

The First Epistle to the Corinthians

Implications of the Great Sacrifice of Christ

David Gooding

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, the *King James Version*, or are Dr Gooding's own translations or paraphrases.

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What Should We Call Our Churches?

Part 1: The Significance of the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1–13

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul', or 'I follow Apollos', or 'I follow Cephas', or 'I follow Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

On these six occasions we shall be thinking together about some of the basic principles of the church: the church's name; its discipline; its fellowship; its traditions; its future.

Since we shall be considering these matters after the Lord's Supper each Lord's Day, we may be tempted to ask what they have to do with it—with the sacred emblems before us that tell us about Christ's sacrifice. So we do well to remember that the topic of the church is germane to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. There is no safer place on earth to consider the principles of the church than at the foot of our Saviour's cross. If the way we celebrate our Lord's death does not have an impact on the way we run our churches, then it would be questionable whether we have been attending as we should to the significance of this feast.

As we think about the doctrine of the church each week we shall be considering *an aspect of our blessed Lord's sacrifice*.

- Paul solved the problem presented to him by indignantly asking the Corinthians, 'Was Paul crucified for you?' (1:13), and then states, 'We preach Christ crucified' (v. 23).
- When we turn to consider church discipline we shall be thinking of the great Passover sacrifice of Christ: 'Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us' (5:7 KJV).
- We will think about the fellowship of the church and that wonderful altar, filled with his sacrifice and all its benefits, becoming for us the very 'table of the Lord' (10:14–22).

- And as we think of the traditions of the church we shall come to think of his covenant sacrifice and his death for our sins (11:17–34).
- Then we shall consider the importance of the death, burial and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ in relation to our own death, burial and resurrection (15:20).

What should we call ourselves?

The Corinthians were making a mistake. Some of them were calling themselves after prominent preachers and teachers—‘I follow Paul’, or ‘I follow Apollos . . .’ (1:12). We can easily find it in the goodness of our hearts to forgive our first century brothers and sisters for falling into that mistake. Yes, but we could not find it easy to forgive ourselves if we fell into that same mistake of calling ourselves, or allowing ourselves to be called by any name other than the blessed name of Jesus Christ our Lord, for it is a serious matter indeed. But the curious thing is that we too fall into the very same error. Christians at large allow themselves to be called by all kinds of names.

It is foolish even at the human level. Let us take an illustration to grasp its absurdity. Here is a man, Mr Churchill. He falls in love with a good lady whom he marries, and she becomes Mrs Churchill. Thus far, all is simple and straightforward. Ladies have different theories about cooking—some use pressure cookers, some use grills, and some use microwaves. Mrs Churchill is of the pressure cooker variety. Pressure cookers are very good things, but what would we think of Mrs Churchill if she began to call herself Mrs Pressure Cooker? It would be ludicrous.

We find Christians doing it. A lot of them believe monarchical bishops should rule the church, and another lot believe elders should rule it, and still others believe that each congregation should be separate. There is a bit of truth in all of their positions, but what an absurdity if after a while they ceased calling themselves just *Christians*, and began to call themselves after their methods of church government: *Episcopalians*, *Presbyterians*, *Congregationalists*. That is as incongruous as Mrs Churchill calling herself Mrs Pressure Cooker.

Let us think of something else about Mrs Churchill. She is very clever and loves geometry. She knows all about Pythagoras’s Theorem. That theorem is very true and it sometimes needs to be applied, but what would we think if she forgot to call herself Mrs Churchill, and called herself Mrs Pythagoras’s Theorem?

What about Christians? They get hold of a doctrine, say salvation or baptism. These are exceedingly important matters, but what would we be guilty of if, instead of calling ourselves Christians, we called ourselves after our doctrines? *Salvationists* or *Baptists* or something else?

At last Mrs Churchill comes to see that all these other names are wrong, and that she is Mr Churchill’s wife. So she decides to call herself Mrs Wife. That’s ridiculous too, yet some Christians have acted like that. They have learned that all other titles are wrong; they see that all Christians are brethren, so they call themselves ‘Brethren’. That’s like Mrs Churchill calling herself Mrs Wife. We would not do such a thing in ordinary affairs; why then should we do it in the sacred matter of the public name of the church?

'No other name'

Is there any reasonable doubt about the matter? When Paul comes to answer the question, he wisely uses various tactics. The first ten verses of our chapter are a marvellous cavalcade of the glorious and official name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Before he even mentions the problem, he has given us the cure. Did we notice how many times he has mentioned that holy name in his first paragraph? We should not think it to be undue repetition. Not merely Jesus; not merely Christ; but *our Lord Jesus Christ*.

There is an interesting thing about names. If we knew Prince Charles well enough we might call him Chas, as his brothers are supposed to do. But if he comes to do a tour of a factory, or opens a new bridge or something, we would be well advised not to call him Chas. Why not? Because in public he is Prince Charles: he has various official titles for those occasions.

Let us dwell for a moment on the name of our blessed Lord Jesus Christ. Let the glory and splendour of it so fill our hearts that all other names go by the board. Paul, addressing the Corinthian Christians, says in verse 2, '... all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. We will find that, no matter what Christians call themselves, they will come back to this very point. In our days as sinners, when we found ourselves lost and perishing and going down like Peter under the waves, on whom did we call? Did we cry, 'Luther, save us'? Indeed not! We called on the name of the Lord. In the trials of life, when at our extremities, we do not call on great apostles like Paul or Peter: 'Paul, hear us!'; 'Peter, hear us!'; 'Wesley, hear us!'; 'Darby, hear us!' There is salvation in no other name (Acts 4:12). Praise God, every believer can call on the name of the Lord: he is 'both their Lord and ours'. All true believers call on only one name in the hour of their need.

Look what he says about this lovely name in verse 3: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' What an astonishing statement! Less than fifty years previously he worked in a carpenter's shop in Nazareth. Now the apostle is saying, 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ', putting the Lord Jesus on the same level as God.

Try putting some other name in there. 'Grace to you from God and Luther.' 'Grace to you from God and Billy Graham.' That would be blasphemous. Much as we admire and love the great servants of God from all ages, we would never think of putting them on a level with God. But the blessed Lord's name is such as to be equal with and go alongside the name of God the Father.

His is a marvellous name. Not only do all our graces come through him, but Paul says, 'You are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ' (v. 7). The hope of the church is not just to get home to glory to meet our loved ones again, but also the revelation of the Lord Jesus. Compare 1 Timothy 6:15, 'which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords'. God shall stage the revelation and show this world who is the rightful king and heir. God shall move the curtains aside and, calling the attention of every eye in the whole universe, he will reveal Christ. We began with him when we called on his name for salvation; we continue with him because all grace comes from him; and we look forward to him—to his revelation.

On this matter of what we call ourselves, Paul says in verse 10: 'I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. When we read and appreciate a verse like this, just think how silly and out of place it would be to beseech somebody by *Brethren doctrine*. What name shall we call our church? Call it by the very highest name we know—the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is a church?

Let us bring to bear another consideration here. What do we suppose a church is? A name surely corresponds to what a thing is. If a thing is a badminton club, call it a badminton club; if it's a rescue station, call it a rescue station; if it's a theological circle, call it a theological circle. What is the church's essential nature, so that we might put the right name on it?

Verse 9 gives us the answer: 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.' We must observe the poignancy of this remark. It is not just the fellowship of Jesus Christ; or even of Jesus Christ our Lord, merely. Here is the Father inviting men and women into a fellowship—the fellowship of his very Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We should think for a moment about what God thinks of the Lord Jesus. If Her Gracious Majesty the Queen invited you to become a friend of the heir to the throne, what and how would you call him? Chas? You would be speaking about the Queen's son, and when she speaks of her son the titles fairly flow. God has invited the likes of us—how stupendous the invitation: God the transcendent Lord invites us into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Let that settle it—that is what it will be called. That is what it is—it is the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Dare we put any other name on it?

It was Christ who was crucified for us

Someone may say that he was brought to Christ through reading some of the works of George Whitfield or John Calvin. However, being a follower of George Whitfield or being a Calvinist will not save us. Was Calvin crucified for us? Was Whitfield crucified for us? They were great servants of God to whom we all, without exception, owe incalculable debts—whether we realise it or not. But when it comes to Christ on the one hand, and Peter, Paul, Luther, Whitfield, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Darby, or whoever you like to put, on the other, the gulf between them is unbridgeable. They merely told us about the death of Christ. It was Christ who died for us. They came and told us how the Lord Jesus was crucified, and then they added that he was crucified because they too were sinners like the rest of us. They must stand with us on the one side. They were eminent servants of God, but also sinners, undone, lost, and on their way to perish eternally like us all.

The one who died for us, in all his solitary worth, is Jesus Christ our Lord. 'Was Paul crucified for you?' (v. 13). No! Then do not call yourself by his name. Mark the term, *crucified*. Not only did our Lord die, or give himself as a sacrifice, but he was crucified. He, for our sakes, 'endured the cross' (Heb 12:2). There are many ways of dying, but we are called to think why it was that, when our blessed Lord died for us, it had to be 'even death on a cross' (Phil 2:8).

We shall continue to think about the difference between the death of Christ and the cross of Christ in our next study. When we learn that our Lord suffered the death of the cross for us, we shall never again call ourselves by the name of any other person.

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.¹

¹ Isaac Watts (1674–1748) ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’ (1707).

What Should We Call Our Churches?

Part 2: The Emphasis on the Cross of Christ

Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:13, 17–2:5; 3:3–4

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? . . . For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

. . . for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, 'I follow Paul', and another, 'I follow Apollos', are you not being merely human?

Some believers at Corinth had made the profound mistake of calling themselves in party spirit after the names of certain leading Christians: Paul, Apollos and Peter. They should only have

identified themselves with that name common to all believers — the holy and blessed name of the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw how Paul dealt with this problem. In the opening verses of chapter 1 he brings before them a glorious cavalcade of the majestic name of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that the glory of his name may eclipse all others.

