of judgment and an agent of hardening. Prophesying, on the other hand, can convict and save the unbeliever in addition to speaking powerfully to those who believe.

Before continuing further into the passage, draw the attention of your students to the main points communicated here by Paul. Worship is corporate and is not to be done in a vacuum. What we do should be for the blessing of all. It is wrong to be concerned only about what blesses us, with no concern for the needs of others. Secondly, it is wrong to make a divisive issue out of a minor gift. If it was wrong for the Corinthians in the first century, it is also wrong for us today.

2. The Necessity of Order in Worship (verses 26-40)

The pride of the Corinthians had generated a competitive atmosphere in their worship services in which each was trying to outdo the others in the exercise of their gifts. The result was chaos. Paul thus gives strict regulations for the conduct of worship in Corinth.

- verse 26 - The worship in the early church was far more informal than ours tends to be. It was similar to the synagogue worship of the Jews in that many participated, interjecting at various points their contributions to the worship. The worship included singing, prayer, and the reading of Scripture, but the floor was open for exhortations from any male member of the congregation.
- verses 27-33 - The rules Paul gives are simple enough. One person is to speak at a time (the Corinthians apparently were producing cacophony by speaking all at once). Only a few should contribute in any one service, so that the people would not be confused by having to absorb a multiplicity of messages. No one should speak in tongues unless an interpreter was present (significantly, these requirements all indicate that the gift of tongues, like the other gifts, is under the control of the speaker, and is not a spontaneous thing that suddenly “grabs” a person uncontrollably). All that is spoken should be judged for its accuracy and usefulness by the “prophets” - those gifted expositors of the Word of God whom God had given to the congregation. People were not to interrupt one another, but no one was to dominate the worship, either - if someone who was seated had something to say, the one speaking should allow him to contribute. The result is order, not chaos.
- verses 34-36 - Paul now adds to the already-mentioned regulations that the participation in the formal worship of the church is to be by the men only. Women are not to prophesy or to speak in tongues (or, by inference, any of the other things mentioned in verse 26). Some have imagined a contradiction between this passage and 11:5, but it should be noted that in chapter 11 Paul did not assert approval of the practice he was describing. He apparently was willing to tackle one issue at a time, and knew that he would be dealing with the practice later in the letter, so said nothing about it while dealing with the matter of covering. Verse 36 indicates that the Corinthians, in their arrogance, felt free to go against the common practice of all the other churches. They appear to have been unique in their toleration of female participation in the service, as they had been in the matter of women going unveiled in public (Paul’s instructions to Timothy in I Timothy 2 appear to have been more in the nature of prevention than correction).
- verses 37-38 - Paul again “pulls rank,” asserting his authority as an apostle and calling upon the Corinthians to recognize the truth of what he is saying. He also indicates that if they fail to do so, they and their practices will not be recognized as valid by other believers.
- verses 39-40 - His conclusion to the whole matter is a very useful one. Though prophesying is vital and tongues-speaking insignificant, he does not want to generate an overreaction that would involve the banning of tongues-speaking. The gift is useful, but only within the carefully-circumscribed framework laid out in the preceding verses. The basic goal of all this is one of order in the worship of God.

Conclusion

As far as concluding applications are concerned, several things ought to be brought out in addition to those mentioned in the middle of the lesson. Order in worship does not mean total regimentation, nor does it rule out open participation by the members of the congregation. It does, however, indicate that there are limits to spontaneity, and these limits are to be imposed by the leadership of the church, those ordained by God to preserve the truth. Neither the democratic ideals of our society nor the pervasive feminism of our era should impinge on the directions given for worship in this passage. In addition, the emphasis placed by Paul on learning from what is done in other churches is a helpful one. We should never be so arrogant as to think that we are the only ones who do things right and we have nothing to learn from the practices of others.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

TONGUES AND PROPHESYING

1. What is speaking in tongues? What is prophesying? How are they similar and how are they different?
2. Why does Paul consider speaking in tongues to be an insignificant gift?
3. What verses in I Corinthians 14 imply that the gift of tongues is under the control of the speaker, and is not a spontaneous “moving of the Spirit” that “grabs” a person uncontrollably?
4. What does the quotation from Isaiah in I Corinthians 14:21 have to do with speaking in tongues? In what sense is speaking in tongues a sign to unbelievers?
5. List the limitations that Paul places on the practice of speaking in tongues in I Corinthians 14.
6. What does Paul’s treatment of the gift of tongues in I Corinthians 14 teach us about the importance of edification in worship? about the importance of order in worship? about the role of the church leadership in the worship of the church?

THE RESURRECTION

I Corinthians 15

Lesson Aim

To stimulate students to godly living and faithful service through the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

Memory Verse

I Corinthians 8:13 - "Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall."

