

THE FIRST EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS: AN EXPANDED PARAPHRASE

III. PAUL DEALS WITH THE REPORT RECEIVED FROM FORTUNATUS AND HIS COMPANIONS (CH. 5: 1-6: 20)

(a) *A case of flagrant immorality (Ch. 5: 1-13)*

It is actually reported that one of you is involved in an illicit union, and a union of a kind that is not even practised among the pagans—a man to be living with his father's wife! And you—far from grieving over this, and taking steps to have the man who has behaved in this way removed from your fellowship—you are quite inflated with pride about it!¹ But for my part, although I am absent from you in body, I am present with you in spirit, and I have already passed judgment on the man who has committed this flagrant offence, as though I were actually with you. This is what you are to do in the name of the Lord Jesus: you must hold a meeting at which I shall be with you in spirit, together with the power of our Lord Jesus, and there you must solemnly hand a person like this over to Satan with a view to his bodily destruction,² in order that his spirit may find salvation in the day of the Lord.

You boast, but there is nothing honourable in your boasting. Do you not know that a little leaven permeates the whole mass of dough? Sweep out the old leaven, in order to become, so to speak, a fresh mass of dough, as free from leaven in fact as you are holy in God's sight. I am using this language because our passover sacrifice has already been offered up—our passover sacrifice, of course, is Christ. Therefore let us celebrate our festival of unleavened bread, having got rid of our old leaven—the leaven of evil and wickedness—for the unleavened bread which we use for this festival is sincerity and truth.

I wrote to you in my previous letter telling you not to associate with fornicators. Of course I did not refer primarily to fornicators of the world—or covetous, rapacious or idolatrous persons—for if

you were to avoid association with them you would have to go out of the world itself. No, what I meant when I wrote was this: if a man who bears the name of a Christian brother is a fornicator—or a covetous, idolatrous, foul-mouthed, drunken or rapacious person—you must not associate with *him*; in fact, you must not even sit at the same table with him. What business is it of mine to judge outsiders? It is your own responsibility to exercise discipline over those who are within your fellowship, but the outsiders will have God as their judge.

So, because it is your own responsibility to exercise discipline over your own members, expel that wicked man from your communion.

(b) *Christians and the law-courts (Ch. 6: 1-11)*

If any of you has a complaint against his fellow-Christian, does he dare to prosecute him before sinners instead of bringing the matter before God's holy people? Do you not know that God's holy people are going to judge the world? If the world is going to be judged by you, then, are you incompetent to deal with the pettiest disputes? Do you not know that we are going to judge angels, not to speak of things which belong to this life? If, then, you have disputes about things which belong to this life, do you set over them people who have no status in the church?¹ I speak like this to make you ashamed. Have you come to such a pass that there is no wise man in your company who is able to arbitrate between two fellow-Christians? Evidently not, for Christian prosecutes Christian publicly, and before unbelievers too! Now it is really an utter acknowledgment of defeat on your part that you have law suits against one another at all. Why do you not rather put up with injury? Why do you not rather allow yourselves to be robbed? But it is you who do the injuring and the robbing, and to your own fellow-Christians at that! Do you not know that unrighteous people will have no inheritance in the kingdom of God? Do not deceive yourselves: there will be no inheriting the kingdom of God for fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, or those who indulge in homosexual practices; nor yet for thieves, covetous persons, swindlers, drunkards, or those who are given to abusive language. That is what some of you used to be, but you have been washed, sanctified and justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, by the Spirit of our God.

¹ Or: "You should set over them those who are least esteemed in the church".

¹ They probably regarded this as a bold assertion of Christian liberty.

² Satan is viewed as having (by divine permission) such jurisdiction over a Christian's body as he had over Job's.