‘Even death on a cross’

Now we notice his next move in dealing with this problem. He reminds them that, when the Lord Jesus died for our sins and for our redemption, it was not by just any death that he died; it was by death on a cross. We frequently refer to that holy event by different names: the death of Christ, his offering of himself, the sacrifice of Christ, the cross of Christ, and the blood of Christ. Speaking generally we mean more or less the same thing, and there is no reason why we should not use all of these terms. In the strict language of the New Testament, however, there is a different concept lying behind each of these expressions. If we would speak with exactitude and intelligence we must distinguish between the blood of Christ, the death of Christ, the sacrifice of Christ and the cross of Christ. We are not saying exactly the same thing in all these expressions.

Let us listen to holy Scripture itself as it tells us that our Lord became obedient unto death. That is tremendous, but there is something more. Not just to death, but to ‘even death on a cross’ (Phil 2:8).

Death comes in many forms; some deaths can even be glorious. Think for instance of a major in the army. When in charge of his troops he perceives that the only way for victory is a dash of supreme courage, and going out in front of his men he brings them behind him right in face of the enemy’s camp. As we see him going across No-man’s Land, straight into the fire of the enemy, our hearts are ablaze with the man’s courage — what a glorious thing it is. But how different is the death of the cross. No one could begin to think of it as anything glorious. The ancient world considered it one of the most shameful deaths a man could possibly die.

It is to the cross of the Lord Jesus that Paul now calls our attention. How we wish we had his powers to do what he frequently did for his fellow-believers. He reminds us in his letter to the Galatians that as he went among them, ‘Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified’ (3:1). He uses a word that means he was *placarded*. Paul made no secret of it as, with vivid powers of description, he sets forth the whole shameful business of the sight of a man crucified. How ghastly and *shameful* a sight it is!

Two elements in the shame of the cross

1. Its fearful weakness

Take the strongest man there is and spike him by his hands and feet to a cross and leave him there to die. The grimness of it is that death does not supervene immediately. It may take hours and sometimes days as the man hangs there, helpless. The contortions of his body as the victim tries to raise himself to get enough power to breathe — and then the pain in his arms and legs is so terrible that he sinks back. The natural response of the body in trying to free itself can only manage to increase its own suffering. The very horror of that awful weakness and the frustration of strength is dreadful. The man is powerless.

2. The mockery of human wisdom

Let him think now of a way to get himself down. All his schemes and all his cleverness have come simply to this. It was this that startled the disciples when they first heard our Lord mention it. When he had just done a miracle after coming down from the Mount of Transfiguration, and the crowds were amazed at the majesty and the power of God, he immediately began to teach them that the Son of Man would be handed over into the hands of men, as though completely powerless. They could not visualise God Incarnate nailed, powerless, to a tree.

Not only that, but consider the taunt. When they crucified him they did so at a place called Calvary, which means 'Place of a Skull'. The holes in the rock look like the empty sockets, the empty nostrils, of a skull. In life the human face, if not handsome, can be noble, as it reflects something of the character of the person encapsulated in the brain within. But a skull—eyeless, brainless, sightless, mindless, a 'grinning' skull—how it attests our human powerlessness, and, in the end, the ineffectualness of our wisdom.

They crucified Jesus at the place of a skull, and they mocked him. 'He said this and he said that. He had his schemes. How wise he was, and it has come to this.' And to emphasize the point they plaited a crown of thorns and put it upon his head. 'That is where all his wisdom and wise schemes have come to,' they said.

Human weakness and human folly. But be careful! The cross surely does not show us Christ's weakness and folly. He had none. He was the all-powerful Son of God. What it shows us is the folly of the men that crucified him and their weakness. Our hearts beat loyally to the Lord Jesus after all. We will not hear anything against him and his name. The cross of Christ shows us the abject folly of this world—be it the military governor and the mighty power of Rome; the intellectuals with their Greek language; the religious people with their Hebrew. The Latin, Greek, and Hebrew above his cross were expressive of this world's power, intellect, and religion, and the cross of Christ shows the bankruptcy of it all.

It is a measure of the ignorances they were, to crucify 'the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8). If only they had known; but they did not know. What folly, to be presented with the Lord of glory and not recognise him; and then to decide that the best wisdom was to crucify him. Does it not declare the bankruptcy of human wisdom, the height of folly?

And it shows the weakness of mankind too. Look at those men at the cross, with their robes on and saying to him to come down (Matt 27:42). 'But you can't, can you?' They feared what he taught, so they used their little religious power and political manoeuvrings to stop his teaching. They nailed him to a cross (that was all they could do), and thus proclaimed how frightened they were of the truth he taught. They could not face it, so in their weakness, to refute his arguments, they crucified him.

Why did God allow his Son thus to suffer at the hands of men?

That's another story. He did it for our salvation. But were we that bad? We needed to be saved all right; but did God have to go to that length to save us? Yes! The 'weakness' of the crucified Christ shows how weak we were. 'While we were still weak . . . Christ died for [us]' (Rom 5:6).

Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfil thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and thou alone.
Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling . . .²

The cross of Christ is a vivid declaration of God's assessment and judgment of us, placarded before the world. That's what God thinks of us. Our hands were too weak, criminally weak. And as for our wisdom—have we some schemes and ideas for saving ourselves? We have learned that our wisdom was but folly. The cross of the Christ is the placarding by God of his judgment on us—weak and foolish, and sinfully so.

We take the emblems at the Lord's Supper, and we tell everybody that the cross was for us. Our Lord Jesus Christ did not deserve to suffer there; it was we who deserved thus to be crucified. 'I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me' (Gal 2:20). I have been 'crossed out' and it is Christ who lives in me.

Not in the wisdom of men

They were calling themselves after Paul. He was not that bad, was he? Were Peter and Darby that bad? They were very wise men and very powerful preachers. They did not deserve to be crucified, did they? Yes! They were just as sinfully weak and foolish as any one of us. Why would we call ourselves after them? After Paul was saved, he had such excellent wisdom to tell them how to carry on the affairs of the church. Where did he get that wisdom? Was it his wisdom? No, it was a wisdom God gave him: he really had none of his own.

Imagine I have a scientist friend called Mr Knowington, who has been working at the causes of cancer and he finds a cure. However, being a sensitive and retiring person, he asks me to go and tell the world, particularly the medics, about the cure and the great secret. So I go and do that; and presently I set up my own establishment and display at the front of it 'Gooding's cure for cancer'. Well, I preached it! Yes, but how would the scientist feel about 'Gooding's cure for cancer'? It would not even be honest for me to allow my name to take the credit for what my scientist friend had discovered.

Listen to Paul. 'Don't begin to attribute to me that wisdom by which you are saved, or dare to call yourself after me. Like you, in my religious folly and weakness, I deserved only to be crucified and crossed out. The name of Christ is the only name.'

Paul then graphically hammers that home with three points:

² Augustus M. Toplady (1740–78), 'Rock of Ages' (1776).

1. God's deliberate use of the message of the cross of Christ (1:18–25)

The gospel message is the message of a cross—of a crucified man. This seems to the world to be utter folly.

'The Jews demand signs . . .', and sometimes we follow them. We love to preach marvellous miracles, and miracles have their uses. They can be evidentially valuable; they point to the person of the Lord Jesus; but even in the Gospels we should notice that the miracles he did were also sermons. In the end it is not a miracle as a sign that saves us. The message that saves us is not that Jesus did miracles, but that *Jesus died*.

If we should go outside and do half-a-dozen miracles, we would get the entire street following us, like the children who followed the Pied Piper of Hamlyn. I don't know that that would convert them. The message that converts people to God is a message of a cross. It condemns them and brings them to repentance; to love the God whose law condemns them; to agree with God that they are sinful; and in that moment they find a Saviour who died for them so that they might be forgiven.

' . . . and Greeks seek wisdom', and philosophy has its uses. I teach it myself! But not one of its uses is to save people. When it comes to our salvation, neither miracle nor philosophy can help. God has deliberately chosen to save us by the preaching of the cross. It is the only medicine that will heal us. *Man* has to be cancelled out in this matter.

2. Paul told the Corinthians, 'consider your calling' (1:26–31)

Consider the people that God has chosen. I can speak freely, for they are all in heaven and they won't mind my saying it. *' . . . not many of you were wise':* there weren't many philosophers—not many eggheads! *' . . . not many were powerful':* there weren't many politicians. *' . . . not many were of noble birth':* there weren't many blue-blooded among them.

You say, 'Yet they were saved?'

Yes, God had chosen them.

'Why didn't he choose a better bunch?'

To make it abundantly clear that it wasn't their wisdom or their power or their blue-bloodedness that brought them to see that the gospel was true. If I am not careful, I could think it was my intelligence that saved me. That other chap over there, he is not saved, but he has not got the intelligence, poor chap. I am saved because I had the intelligence to see it was true. Well if you think that, you are not saved yet. Not my intelligence, nor my good breeding, nor my political or economic clout is the reason why I happen to be saved. I owe it solely to God and to the Saviour who died for me.

3. It was not Paul's ability as a gospel preacher (2:1–5)

You may say: 'What really brought me to salvation was the technique of the gospel preacher.'

Oh?

'Yes, he had studied up all the recent ideas on how to sell things—how to sell marmalade, how to sell anything. He was a wonder at putting the psychological approach across. I had heard the gospel many times, but this fellow was tremendous. It was the way he put it across.'

So the cleverness of the preacher is what is responsible for your being in Christ? I am sorry for you, for this reason—you would only need a cleverer man to come along and it would take

you out of Christ, wouldn't it? A man who had studied psychology a little bit more could do that. If my being in Christ depended on the cleverness of the preacher, where should I be?

But it isn't so. 'And *because of him* you are in Christ Jesus' (1:30). 'It was not my clever preaching that put you in Christ,' says Paul. 'It was God that put you in Christ, not me. It wasn't my method, it was the power of God. When I came to you I came with lowly speech, lest your faith should be in the wisdom and technique of the preacher rather than in the power of God.'

'When we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died', we perceive it is no accident. This is a deliberate thing on God's part, that it might get home to our hearts that in all our salvation there is nothing of man—neither his strength, nor his imagined weakness. It is of God that you are in Christ Jesus.

What is wrong then, in calling yourself after the name of a man?