Lesson Background

In the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, Paul deals with the final topic broached in this letter - that of the resurrection of the dead. Unlike the subjects dealt with in previous chapters, this was not a primarily practical issue, but we will see that it was a theological issue with significant practical implications. The Corinthian problem in this area stemmed from their preoccupation with knowledge - the issue with which the book began. The respected philosophers of the first century were all in one form or another dualists, exalting the spirit while deprecating the body. Sharp differences in practical application existed, since some argued that the insignificance of the body should lead a man to asceticism, while others maintained that, if the body was indeed temporary and of no eternal significance, then licentious living was perfectly permissible. Examples of both extremes existed in the Corinthian congregation, and Paul takes the opportunity provided by this example of selling out to popular culture to initiate a wide-ranging discussion of the nature and significance of the resurrection.

The first century Corinthian church is not the only one that has ever had to face the temptation of selling out to popular culture, of course. While we do not often today see overt forms of dualism, we do face the same sorts of extreme teachings on the significance of the body. Some, for instance, tell us that the body is all that really exists. Man is an animal, a physical organism, and no more. This view, too, leads to opposite extremes. Some conclude that life has no meaning and therefore physical desires are to be indulged. Advertising certainly gets quite a bit of mileage out of fostering such hedonism. Others see the body as the only source of meaning and fulfillment. They make a god out of health and fitness, thus fostering narcissism. In contrast to these, groups such as the Roman Catholic Church and some Eastern religions and cults teach that the insignificance of the body should lead us to self-denial, whether it be celibacy or extremes of dress and behavior.

The main significance of this chapter for your students is thus to help them understand the teaching of Scripture concerning their bodies. We will consequently begin the lesson with a quick survey of the content of the chapter, but will concentrate most of our time on verses 30-34. By the time the lesson is over, your students should realize that their bodies are very important, and that the ways in which they choose to use them must be governed by the teaching of God's Word.

Lesson Procedure

Christians often spend a lot of time discussing the details of the Bible's teaching about the future. Such discussions too many times are purely theoretical, as if questions about what will happen in the future have no real bearing upon our present lives. In chapter 15 of I Corinthians, Paul discusses an important biblical teaching about the future - the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. Begin the class by asking your students what value they think the doctrine of the resurrection of the body has for their present lives, but don't be surprised if they have no real ideas on the subject. Explain to them that Paul considered the doctrine to be of great practical relevance. Then proceed to a survey of the content of I Corinthians 15. Do not spend a great deal of time on the survey. I have given you far more information here than you will have time to use, so pick and choose only what you consider to be appropriate for your class.

1. The Content of the Chapter

A. The Importance of and the Evidence for the Resurrection of Christ (verses 1-11)

Paul begins the chapter, not with debate, but with established fact. The resurrection of Christ is not seen here as something for which Paul must argue. He presents it as essential to the Gospel he preached to the Corinthians and as a vital factor tied in with the salvation of sinners. He presents two forms of evidence for the resurrection of Christ, taken from Scripture and from numerous eyewitness accounts. These latter included many people known to the Corinthians, both personally and by reputation, as well as Paul himself, who saw Christ, not in the flesh, but on the Damascus Road. The resurrection of Christ is therefore not a matter of debate, and any teaching that contradicts this fundamental truth of the Gospel is not to be tolerated.

B. The Theological Implications of the Denial of the Resurrection of the Body (verses 12-19)

In this paragraph, Paul shows that the denial of the resurrection of the body not only contradicts the fundamental truth of the resurrection of Christ, but that such a denial leads to other problems as well.

- verses 12-13 - Paul makes the basic point that any denial of the general teaching of the resurrection of the body implies a denial of the resurrection of Christ.
- verses 14-15 - Carrying the argument further, Paul points out that if Christ is not alive, those who spend their time preaching the Gospel are engaging in an exercise in futility (either that, or they are outright liars), and those who believe them are the most gullible of fools.
- verses 16-19 - Not only would this imply the gullibility of believers, but would also leave everyone hopelessly in sin. Furthermore, those who have died in Christ are gone forever, never to be seen again. Christians are pathetic figures indeed if the resurrection of Christ is a myth.

C. The Relationship Between the Resurrection of Christ and the Resurrection of Believers (verses 20-28)

In this paragraph, Paul uses the Old Testament image of the firstfruits to illustrate the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and that of Christians. At harvest time, the first grain to be brought in was offered to the Lord. This did not mean that only the first grain harvested belonged to God, but was a symbol of the fact that the entire harvest came from Him and belonged to Him. Paul pictures the resurrection of Christ as a firstfruits offering - God was claiming Christ as His own, but Christ was not the entire harvest. The resurrection of Christ thus foreshadowed and guaranteed the resurrection of believers.