'I am of Paul', 'I am of Cephas', 'I am of James', or anybody else, what is wrong with that? Well, when you do that, says Paul, 'are you not being merely human?' (3:4). What does it mean, 'not being merely human'? Of course they are human! But men not crossed out; men still trusting *man*; men who have not come to see the significance of that man, Jesus Christ, crucified upon a cross. Still they are prepared to parade somebody else's name alongside the lovely name of Christ.

God give us again to see that figure on the cross. It wasn't just a death; but deliberately, as the only way for our salvation, he became obedient unto death, and that, the death of the cross. God give us the grace to say, 'Yes, that being so, I have been crucified with Christ. I have been crossed out and I own only the name of the Lord Jesus.'

Discipline in the Church

Reading: Exodus 13:3, 7–16; 1 Corinthians 5:7–8; 6:9–12; 19–20

Then Moses said to the people, 'Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten'.

Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. You shall tell your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.' And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year. When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD'S. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.

Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. 'All things are lawful for me', but not all things are helpful. 'All things are lawful for me', but I will not be enslaved by anything.

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

We are currently studying together some of the aspects of the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians, and in particular we are observing how Paul dealt with some of the practical problems that arose in that church. On the last two occasions we have been hearing him answer the question, *What shall we call ourselves—what shall we call our churches?* We noticed there how Paul takes this practical problem right back to its first principles in the death of Jesus Christ our Lord, and applies therefore not so much legal arguments as *the implications of the death of our Lord Jesus*. Once we understand what was involved in that death, and therefore what is involved in the Christian gospel, there will be no doubt whatsoever about what we should call our churches.

Now in chapters 5 and 6, Paul turns to another matter—*the question of discipline in the church*, if and how it shall be exercised. There is no doubt as to what his answer is going to be. The church of God will be called upon at times to execute what surely must be an exceedingly sad thing: it will be called upon to execute discipline on its members. Paul sums it up in 5:13, talking of a man who had professed to be a believer, was a member of the church at Corinth, and had fallen into grievous sin to the scandal of the whole public. Paul enjoins upon the church that they must exercise discipline. They must put away the wicked man from among themselves: ‘Purge the evil person from among you.’ There is no doubt, therefore, that the New Testament teaches that grievous sinners must be excommunicated from the church.

This matter has been hotly disputed, for two reasons

1. There are some who tell us that it is strictly forbidden by the Lord Jesus Christ that we should do any such thing. We are not to attempt any such discipline in the church. We are not to judge who are, and who are not, sinners, and we are certainly not to attempt to excommunicate them.

Such a viewpoint might strike you as very odd when we have just read 1 Corinthians 5, but it is based on an appeal to a parable spoken by our Lord Jesus where our Lord describes a farmer who planted wheat in his field, and then the enemy came and planted weeds. When the weeds began to show themselves the servants were distressed:

And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?’ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ So the servants said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them’. (Matt 13:27–29)

So some people say, ‘There is our Lord’s explicit charge. You are not to try and root up tares out of the church, lest in rooting up tares you root up genuine believers as well.’

But, of course, the appeal rests on a grievous misunderstanding of what our Lord is saying. A moment’s thought will show us that in the parable of the Weeds our Lord Jesus is not talking of discipline to be exercised on believers who have sinned. ‘The weeds are the sons of the evil

one' (v. 38), not believers at all. And another moment's reading will show us that, when our Lord taught that parable, the field he was talking about was not the *church*. He explicitly tells us that the field is the *world*, so he is not talking about the excommunication of a sinning believer from the church. What he is talking about and forbidding, is the rooting up of the 'sons of the evil one' from the world.

And then you notice that in the parable of the Weeds, he was not addressing the *elders* of a Christian church and forbidding them to exercise discipline. He was talking about the *angels* of God (v. 41). When the harvest comes it is the Master's servants who will root up the weeds. And who will the Master's servants be? They will be the holy angels of God to whose solemn charge will be committed the task of purging this world of the children of the devil and binding them, so to speak, in bundles, and consigning them to the lake of fire.

The enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (vv. 39–42)

The parable of the Weeds is saying that the final judgment is not yet come, and God therefore allows this evil world to go on in its evil ways and the angels are forbidden to attempt to gather the weeds. It will come, and when it comes the angels of God will be sent forth and the wicked shall be removed and consigned to the lake of fire. Thank God, that time has not yet come, and there is still opportunity to preach the gospel so that people might be saved.

The Lord is not slow to fulfil his promise as some count slowness, but is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

What 1 Corinthians 5 is talking about is not that at all. It is not talking about rooting up the wicked out of the world; it is talking of what must happen if someone who is a believer, a member of a Christian church, falls into grievous sin.

Now you will notice another big distinction. When the angels eventually root up the weeds and take them out of the field, they are not doing it so that the weeds shall be saved—they are doing it explicitly that the weeds shall be consigned to the fiery furnace (Matt 13:40–42). But you will notice from our chapter that in this sorry circumstance, when with much grief and self-judgment before God a church is obliged to hand over this offender to Satan, it is done 'for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord' (1 Cor 5:5). It has the man's salvation in view, not his consigning to the lake of fire. He is to be disciplined so that, in God's mercy, though it might cost much physical suffering under God's discipline, it might lead the man to repentance and his spirit being saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

2. The second argument that is sometimes heard against discipline in the church is that it seems so narrow-minded and cruel it will put people off.

Well, perhaps in one sense it would, in our modern permissive society. But weigh up the other situation. Where flagrant sin is allowed to go unchallenged and remain in the church, see how it militates against the very gospel itself. Since the *Reformers* the attitude has become prevalent, and the parable of the Weeds has been used to excuse it, so that there have been times in Europe when openly immoral men, whose immoralities have been the butt of every newspaper writer, have not only been leading members of the church, but in some countries are head of the church. What sincere man would want to get converted and enter a church, the very head of which is the butt of popular accusation of his immoralities?

It is, of course, a denial of the gospel we preach; and for the gospel's sake the church and her testimony must be preserved, if need be, by this sad, extreme measure of excommunication. And it is not only the kind of immorality that chapter 5 mentions that is subject to the discipline of the church; chapter 6 talks of what is to happen when grievous disputes arise and believers are chasing one another before the Gentile law courts.

'Our Passover Lamb'

But now let us turn to what must be for us today, as we sit around this table, the more important consideration. How will Paul enjoin upon the believers the need for this discipline? Is it narrow-mindedness and pharisaic hardness of heart? 'No, indeed not,' says Paul.

Let us consider those emblems once more. We thought last week and the week before of the death of Christ under the form of the cross of Christ. 'He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross' (Phil 2:8); and we saw in those studies the significance of that aspect of his death—*his cross*.

Now Paul brings to bear upon us another aspect of the death of the Lord Jesus: 'For Christ *our Passover lamb*, has been sacrificed [for us]' (5:7). We are not talking about some cruel legalism that wants to bind men in its chains; we are talking of a God of redemption, who loves to set the saved free. And we are reminded that the ancient story of the Passover and Israel's deliverance will, if we study it, help us understand what was involved in the death of Jesus Christ our Lord. Our Passover, Christ himself, has delivered us from bondage. Listen therefore, as Paul applies it to our hearts:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything. (6:12)

Listen to my old heart, when it is a bit out of sorts spiritually and wanting to have its own way: 'Why shouldn't I do that? Why shouldn't I do this? I have a right to do it. Who are you to criticise me and tell me what to do? I am going to do it anyway!'

Oh! And are you going to be free, or will you develop a habit that will enslave you for the rest of your life? 'All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient' (KJV). All things are lawful, but, says Paul, 'I am not going to be made a slave by it.' What a slave-master sin is.

When our blessed Lord comes alongside and counsels us — 'Don't do that', it is not because he wants to enslave us, but the very opposite. See that bread, see that wine, is Paul out to make us slaves? No—to set us free! The blessed Lamb of God who died to set us free warns us that

there are things in life that will, if we let them, bring us under their power and enslave us. We do well to listen to his voice, that we might enjoy the freedom that he made possible by his death and resurrection.

When Israel were brought out of Egypt, they were not *just* brought out of Egypt. They were taken to a great inheritance flowing with milk and honey. But they spoiled it, I am afraid I have to tell you. It was a nice story and it was a nice inheritance, but the actual facts are really down to earth. They ruined it. They quarrelled, they sinned, they fell into immoralities, into idolatries, until it became God-forsaken. We have been redeemed for an inheritance, 'but let me tell you,' says Paul, 'that inheritance is not going to be ruined.'

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practise homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. (6:9–10)

Our permissive society may well give people permission to do these things and tell us we shouldn't be narrow-minded. They won't be in God's heaven. Heaven is not going to be ruined by that kind of sin. What a sad place sin makes of our world. We were also like that: we don't speak with superiority in our hearts. We were like it, but we were washed, cleansed, justified, so that (praise God) we may enjoy the great inheritance above: 'And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God' (6:11).

Two other things, and we may consider them very briefly. It is not the *understanding* of them that is difficult, it is the *doing* of them.

1. Cleansing out the old leaven

When Israel came out of Egypt, we are told that they didn't have time for their bread to be made properly and so they ate unleavened bread. But then God turned it into a yearly celebration to remind them of their redemption from Egypt and thus it has continued down the centuries. It is celebrated here in Belfast. If you happen to know a Jewish family, enquire of them and let them tell you what they do when their Easter-time is coming up. How they clean the house diligently to find and remove every speck of leaven that there might be in the house; and knowing that the ladies have done their job well, the husbands hide a little bit of leaven on purpose! And then comes the great day when father collects all the family, and they go round and peer in every cupboard. Of course they find what he had hidden and take it out ceremoniously and burn it outside in their back yard, in their attempt to get rid of every bit of leaven and so keep the celebration of Israel's coming out of Egypt.

If only all we had to do was to chase out a bit of mouldy bread or leaven from our homes; it would be tiresome, but not difficult. Ours is a more difficult task. Not only that severe matter, when it is called for, of excommunicating a believer from the church, but to chase the old leaven of malice and wickedness from our own lives (5:7). With what difficulty it goes—

the bitterness, the corruption. Who of us doesn't know his own heart and all the ugly, bitter things that sometimes ferment and fester there?

But Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us and we are called to keep a life-long festival: a feast of spiritually unleavened bread. 'You are already unleavened,' says Paul. What an encouragement! God has not only reconciled us but he has implanted within us the new, purer, holy life—the very Holy Spirit of God. In one sense we are unleavened, but the bits and pieces of the old sins and bitterness, the old corruptions, remain. By God's grace we are to give them no mercy but to hunt them from our lives.

2. Consecration of the firstborn

Then, when they came out of Egypt, they were told that thereafter every firstborn must be consecrated to God. Why? The logic was simple. When Pharaoh wouldn't let the Israelites go, God commanded his destroying angel that every firstborn in the land must be executed. That applied to the Egyptians, but it would have applied equally to the Israelites. When the judgments of God started, it didn't make any difference whether you were Jew or Gentile, Israelite or Egyptian. God is no respecter of persons, and when his judgments start he judges all equally. Israel's firstborn would have been lost too, had it not been that the Passover lamb died instead of the firstborn, and the firstborn went free.

'You are not your own,' says God. 'Had I not provided the sacrifice for you—you firstborn, you would have had no life. You would have been dead. You owe your life to me, and I want it' (6:19–20).

As we sit around a table, let us remember the destroying angel of the wrath of God. How does it come that you have got a life at all, my sister, my brother? It is because the Saviour gave his life for ours. The sheer fact is not sentimentality or a gush of emotion, but the cold light of logic. We are not our own, we have been bought with a price, and we are not free to do what we like with the church. If Christ says 'get the leaven out', out it must go.

I am not free to do what I like, even with such a personal thing as my own body. It has been bought and I am not my own.

You say, 'I don't like the sound of it.'

All right, get yourself unredeemed then. Stand by yourself without a Saviour under the wrath of God, if you want to be on your own. I want to be redeemed so that I can have a life to live. Then I accept the redemption that is in Christ Jesus with the logic that we had read to us earlier this morning:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor 5:14–15)

Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us.

4

The Table of the Lord

Reading: Malachi 1:7–8, 11–12; 1 Corinthians 8:1–11; 10:14–22

By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the LORD'S table may be despised. When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favour? says the LORD of hosts.

For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised.

Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that 'all of us possess knowledge'. This 'knowledge' puffs up, but love builds up. If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, he is known by God. Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that 'an idol has no real existence', and that 'there is no God but one.' For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died.

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

In our reading of the First Epistle to the Corinthians during these weeks we have noticed a recurring pattern. Paul will raise one of the practical problems vexing the church at Corinth,

and then by way of solving it he brings his fellow-believers back to the very fundamental of the faith—to consider the death of Christ that is the basis of our salvation, and invite them to think through the implications and the principles of that great sacrifice.

We noticed therefore, that in the early chapters he directed their attention to the cross of the Lord Jesus: the fact that our Lord died. Not simply by a death, any death; but that he died, becoming obedient unto death, *'even the death of the cross'*. There he showed us that the cross was no accident, but the deliberate policy and deliberate strategy of God.

Then he moved on to another problem, the question of discipline in the church, and to bring us to the heart of the matter he referred us once more to the death of the Lord Jesus. This time not so much the cross of Christ, but rather the great sacrifice that our blessed Lord offered on our account, *'Christ, our Passover Lamb'*.

The problem of idolatry

Now we come to another problem that vexed the early church. Should you or should you not eat food sacrificed to idols? At first sight, of course, it seems a very remote problem to us. One that we might quite profitably dispense with thinking about. I am not forgetting either, when I so speak, that we are in danger of spiritual idolatry, for Paul reminds us in the Epistle to Colossians that wanting to have more than your share is a form of idolatry. *'Covetousness,'* he says, *'is idolatry'* (3:5).

But this morning we are not thinking so much of that particular spiritual idolatry; we are thinking of a much more practical, down to earth problem that faced the early churches. They lived in cities where literal idolatry was rife. There were hundreds of temples throughout the city where daily sacrifices were offered. Much of the meat that resulted from those sacrifices would then be sold in the butchers' shops. And the question would arise: was it right to go and buy your meat from a butcher's shop, if you knew that it had originally been offered as a sacrifice to a pagan idol?

This question also raised its head in social affairs. You would get an invitation from your next-door neighbour or the boss at work to attend a dinner. You might feel that you would like to go to the dinner because you like dinners. Or you might feel that, whether you liked dinners or not, it was a politic thing to do: if the boss and his wife invited you to go to dinner, you shouldn't show yourself churlish and not go. There is such a thing as promotion, and to show yourself to be uncivil and uncivilized might go against your possibilities of promotion.

But when the invitation came it would announce that they were giving the dinner party, not in their home, but in the temple of Lord Serapis³, maybe. (We have invitation cards that have survived from the ancient world, announcing that 'so and so' was holding a dinner party in the temple of Lord Serapis.) It would be in the temple because there was a plentiful meat supply, and one of the side rooms would be a convenient and socially attractive place to have your dinner party.

³ Serapis, also spelled Sarapis, Greco-Egyptian deity of the Sun first encountered at Memphis, where his cult was celebrated in association with that of the sacred Egyptian bull Apis (who was called Osorapis when deceased). He was thus originally a god of the underworld but was reintroduced as a new deity with many Hellenic aspects by Ptolemy I Soter (reigned 305–284 BC), who centred the worship of the deity at Alexandria, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Should you go?

You say, 'That's all very remote. We never get invitations to the temple of Lord Serapis here in Belfast. What has it got to do with us?'

Well, I suppose it is remote for us, but not for some dear believers still. This is a very serious practical problem for many young folks in some countries, who get converted to the Lord while they are still minors in their parents' homes. Being the age of fourteen or seventeen and finding the Saviour, they live in homes where the meal can be offered to the gods on the god-shelf in the corner of the room. Should they eat it? Then the problem is not quite so remote.

And here in Belfast there are all sorts of Masonic lodges, where solemn businessmen and others gather and partake in rites of the worship of Osiris and Om and all those old pagan deities that Jezebel and Ahab worshipped. It is plain, unadulterated idolatry in the crudest possible sense. The business world and some of the ecclesiastical world here in Northern Ireland is riddled with it. Catholicism has always rejected that kind of idolatry, but then Catholicism for its part still engages in crude idolatry. Just the other year, they held a great celebration in Zaragoza in Spain in honour of the Virgin, and there they proclaimed her redeemer alongside of Christ.

If we get our noses above our own little furrow here in Northern Ireland and look upon the world at large, there are great currents of thought afoot for evangelisation. There was put into my hand, I suppose it was five years ago, a magazine reporting the results of a Congress on Evangelism, where one good man was advocating that we ought really to return to methods used by earlier ancient *evangelists* (as he called them), which was that, when you come to a heathen country, you shouldn't try and convert the people from their religion—you will only put their backs up. Their religion is so entwined with their culture, and their culture with their religion, you must accept both, and just sow your tiny seed of Christianity within their religion. So you shouldn't try and convert Hindus, but join the Hindus and add a little bit of Christianity into Hinduism.

That was the method used, even here in Ireland centuries ago, when men came and preached the gospel, and found all sorts of pagan festivals. They took them over and 'baptised' them, adding a little tincture of Christianity to them. So that today respectable citizens in Belfast, having forgotten what it is all about, celebrate Halloween, which is nothing other than the worship of departed spirits. It is to be found in all parts of the world.

The idea is that once a year you go to the cemetery, escort back to your home the spirits of your departed relatives, and give them a great feast. Then after a day or two you escort them back to the cemetery in the hope that, having had a good feast, they are now content and will not come pestering you for the rest of the year. That is why, in some quarters, they hollow out a pumpkin with eyes and a mouth, put a candle into it, and place it outside the window. It is supposed to be one of the departed spirits come back for the feast. It has fitted in well with the notions of a purgatory and praying for the dead; and thus it entered Christendom. It is sheer idolatry!

How shall we go about solving such a practical problem?

The first warning that Paul gives is that we must *beware of slick answers*. It is so easy to take what in fact is true, make our deductions from that, and control our behaviour from it without realising that it is only one side of the truth; and therefore we come to answers that are unhelpful, if not positively wrong.

The matter is more complicated than we think. For instance, Paul reminds us in chapter 8 that you may have knowledge, which is a marvellous thing, but it is not the only thing. More important than knowledge in this matter is love: love for the Lord and love for one's fellow believers. Love for God that will always be sensitive, lest his unique glory as God should be infringed; love for my fellow believers, lest I do them damage.

Knowledge must be subordinated, therefore, to love. Paul says, 'We all know of course that a mere idol is nothing' (8:4). Plaster of Paris, or a bit of wood, or something. Absolutely nothing, and in one sense you can make a mock of it. What does it matter, if you have offered a piece of meat to an image made rather tawdrily out of a bit of wood and painted with a little gold paint? It is nothing.

It was in that fashion that the great prophet Isaiah spoke, when in the name of God he denounced Gentile idolatry and showed us the stupidity of idolatry. 'There is a man,' says Isaiah, 'he takes a beautiful tree and he is going to make a god.' So if you want a god you had better take a good tree. You want a god that will last; so take beautiful hard wood, form it, paint it, and put it up on its pedestal. You have a god! And what do you do with the bits that are left over? Well, they will do for putting on the fire to cook your breakfast (see Isa 44). So, with one bit of the wood you worship it as a god, and with the other bit you cook your breakfast. Nonsense, isn't it?

We all know that an idol is, in one sense, nothing; and in the true sense of the word there is only one God. Because you know there is only one God and that an idol is nothing, you may without any bad conscience buy meat in the butcher's shop and, whether it has been offered to an idol or not, you can say, 'It doesn't affect me in any way. It is a good beef steak and I am going to eat it.'

All right for you! But there are some people around, who have been brought up in idolatry. They are aware of the contest and to them an idol is something. You may despise their weak conscience, you may wish they were more enlightened; but, having been recently converted out of paganism, for the moment to this good believer an idol is a very sinister thing. If he were to go and eat a piece of meat offered to an idol, *his conscience would be defiled*. He might do it to please you because he didn't want to be the odd man out. You invited him to dinner, which you cooked. It smelt nice and you put it before him. If he refuses to eat, there is going to be a very awkward scene. So he eats it, but he has a conscience about it and he goes against his conscience. In his heart he thinks he is dishonouring the Lord; he thinks he is compromising the deity of the Lord Jesus.