Paul also uses the idea of federal headship treated at greater length in Romans 5. If the death of Adam was the foreshadowing of the death to be experienced by all over whom he was the head, so the resurrection of Christ, which involved the conquest of death, foreshadowed the resurrection of all over whom He is the Head. Paul presents the resurrection of believers as being within the broader context of the defeat of death by means of the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

D. The Practical Implications of the Denial of the Resurrection of the Body (verses 29-34)

Most of the attention given to this paragraph has been focused on verse 29. Though the verse is of some interest, the problem posed by it is probably at this point insoluble. Commentators become extremely creative when they arrive at verse 29, ranging from those who use it as a basis for church practice (as do the Mormons) to those who see it as another example of Corinthian aberration (whatever the Corinthians were doing, Paul is pointing out their inconsistency, not countenancing their practice) to those who seek to explain it away as an unusual way of describing something legitimate (for instance, some suggest that Paul is referring to replenishing through the baptism of new members the ranks of the church, depleted by the deaths of some). I tend to favor the second explanation, since we have already seen several instances of practices among the Corinthians that were unique among the churches of the first century. The remainder of the verses in this paragraph will be the focus of our attention when we turn to the application of the teaching of this chapter.

E. The Nature of the Resurrection Body (verses 35-49)

Paul now tackles the issue of the nature of the resurrection body. He considers arguments against the resurrection based on this question to be nothing more than straw men and indicates through various examples in nature that the resurrection body is both the same as and different from the earthly bodies we now inhabit.

- verses 35-41 - Taking examples from plant and animal life as well as inanimate objects, Paul shows that God is perfectly capable of taking the same matter and arranging it differently according to His purposes. Thus God is able to take the same bodies in which we now live and renew them for eternal life.
- verses 42-49 - If it is true that the resurrection body is the same as the body in which we now live, it is also true that the body given in the resurrection is different from the one we now inhabit. The old body is mortal, while the new is immortal; the old is sinful, the new is perfect; the old is weak, the new is strong; the old belongs to the life of the natural man, the new to the life of the spiritual man; the old is of the earth, while the new is of heaven; the old has its source in Adam, the new in Christ.

F. The Eschatological Context of the Resurrection of Believers (verses 50-58)

Paul concludes his argument by pointing out the necessity of the resurrection of the body. Our present bodies simply are not capable of eternal life. Because of this, the dead must not only be raised to a new bodily existence, but those living at the time of Christ's return must be changed - their bodies transformed into the likeness of the body of Christ (the resurrection body of Christ is the best model available to us of what our bodies will one day be like). It is only when the resurrection has occurred that death will be finally defeated. It is because this final victory is already assured because of the resurrection of Christ that Paul is able to end the chapter with the confident exhortation to faithfulness of verse 58.

2. The Application of the Chapter

In summarizing the chapter, we have seen already the enormous doctrinal importance of the truth of the resurrection of Christ, and the dead in general. We now turn to an examination of the practical importance of this teaching. In order to apply this chapter rightly, we need to return to verses 30-34. Have your students read these verses together and allow them time to reconsider the question with which the lesson began concerning the practical significance of the resurrection of the body. Three conclusions should be obvious to them (and if they are not, bring them out).

A. The Belief in the Resurrection Produces Self-Discipline (verses 30-32)

If this life is all there is, we have no motivation to suffer for Christ. Paul quite rightly concludes that if death ends it all, we might as well eat, drink, and be merry. The Christian who forgets about the resurrection falls easy prey to the traps of hedonism. Any Christian who makes decisions only in terms of temporal values and consequences will never be able to live a life of holiness and self-denial. Your students must realize that the person who clings tenaciously to this life is one who does not really believe in the reality of the life to come.

B. The Belief in the Resurrection Motivates Christians to Evangelism (verses 33-34)

If the body goes into the ground at death, never to be seen again, evangelism is hardly an urgent matter. But if that body is later raised to suffer the torments of punishment for sin, then Christians should want to inform others of this terrible eventuality. Do we really believe that there is a hell and that those who reject Christ will suffer there eternally?

C. The Belief in the Resurrection Encourages Confident Service for Christ (verse 58)

Because Christ has already been raised from the dead, Christians can have the confidence that they will also be raised, and that the defeat of death is already assured. Thus service for Christ is not an exercise in futility, but is a small part in a great battle that has already been won. Christians can thus serve Christ with confidence and consistency, knowing that what they do will produce positive results in their own lives and in the lives of others.

FOR REVIEW AND FURTHER THOUGHT

THE RESURRECTION

1. Why is the resurrection of Christ necessary in order for there to be salvation?
2. Why is Christianity a waste of time if there is no resurrection of the body after death?
3. Why does the image of the firstfruits offering from the Old Testament illustrate the relationship between the resurrection of Christ and the resurrection of Christians?
4. In what ways is the resurrection body the same as the body we now inhabit? In what ways is it different?
5. Why does the doctrine of the resurrection encourage evangelism?
6. Why do those who deny the resurrection have a hard time resisting the temptations of the flesh?