That is how he looks at it, and he hasn't got your knowledge. You force him against his conscience to eat it, so he eats and sins against the Lord. It spoils the relationship between him and the Lord. Says Paul, using a very solemn term: your brother *perishes*—'And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother *for whom Christ died*' (1 Cor 8:11).

You say, 'Why should I surrender my right? I know there is nothing in an idol; why should I surrender my right to a person like that, because he hasn't learned very much.'

My good brother, see the emblems again. You surrender your right! What are you talking about, when for that man's sake Christ surrendered heaven itself, and gave his life and died for him?

So, for the first time in this context Paul brings us back to consider *the death of Christ*. What a price Christ paid; how many of his rights he surrendered. He died for us. As I remember this, let me ponder well my behaviour, lest by my self-centredness I spoil the work of Christ in a man for whom Christ died.

Superhuman power behind the idol

It is not only that: the matter is still more complicated. It would be lovely to have a world where nothing was complicated. You could have pat-answers to everything, and you could look up any problem in your handbook and get the rule. 'This is rule five hundred and sixty-five, that's the one we apply here!' Wouldn't life be simple? But life isn't like that, life is complicated.

There is another side to it. Some Gentiles would think that an idol was important, a bit of wood or whatever it was. But there were many enlightened Gentiles, and if you had mocked their idols they would have looked at you in amazement and you would have been the unintelligent one. They would have said, 'We don't worship the idol. Of course not! It is only an image to help us concentrate our thoughts. We are worshipping the superhuman power behind the idol' — in other words, what they would have called a *god*, or in Greek language, a *demon* (a supernatural power).

That raises another complication. If in their mind it is not the idol that counts for anything but that behind that idol there is this very real spirit power, then for you to join them in eating meat that has been virtually offered to a spirit power would be serious indeed.

'The table of the Lord'

So how will Paul deal with the problem? He will bring us back to the death of Christ. Not *the cross of Christ* so much, nor *the Passover* so much; as this time, *the table of the Lord* (1 Cor 10:21). What do we mean when we talk of our Lord's sacrifice as the table of the Lord? We all perceive at once we don't mean a literal table with four legs. We are not talking of that; nor are we simply talking about the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper, though they become a vivid illustration and symbol of what is involved in the Lord's table.

The passage we read in Malachi will help us understand it. When the Old Testament speaks of the table of the Lord it is speaking of the Lord's *altar*. Why, then, does it call it a table? Why can't it be content to call it an altar? For this reason: in many of the sacrifices of Israel that were brought to the altar, the animal itself wouldn't be completely burned. What would happen is this. The animal would be brought and offered to God. Part of the animal would be put on the altar and go up as a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour for God's benefit, so that (using symbolic language) he would be delighted—he would be satisfied. It

went up (so the technical term goes) as 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God' (Phil 4:18). God enjoyed it.

And then part of the sacrifice would be given to the priests: they took it and cooked it and ate it. That is what they lived on, so these good priests felt they were in fellowship with God. Now they shared the sacrifice that had been brought to God, and their daily food became sharing fellowship with God in the benefits of the sacrifice of that altar.

The man who brought the sacrifice would be given back a large part of the animal, so big in fact that he was obliged to call his neighbours in and they had a real feast. He and all his neighbours in the street ate and enjoyed fellowship together as a result of a sacrifice that had been brought to the Lord's altar. And thus the altar, in a figure of speech, became a veritable table, loaded with provision for God and for men — the table of the Lord.

The joy God has in the table of the Lord

As we think of the death of Christ, we think of the table of the Lord because of the tremendous provision that the death of Christ has made. A table at which, first of all, God sits. Oh, the tremendous joy and satisfaction and delight that God Almighty has received from the sacrifice of Christ. We think perpetually of our own benefit and what we have received. Pause for a moment and think of what God has received. When Christ gave himself as a sacrifice, see what he provided for me: the forgiveness of my sins. And then, 'Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, *a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God*' (Eph 5:2).

There was something about the cross of Christ that was infinitely sorrowful to God — he forsook his own Son. But there was also something about the sacrifice of Christ that delighted the heart of God. In this self-seeking world there was someone, sinless himself, to whom sin was abhorrent, yet he was willing to die for the likes of us. When it happened, it delighted the heart of God: heaven hadn't felt such a joy ever before. He gave himself a sacrifice, well pleasing to God, fragrant to God. Oh the joy that God gets out of that table of the Lord.

The blessings we receive from the table of the Lord

We come on behind and we get our benefits: the forgiveness of sins and justification and redemption; and one day, the very redemption of our bodies, an endless heaven, and fellowship with divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How will you ever get to the end of enumerating the blessings that we receive from the table of the Lord? And not only the blessings themselves, so that we can take them and go and eat them in some quiet corner all of our own; but the fellowship is with God, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, with every believer the world round, of every tongue and people, tribe and nation. What a tremendous fellowship we have been allowed to enter through the table of the Lord.

What food luxurious loads the board,
When, at his table, sits the Lord!
The cup how rich, the bread how sweet,

When Jesus deigns the guests to meet!⁴

The table of the Lord and the Lord's Supper

We must make a very nice hairbreadth distinction. We talk of the table of the Lord, and we have just now been enjoying the table of the Lord. But there is a slight distinction between the table of the Lord and the Lord's Supper that is very important. We have been here today at the Lord's Supper. When you are getting out the cornflakes tomorrow morning you won't be at the Lord's Supper, but you could be at the Lord's table. When you're washing the dishes you could be at the table of the Lord, and say, 'Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (Ps 32:1). Sitting at the table of the Lord, enjoying the benefits that come to us through the death of Christ, even in the kitchen!

There are some implications if you sit at the table of the Lord. We can sum them up very briefly because happily those emblems on the table will provide us with an illustration of what is involved for everybody that has fellowship at the Lord's table:

There is no fellowship without involvement

'The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?' (1 Cor 10:16). What a sacred thing it is to be involved in the blessings procured at such a cost and to share a fellowship in them. How? 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (v. 17).

On those two plates on that table you will see the remains of the loaf that we used this morning. The loaf itself is only a symbol of the body of Christ, but it is a practical picture of the underlying spiritual reality. That loaf went round and this morning there is some over. Suppose there had been such a large gathering of the Lord's people here this morning that when the last believer had taken his or her part there was no loaf left and the plate had gone back empty. If I were to say to you in the next five minutes, 'Where is the loaf?' you would say, 'The loaf hasn't gone, you know; there is the loaf, look! All these folks sitting around, each of them has a little bit of the loaf inside. They are now the one loaf!'

In that same way, if we have partaken of the benefits of the death of Christ, we become one with every believer in whom Christ is. That is why we sing: 'We would remember we are one with every saint that loves thy name.' Christ in them, Christ in us, forming one loaf. You cannot have fellowship with Christ without being involved with all his people. It's impossible to do it!

But the corollary is true. You go to an idol's temple along with someone who says, 'Yes the idol is nothing.' But behind that idol there are spiritual powers, and if you eat of his sacrifice you are having fellowship with those demons.

We have a lady who comes and helps us keep the house clean. The other day she informed us that when she became a believer she had to leave the Freemasons. No good saying that it

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon (1834–92), 'Amidst us our Beloved stands' (1866).

is such a nice Society, and they do a lot of good for widows and orphans. 'I am only in it for the business side and I don't approve of the religious side.' God won't accept your argument; you cannot take the benefits without being involved in the source of them.

Says Paul, 'Shall we provoke the Lord to *jealousy*?' (v. 22). That is a word that we don't often use, but the Lord our God is still a jealous God; he will not give his glory to another (Exod 20:5; Isa 42:8). You mustn't make Mary co-redeemer with Christ, for Christ will get jealous. That is an infringement of his unique glory. You mustn't go and take benefits from the worship of Isis and Osiris and Om and the Sun god in your Masonic temple, or Christ will get jealous.

There is no partaking of the benefits without involvement with the person who supplied them, and that is a solemn matter. Our salvation is not just a little help over a difficult stile. Our salvation, the very table of the Lord, calls us to sit down at the same table with the divine persons, unique in their glory. God will have no compromisers of his glory at his table.

Traditions in the Church

Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:1–2, 23–26

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

In our consideration of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians we have found a certain pattern build up before us. As Paul seeks to help his fellow-believers in Corinth to solve some of the practical problems that beset them, we find that he constantly takes them back to first principles; and indeed takes them back to the great sacrifice of Christ, which underlays and forms the foundation of the Christian gospel.

So in chapter 1 we found him bringing the believers to think of *the cross of the Lord Jesus*. And then in chapter 5, when dealing with another problem, he invites them to think of Christ as *the great Passover Lamb* that brought the believer deliverance. Last week we found in chapter 10 how he points to the death of the Lord Jesus and all the benefits that have come from it under the figure of *the table of the Lord*. Now this week, we find him referring once again to the death of the Saviour. This time, not as the cross of Christ, nor as the Passover sacrifice, nor as the table of the Lord, but on this occasion as *the covenant sacrifice*, the cup of the new covenant: ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’ (v. 25).

‘The new covenant in my blood’

What exactly do we mean when we talk of the death of the Lord Jesus as a covenant sacrifice? What is it that we are saying, when each week we take that cup into our hands and drink wine from it? What is it that we signify? ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood’ — if we ask its significance, we can soon find help to discover what it is.

First of all, let us think of the fact that it is the *new* covenant in contrast to the *old* covenant. The old covenant, you may remember, was a covenant entered into by God and Israel. As Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, on the basis of the law of God delivered over to them, God made a covenant relationship with his people. It was to be observed and remain intact as

long as the people obeyed God's law, for that covenant was based on the law. The law was holy and just and good, but that covenant proved impossible to preserve because the people were unable to keep the law.

Given the very best intention in the world, even people like Saul of Tarsus, who delighted in the law and wanted to keep it, found that, instead of a ministry of righteousness, the law became a ministry of condemnation (see 2 Cor 3:9). It was always saying, 'Do this', but it never once gave you the power to do it. It was forever coming alongside and saying, 'Don't do that', but it never gave you the power to abstain from doing it. It became, therefore, a ministry of judgment and a ministry of condemnation. Its ineffectuality is vividly shown by the fact that it was written on two tables of stone. There it was, objectively written. None could dispute its authority or its rightness; but it was written on two cold tablets of stone that couldn't supply the power to anybody to keep the commandments that it ordained.

Today, thank God, we stand related to God, not on the terms of the old covenant but on the terms of the new.

The terms of the new covenant

They don't run: 'The old covenant laws were difficult to keep, so from now on you won't have to keep any laws.' The covenant doesn't run like that, does it? The new covenant runs: 'I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts' (Heb 8:10).

The other week, talking to some of my younger brothers and sisters, I rather naughtily and unfairly suddenly popped them the question out of the blue: 'This year, perhaps fifty-two times, you have taken the cup at the Lord's Supper. It is *the cup of the new covenant*; can you please recite to me the terms of the new covenant.' I shall not tell you how many passed the exam. I am not quite sure if I ought to repeat the test just now! Can you, my brother, my sister, right now by memory repeat the terms of the new covenant, the cup from which you just now drank? Word perfect, all the clauses! If we can't, taking that cup into our hands, and not being able to remember what the terms are, would be a very curious thing to do. What was I saying when I took that cup? I was agreeing that our blessed Lord should put his laws into my mind and write them on my heart.

The way Christ governs his people

When the new covenant was set up, as this very passage reminds us, it was on the night he was betrayed that the Lord Jesus took bread and took the cup. What an exceedingly dramatic night it was. All through the week that we call Holy Week, our Lord had been coming into the city during the daytime to teach in the temple, while the crowds were around him. But at night when the crowds left he left too, so that the authorities would not be able to come and arrest him in the city under cover of darkness.

It was a dangerous week, that last week our Lord spent in Jerusalem. He had come to the city riding on the foal of a donkey, fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy, coming to Jerusalem as her king: 'Your King comes to you . . . lowly' (Zech 9:9 KJV). But he had found that city in the hands of his enemies, who were even now plotting to destroy him. In their hearts they were

defiant: 'We do not want this man to reign over us' (Luke 19:14). It wasn't safe for him to be in the city after dark.

On that last night, however, he was determined that he would keep the Passover feast with his disciples in Jerusalem, capital city of the King Messiah. Our Lord in secrecy held this last supper so that he might establish his kingdom. He offered the cup of the covenant to those men who sat around him, that he might become their king and Lord and begin to write his laws on their hearts and on their minds. Then he went, via the cross, home to glory and still he hasn't come back again.

A proclamation of loyalty to our absent Lord and King

We live in a hostile world; its ruler, ultimately, 'the prince of this world' (John 14:30 KJV). Here, my brothers and sisters, we have gathered once more this morning, in the absence of our Lord, waiting till he comes. Taking that cup in our hands, we have once more looked up to the Saviour and proclaimed our loyalty to him in a world that is hostile to him. In a world where some betray him still, we have taken the cup to profess our loyalty to our absent king and to repeat our hope that our king soon shall come again.

In Chester in England they will take you round the old walls in the city and presently into a guardroom built in the wall. They will show you a board with what looks a complete muddle of colours. You can't make head or tail of it. And then they will take a tankard and put it on top, and as the colours are reflected in the tankard there comes a face: the face of the king. When one of the kings of England was in exile, those loyal to him used to gather secretly and drink the health of the king. What king? Everybody round that table, when the tankard was put back down on that board, knew which king it was. In the absence of him whom they regarded as their true lord, they drank his health, expressing their loyalty to him till he would come again. Thus have we done this morning by taking that cup.

Relevance to the problems in Corinth

The problems that Paul is talking about in chapter 11 concern two of the major *traditions* of the church. 'Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you' (v. 2). 'For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you' (v. 23). Though the word 'tradition' is not used in English in verse 23, it is the same idea in its original language.

There are some folks who think tradition is a very bad thing. Tradition can degenerate into being a very bad thing, and there can be some bad traditions that are bad right from the very start. True tradition, of course, is an exceedingly important and sacred thing. The idea behind tradition, you will see in verse 23. It means: *to receive from somebody and then hand on to somebody else*. That is what the Latin word *trado* means. That is what the idea in the Greek word means, and therefore the validity of the tradition depends, in the first place, on whom you get it from.

Paul says, 'I received *from the Lord* what I also delivered to you'. Do you see the chain? It is the Lord who is the source of the tradition. He hands it to the apostle; the apostle takes that tradition, keeps it himself and passes it on faithfully to the other believers. There is the chain

of tradition coming from the Lord himself. 'I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions,' says Paul.

The importance of knowing where our traditions come from

I want us to think of ourselves this morning in that light, as those who profess their loyalty to the absent Lord and King. That absent Lord has handed over to Paul certain things that he wants kept. Paul in turn, in the name of the King, hands them over to us, so that we keep them. We must be sure, therefore, before we look at these particular things, what the chain of command is, and where the command and the tradition come from.

Then you will see in these chapters two lots of traditions.

The first tradition

In 11:1–16, Paul deals with those symbols by which we express our reverence to God and our loyalty to the Lord Jesus—and, incidentally, our respect one for another.

1. Christian men pray generally, anywhere, without veil or hat. They do not cover their heads with veil or hat—that is the first part of the tradition.
2. Christian women, when they pray or prophesy, do cover their heads with veil or hat.

The second tradition

As we meet in church, we take bread and wine and remember the Lord, using these two symbols of bread and wine to proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Two lots of symbols, therefore, and both equally important. Both coming from the Lord Jesus, and therefore to be treated with equal reverence and equal obedience. I shall not need to tell you that the symbols in 11:1–16 are not always popular nowadays. Changes have come about in the world outside, and therefore sometimes we shall hear it said that these traditions about women, when they are praying or prophesying being veiled or wearing a hat, are simply matters of local custom. It was good for the believers to observe them in far-off days in Corinth, but they can be safely set aside in modern Belfast or New York. The plain fact is, of course, when we read the verses, there are things that are due to local custom, but not to that alone.

Paul gives reasons why we men should keep our side, and not be veiled or hatted; and he gives the reason why the women should be veiled or hatted. Among other things, first of all there is the order of *redemption* in which the man has his head, the woman has her head, and Christ has his head. The fact that our blessed Lord has his head isn't a local custom to Corinth: that is an abiding truth all down the Christian years and its symbolism must be preserved.

Another reason he gives, as you will see from verses 7–12, is the order, not now of redemption but the order of *creation*. Creation isn't a thing that they did in Corinth at a certain stage because it was in fashion, and then it passed away. The order of creation remains.

And finally, his third major reason, given us in verses 13–14, is *nature*. 'Does not nature itself teach you . . .', and, because dear old nature is the same today as she ever was, nature's

teachings remain. It is not a question of fashion or of local custom merely, but of the order of redemption, the order of creation, and the teaching of nature.

But some will say that these verses surely are derogatory to women, and Paul wrote them in a day in which women were not really regarded very much, and nowadays Christ has taught us better. In those far off days there was a horrible distinction in status between man and woman, and now in Christ there is neither man nor woman. In the old world, in some countries, women were treated simply like things and sometimes worse, like slaves. If you know anything about the ancient Greek world you would thank God, ladies, every day of your lives, for the Apostle Paul, who taught Christian men to honour women.

While it is true that there is neither male nor female when it comes to our *status* in Christ, when it comes to *function* there is a difference. In verses 1–16, they were confusing *the difference between man and woman*.

What is all the fuss about in the second lot of traditions, from verse 17 onwards? In their treatment of the Lord's Supper, the believers in Corinth were confusing another important distinction: *the difference between the home and the church*. Of course, there is a difference between the home and the church. If you are a Christian you will see to it that your home life is under the control of the Lord and sanctified by his presence, just as your life in the church is under the control of the Lord and sanctified by his presence. If we only behave when we are in church and forget to be Christians when we are at home, what a lot of hypocrites we are. Christ should rule in my home as he does in the church.

Does that mean there is no difference between the home and the church? There is a very big difference: these verses command it. Observe the distinction between home and the church. If you want a good meal to fill your hunger, take it at home please. If it is a question of keeping the Lord's Supper, we do that in church. There is a clear distinction between home and church, just as there is still a clear distinction between man and woman.

Symbols of glory

Why should these things appear glum and gloomy? Some people say that these are horrible verses that have caused division among the Lord's people, and as soon as they are scrapped or neglected the better it would be. Oh, no! If we have read these verses aright we shall find that at least three times over Paul uses the word *glory*. 'For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man . . . but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering' (vv. 7, 15). 'Glory!' says Paul. And if we read these verses aright we shall go home today with our hearts full to bursting with a sense of the glory of God and the glory that our blessed Lord has conferred upon us. The symbols that our Lord has given us to use are not demeaning symbols, they are symbols of glory.

The order of redemption

Why then should men not wear hats — not cover their heads — when they pray? The verses tell us, to begin with, that it is because of the order of redemption. 'But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman *is* the man; and the head of

Christ is God' (v. 3 KJV). I suppose of those three statements, it is the middle one that is a little bit difficult. It sounds so dictatorial—the head of every woman is man. Oh dear! That doesn't blend well with modern ethos, and indeed doubtless it has been abused over the centuries to favour all sorts of tyrannies.

But you will not blame the tyranny on Christ, will you? 'The head of the woman is the man.' My good sister, before you start resenting it, read the next phrase, 'and the head of Christ is God.' He has his head then, too. Tell me, how did the Messiah come to have a head? Is he not equal with God, of the exact same nature as God? How did he come to have a head? I can tell you how:

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–8)

That is how he came to have a head: for the sake of our salvation. He was, and remained, equal with God in his nature, but for our sake he willingly gave up being on equal terms with God. What is the difference? Take this analogy for an illustration.

Here is the Duke of Somewhere, and his Grace the Duke goes to bed every night surrounded by inconceivable wealth and comfort. Ah, but the Income Tax man comes after him and with death duties and what not, believe it or not, in order to keep up their style of living to which they are accustomed, something will have to be done. The lands will have to be opened to the public and they will have to allow the public to come and look around the house to collect the money so that they can keep the house going.

They can't afford to lose their profits by hiring somebody to stand on the gate and take the tickets, so they ask for a volunteer. Do you know what? The Duke's blue-blooded son—as blue-blooded as his father—volunteers to go down to the gate lodge and for the summer period live in the old gate lodge, sleep there, and take the tickets at the gate. I will tell you something about the gate lodge. The windows are all broken and draughty, all he has is an old camp bed, and the rats occasionally run across the floor. As the prince sleeps there, he is still equal in his nature with his father, but he is not on equal terms with him. His father is still in the feather bed up in the house, with servants to wait on him every minute. His son is in the gate lodge, himself a servant.

That is what our Lord did for us, my sister, my brother. He could have stayed in heaven, but for our sakes he didn't think it a thing to be grasped on to, to be on equal terms with God. He made himself of no reputation and became a servant and a slave that he might save us. Shall I say after that, that I am not going to accept anyone as head, when the head of Christ is God, the head of man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man? We have a hierarchy for the purposes of redemption.

Do you think that is very undemocratic? Would you say about a rugby team that it is wrong and undemocratic to have a captain and nobody must be able to tell the others what to

do? In the plan of redemption, to bring our planet back to God, there is a very definite hierarchy. God is chief; under him is Christ; under him is man; and under him is woman—all in the same great team for the redemption of mankind.

Men, when you pray, you must not wear a hat or veil. If you did, you would dishonour your head. Not only your own physical head, but Jesus Christ your Lord. He is your head. Now, because he is absent, you must represent him publicly, and as you pray with your head uncovered you are bearing witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is your head. That is why men don't wear hats when they pray; it has nothing to do with custom.

Yesterday I was in the synagogue in Belfast. All the men there were wearing hats when they prayed, and prayer shawls as well. Why? Was it because they are not gentlemen? No gentleman would wear a hat in the presence of a woman. No, they are perfect gentlemen; but they wear hats or a covering when they pray. It is their custom. If I said, 'Please take those old hats off and be liberated!' what do you think they would say? Why don't they do like we do, and not wear hats? Because they don't believe that Jesus is the Messiah.

You won't start wearing hats when you pray, will you?—you will be denying the Christhood of Jesus if you do. Don't dishonour your head. This is an exceedingly eloquent and important symbol, nothing to do with local custom whatsoever.

And when women pray they are asked to cover their heads. If they don't they will dishonour their head—that is, their men-folk to whom they are responsible. 'Since it is the same as if her head were shaven,' says Paul (v. 5). Now we do have a bit of local custom! In the ancient world, if a woman was shaven or shorn she was a woman who had been unfaithful to her husband. For a woman to pray or prophesy without a veil, says Paul, is to dishonour her head, in the same way as she would dishonour it if she became a woman of loose morals.

The order of creation

Genesis tells us that man was made in the image of God. In Genesis 2 you will find that men and women were not made in the same split second. The man was first made, says the ancient record of Creation, and then the woman. Why the delay—was it significant? Yes! Though man was made in the image of God, to have dominion, the woman was made afterwards, and for the man. That is not a local custom, it is God's order of creation. Let none abuse it and turn it into a tyranny. For the other thing is true: if the woman was made after the man, then ever since that time, Adam excepted, all men have been made through the woman. A partnership in God's creation.

But that is God's idea of order, and why should we bother about it when we pray and prophesy? Because God's creation has become disordered! Into that lovely scene of order there came Satan with his rebellious doctrines: 'I will assert myself, I will be as God, I won't be under anybody else.' And all that sorry insubordination and disobedience has ruined the harmony and paradise of our world. And what is Christ doing? He is putting it right, my brother and sister. How? By tyrannical decree from above? No, by himself becoming a servant and accepting a head, and obeying. 'Having learned obedience by the things that he suffered', he is leading us too in the pathway of obedience (Heb 5:8).

For that reason, likewise, we do it for the angels' sake (v. 10). They are unseen by us of course, but angels have been watching us. Watching this great and marvellous thing, how that

the Crucified has begun to restore God's creation to its true and glorious order. They have read it in our hearts and they have read it in the symbols we have used.

The order of nature

Nature teaches us a lot of things. It teaches us that if a man has long hair it is a shame to him. It teaches us that if a woman has long hair it is her glory. What a realist Paul was: not all ladies (they won't mind my saying it) do have beautiful long hair. Some ladies' hair does not grow long; some Africans, for instance. But nature teaches us that if a woman has a beautiful long head of hair it is a glory. God has given it to her as a mantle to cast around her. When God invented a lovely head of hair for a woman he thought he was giving her something beautiful, like the husband who gives his wife a stole. When she goes out to this or that function she says, 'My husband gave me this.' What a beautiful thing it is, and for the moment it is her glory.

In giving women a lovely head of hair, God thought it would be for their glory, meant to be admired by all and sundry. You will notice he didn't permit the men to have long hair. It made the woman more glorious in this respect. Precisely because she is so glorious, God asks that when we come to spiritual exercise, a woman should veil her glory in the presence of God, lest she attract to herself in that moment the attention that God should receive, undivided for himself.

The traditions of the church: they come from Messiah, they come from Paul, and they come to me as I have taken that cup into my hand this morning. May the Lord grant his laws to be so written on my heart that I shall willingly obey them and keep the traditions that have been delivered to us.

The Death, Burial and Resurrection of Christ in Relation to the Human Body

Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:1–12

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?

We come to our last study of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We have been noticing how that, in the course of this letter, Paul is dealing with certain difficulties, troubles and disputes that had arisen in the church at Corinth. We have further noticed that, whatever the trouble is, Paul constantly in the end brings them back to the death of Jesus Christ our Lord: a death that lies as the foundation to all of our Christian salvation.

We have noticed how that, according to the difficulty, he has concentrated on different aspects of the death of the Saviour and drawn out the principles involved therein so that they might be clearly seen as the things that must control our behaviour in the church.

So we have thought together in the early chapters of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ: how that he was obedient unto death, *'even death on a cross'*. And we pondered the significance of that special form of death.

We moved on to think of church discipline in the context of another aspect of the death of Christ. In chapter 5 we are told that *'Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed'* (v. 7).

Then subsequently we thought of the church's fellowship, and that aspect of the death and sacrifice of Christ that is expressed in the term *'the table of the Lord'*.

Last week we moved on still further, to think of the symbols in the church by which we express our reverence for God and loyalty to the Lord Jesus and respect for one another. In

that connection we were reminded of the death of the Lord Jesus as *the great covenant sacrifice*—an expression of his Lordship, and the guarantee that under the new covenant he will write his laws on our hearts and minds. So the symbols of the church are directly related to the Lordship of Jesus Christ our Lord, and of his recognition as the head of the church.

Now this morning, for the last occasion, we come to chapter 15. In the light of what has happened in this past week, perhaps it is not outside the providence of God that we should be thinking of the death of the Lord Jesus in this particular aspect: ‘that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures’ (vv. 3–4). In other words, we are to think of *the death of the Lord Jesus in relation to the human body*.

The death of our Lord Jesus lies at the very foundation, not only of the behaviour of the church but of the very gospel itself. Here is the heart of matters; our very salvation depends upon this. So that, to begin with, surely we ought to notice what the gospel is. The gospel, if we would put it in a nutshell, objectively speaking, is as follows, ‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures’. It is not merely enough to say that Christ died for our sins; for, left like that, what would it mean?

What is the gospel?

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received:
that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,
that he was buried,
that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,
and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3–5)

Christ died for our sins

Was it because, perhaps, our wicked sins, our jealousies and spites, hounded him to his death, and that was a disaster? Or, that he died for our sins simply as an example? It is exceedingly important, if we are to grasp the gospel, that we shall notice that he died for our sins, not in just any way you like to think of: he died for our sins *‘in accordance with the Scriptures’*.

Not only is there in the Old Testament the explicit statement as to the sense in which he died for sins, but the Old Testament abounded with illustrations in Israel’s ritual of what it meant when a victim died for the people’s sins. In Israel, thousands of times did they bring their sacrifices, confess their sins over the head of the animal, lay their hand and their weight on the animal’s head, and then the animal would be killed so it would be evident that the victim was dying in the stead of, in the place of, the repentant sinner. He died for our sins according to the Scriptures—the first-third of the great gospel.

He was buried

This is an integral part of the gospel. It is a fact, perhaps, that we do not always emphasize as much as we should. What a glorious part of the gospel, that Jesus Christ was buried. You say,

'I don't quite see the relevance of that.' You might well do one day. It is gospel, my friend, because he was buried as literally as you may be buried one of these days. When we think of the gospel, we think that Jesus Christ died for our sins, so that he might deal with the guilt of sin—the effect of sin upon the human conscience and spirit. When we think of the gospel, we think also how Jesus Christ was buried—so that he might deal with the effect of sin upon the human body.

What a story the burial of the body is! When we think how the human body came fresh from the hands of almighty God, as God himself stooped and took the dust and fashioned it with all the pride and divine skill of the divine artificer to make something exceedingly beautiful, and yet what sin has done to it. Let us think about the burial of a human body (v. 43).

'It is sown in dishonour.' Let us understand it fully. Presently we shall see that it is not appropriate to say over the human body as it is lowered into the grave, 'This is victory'. It is far from victory. It is grievous defeat that a body, designed by God as something glorious and beautiful to express the human personality, should come to this. The dishonour of it! Just imagine standing with Martha at the graveside when our Lord commanded that the stone be rolled away. 'Oh, no, Lord; don't do that,' she said. 'By this time he stinks.' It is sown in dishonour. Oh, the fearful result that sin has caused on the human body.

'It is sown in weakness.' It is not given to all of us to be giants in strength. But if you think of the beauty of the female form brought to such hideous dishonour, then think of the strength of the male form, albeit an Olympic giant, brought by sin and consequent disease to pitiful, helpless weakness. We were never meant to be such weak things that scarcely can lift a hand, and in the end are dead.

'It is raised in glory . . . it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.' The gospel is that God is not going to accept defeat, not even at that level. He designed the human body as something glorious, and God is concerned not merely to forgive our sins and to cleanse our consciences—he will not allow sin or death to have its final victory even over the human body. Therefore, it is an integral and exceedingly important part of the gospel that Jesus Christ was buried.

He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures

All the Gospels take special care to tell us that he was buried, and *how* he was buried. Mark perhaps is the most pointed of them all, when he uses the word that no other evangelist, nor anybody else I know of in Scripture, uses of the body of Jesus Christ our Lord. He calls it a *corpse*. 'Joseph of Arimathea . . . went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus' (Mark 15:43). Pilate took precautions (so we are told), surprised that he was already dead. He consulted with the centurion and discovered that he was already dead, and, says Mark, 'he granted the corpse to Joseph' (v. 45). It is, at first sight, shocking to think of the body of Jesus Christ as a corpse. But, you see, if there were to be a resurrection there must first be a death of the body. You can't have a resurrection without the death of the body.

So was he buried, and 'he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures', with the declared implication, *'Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep'* (v. 20). The guarantee is that he, the firstfruits, will be eventually followed by the great harvest of the dead, and of those millions that have been redeemed through his blood.

Relevance to the problems in Corinth

That then is the particular aspect of the death of Christ that is before us here in chapter 15. Once more it is before us because of a difficulty in the church; and this time the difficulty was doctrinal. Some were saying in the church at Corinth, apparently, that there was no such thing as *the resurrection of the dead*. Not realising, presumably, the fearful implications of what they were saying.

It is a fact that you can get dear Christians, sound believers in that sense, who can occasionally imbibe doctrines that would be destructive of the very foundation of the gospel; and they have imbibed them without realising how serious these wrong doctrines are. Doctrines matter! It won't do to become sentimental and say, 'Ah well, so long as we love each other it doesn't matter what we believe.' It matters tremendously what we believe. Paul is not prepared to see some of the Corinthians imbibe notions that, without their knowing it at the moment, would be destructive of the very basis of the gospel. 'How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?' (v. 12).

It is a fact that all down the Christian ages, and perhaps never more so than at the present time, there are people who profess themselves willing to believe the gospel that Jesus died for our sins; willing to believe that there is a life to come—a heaven; but they cannot bring themselves to believe the literal resurrection of the body. It seems to them to be too good to be true; a little mythology that ought to be demythologised into simply meaning that there is a future beyond. We must beware of it, because it is not (though many plead it is) another way of interpreting the Christian gospel.

'Why bother,' says a learned theologian, 'whether the grave in which Jesus' body was buried was found empty or not? It makes no difference whether the body was there or it wasn't there.'

What utter nonsense! The Christian gospel is not that Jesus died and was buried and survived, and that his immortal soul survived on into eternity. That is not the gospel. The gospel is that he died, was buried, and on the third day that body came out of the sepulchre and was raised. Nothing short of the resurrection of the body will do.

'Christ has been raised from the dead'

Paul spends time pointing out to the Corinthians that if they surrender faith in the resurrection of the body, then it completely destroys the Christian gospel. For if there is no resurrection of the body at all, then the body of Jesus Christ is not raised. And if Jesus Christ is not raised then you are still in your sins. If you are still in your sins all is lost (vv. 12–19).

The words of Jesus Christ, 'Peace be with you,' may comfort you for a few brief hours in this temporary life on earth (John 20:19). But his words, 'Peace be with you', will not forgive your sins. Only his death can do that, and if it is not followed by a resurrection his death has no validity.

Worse still, if Jesus Christ is still in the grave you have followed men who have deliberately deceived you, because the apostles deliberately and knowingly witnessed that he did rise bodily on the third day. Understanding perfectly what they said, that they meant a literal resurrection of the body, they said it; and if Jesus Christ is not risen then the apostles are bound to be deliberate liars. I wouldn't put much faith in the message that has been

brought to me by a pack of deliberate liars. It is an integral part of the gospel—the bodily resurrection of Christ and the bodily resurrection of all who trust him.

I suspect one of the major difficulties that people face when they think about the resurrection of the body is the question, ‘How shall it happen?’ (v. 35). It would be fascinating to know all the mechanics of it and the answers to all those intricate questions that arise. If what I am in this life depends so directly upon my memory—such that if my memory goes in this life my character, my personality, is grievously altered—what happens if in death my memory is destroyed? That is only one of the many questions that centre round this question of the resurrection of the body.

We are not asked to solve all those questions; but God himself does provide us with analogies to support our faith. How shall it all be done? Well, take an analogy from the realm of farming (v. 37). A farmer sows a bare grain of wheat or barley. The grain itself goes to mush and disappears. But you get up something, and that something is both like and unlike what was put in the ground. It is of the same kind, but it is more glorious. The bare grain is naked indeed; what you get up is not one grain but many grains in a beautiful green ear of corn that at its appropriate time comes on flower and blossoms. A lovely thing, full of the sap of life and beautiful with its little flower in its day, with vastly more potential than that one little grain of wheat ever had. So shall it be in the resurrection.

What is more, while what comes out is like what went in, and yet so much more glorious, farmers throughout the centuries have discovered that you don’t get anything out unless you put something in.

Someone may say to me, ‘When my human body comes out of the grave at the coming of Christ, is it going to be much changed into a different kind of human body? Shall I still be human?’

Yes, because flesh can exist in different modes. Take the substance, *flesh*, that we find in our world. You will find this curious and interesting matter, that flesh exists under different modes (v. 39). There’s fish and chicken and oxen and human flesh, and it is all flesh. But our good surgeons will tell us that it is very rarely that you can mix the different types of flesh. One flesh will reject the other type, but it is still flesh. So flesh can exist even before our eyes in different modes. What difficulty would there be in thinking that my human flesh—the type that I have now existing in this mode—could in the resurrection still be flesh, but a different kind? ‘. . . for star differs from star in glory’ (v. 41), so there shall be a difference between our body now and our body then.

We are in the presence now, not of some tiny little detail, some little superfluous but pretty decoration upon the cake of our redemption—we are now at the heart of the whole process of redemption. It is that God made man, Adam, a living soul—a human being. Adam sinned, with all the terrible consequences. God is not attempting simply to undo the result of sin and once more produce Adam restored. God’s way is to start over again with a different type of man. Human still, but fundamentally different in this respect: “‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit’ (v. 45).

There is now in God’s great universe, and has been ever since the birth of Jesus Christ our Lord on our planet, a different race of human beings. Just as we received our physical life

from Adam and bore his image, so we who trust Christ shall bear the image of a different kind of human being. 'The second man is from heaven' (v. 47).

Here we may pause just a second to notice with delight what Paul has been telling us in this epistle. Let us forget all the problems in it and allow ourselves a moment's enjoyment. We started in the early chapters thinking of the cross of Christ, which tells us of the end of all flesh before God—the 'crossing out' of man. We who come in repentance to the cross of Christ for forgiveness must learn a bitter but fundamental lesson. Not the patching up of man but the end of man: we learned at that cross not to put our trust in man.

The body of Christ, the church

As our epistle has gone along, see what glorious anthropology it has taught us. Had we had time to read together chapter 12, we should have discovered that, while *man* is finished, God has begun a new kind of thing in his universe. It is called *the body of Christ*; and into that body every believer has been baptised and each believer has become a member. It is a glorious thing, the like of which was never before, an entity so marvellous that the angels themselves are interested in this new thing. A body in which each member is a human personality, and yet a body in which all these human personalities work in perfect harmony the one with the other because they are controlled by the head. A body that is supra-personal and not sub-personal. On its glories one could speak a long while. This is God's idea of redemption: the body of Christ already now in existence, waiting to come to the perfect stature of the head, which is Christ (see Eph 4:15).

We think not only of all those *personalities*, each forming one member in the body of Christ—personality still, individual still, with freewill still, but all of them part of a greater thing than their own personality—now we think of the *body* that each of those members is going to have. Bodies to express their personalities, so far more glorious than the bodies we have now.

Sometimes they confine us. When I want to tell you something, I say, 'Oh, I don't know how to put it! I meant to say this, but I said something else; I meant to do this, and I do something grievously short.' I feel all sorts of ideas within me that could find fulfilment, but I lack the means to do it. I am so limited in this body. Ah, but one day I shall have not the body that is now, but a glorious body, a spiritual body, bearing the very pattern of the second man himself, the Lord from heaven (1 Cor 15:47). When shall it be?

When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' (v. 54)

It shall be then, not now. It is a cruel thing to point to a decomposing body in the grave, and say, 'that is victory'. That is defeat. Victory shall come when the Saviour comes and the dead shall rise, the perishable shall put on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality. For the moment, we must face reality and acknowledge defeat. Death is 'the last enemy' (v. 26). You have no need to be ashamed of your tears nor try to keep them back. When the Saviour was confronted with what death had done to his friend Lazarus, Jesus wept.

I know you will tell me that you find peace and comfort in the fact that God is behind the scenes and he allowed it, and that ultimately your loved ones were 'put to sleep in Jesus' (see 1 Thess 4:14). That is a lovely comfort. You take your leave of them with a certain hope that one day their bodies shall rise when the Saviour comes. You take your comfort in this, that the redeemed themselves are with the Lord, consciously enjoying his presence, and that is glorious. But I talk of the *body*, and, as far as the believer's body is concerned, this for the moment is defeat. Think of the ugliness of disease and death, worms and corruption. 'An enemy has done this' and rightly we weep, but with the certainty in our hearts that one day there will come victory. 'Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory"' (v. 54).

Already you may begin to taste that victory. Consider what the war is about. You see, 'the sting of death is sin' (v. 56). The really painful thing is not the death of the body – and that can be very painful, but what comes after, therein lies the sting. 'It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement' (Heb 9:27). What will be done because of my sin? – that is the sting. Bury an unconverted man or woman: death is a disaster, but what lies beyond? That is the sting in the tail of death.

For the believer that sting has been forever removed: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (vv. 3–4). For the believer there is no judgment: 'He does not come into judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5:24). The sorrow is there, but the sting is forever gone and one day the victory.

What then?

You say, 'I'll go home and dry up my tears!'

That would be an inadequate response. What shall I do in face of the coming resurrection? This is what I must do:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. (v. 58)

Everything that I do for Christ shall last eternally. Let me abound in his work now, therefore, because he is coming soon. I haven't much time, and even before he comes I too might pass through death. Therefore, let me grab every opportunity I have now and fill all the remaining moments with loving labour for the Lord.

About the Author

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