(c) *Liberty and licence* (Ch. 6: 12-20)

“All things are permissible for me,” you say—yes, but not all things are profitable. “All things are permissible for me”—yes, but I will not allow anything to get the mastery over me. “Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food”—yes, but God will make an end of food and stomach alike. But do not go on to say, “The body is for fornication.” It is nothing of the sort; it is for the Lord, and the Lord is Lord for the body. It is God who raised up our Lord, and through His power He will raise us up too. Do you not know that your bodies are Christ’s members? Well, shall I deprive Christ of His members in order to make them members of a harlot? Perish the thought! Do you not know that anyone who has commerce with a harlot becomes “one body” with her? He does, for the scripture says: “The two will become one flesh.”¹ But he who is united with the Lord is joined in one Spirit with Him. Have nothing to do with fornication. Every other sin a man commits he commits outside his body, but whoever indulges in fornication sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is the sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who resides within you, the Spirit whom God bestows upon you? Thus you are not your own property, for you have been purchased—and purchased at no mean price. So, glorify God in your body!

IV. PAUL REPLIES TO THE LETTER FROM CORINTH (CH. 7: 1-16: 14)

(a) *Marriage and Divorce* (Ch. 7: 1-40)i. *Is the marriage relationship permissible at all?* (Ch. 7: 1-7).

Now let me deal one by one with the matters you have raised in your letter.

First of all, the marriage question. “It is a good thing,” some of you say, “for a man to have no intercourse with a woman at all.” I agree; but because of the illicit unions that would be contracted if relations between the sexes were left unregulated, let every man have his own wife and every woman her own husband. Let the husband give the wife her due, and let her give her husband his. A wife has not unfettered control over her own body, for her husband’s rights must be considered; in exactly the same way he has not unfettered authority over his body, for his wife’s rights must be considered. Do not deprive each other of these rights. You may, of course, practise abstinence for a period by mutual consent, in order to give yourselves time for prayer; but then you should come together again, so that Satan may not make your

¹ Gn. 2: 24.

incontinence an occasion for tempting you. I am saying this by way of permission, I am not commanding you. In fact, my own desire would be for every one to be like myself; but each Christian has his own gift from God—some this way, and some that.

As for unmarried people and those whose partners have died, what I say is this: it is good for them to remain as I am. But if they cannot remain continent, then let them marry; it is better to marry than to be aflame with unslaked desire.

To those who are married my directions are these—in fact they are not mine but the Lord’s. A wife must not leave her husband (if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and a husband must not divorce his wife.

ii. *Mixed marriages* (Ch. 7: 12-24)

For the rest, this is my own ruling, not the Lord’s. If a Christian man has a wife who is not a believer, but she is content to go on living with him, he must not divorce her. And if a Christian woman has a husband who is not a believer, and he is content to go on living with her, she must not divorce her husband. The unbelieving husband is consecrated by his union with a Christian wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated by her relation to a Christian husband. If that were not so, your children, born of such a mixed marriage, would be unholy; as it is, they are as holy as the children of two Christian parents. If, on the other hand, the unbelieving partner withdraws from the marriage relationship, let the withdrawal take effect; the Christian husband or wife is not bound by the marriage tie in such circumstances. But it is best if the marriage remains in force, for your Christian calling is a peaceable one. Are you a Christian woman married to an unbelieving husband? Well, how do you know that you may not be the salvation of your husband? And are you a Christian man with an unbelieving wife? Well, for all you know you may be her salvation.

However, in accordance with God’s appointment for each one of you, let each of you go on living in the status in which God has called you. This is the instruction that I give in all the churches. For example: was a man circumcised when God called him? Then he should not try to annul his circumcision. Was he uncircumcised? Then he should not get himself circumcised. Circumcision is of no consequence, nor uncircumcision either; what does matter is the keeping of God’s commandments. So, I say, everyone should continue in the condition in which he was

when God called him. Were you a slave when God called you? Do not let that trouble you (but if you do have an opportunity of gaining your liberty, avail yourself of it). For a slave who is now "in the Lord" because God has called him is the Lord's freed-man; in the same way a free man whom God has called is henceforth Christ's slave. It was with no mean price that you were bought; do not become enslaved to men. So then, my brothers, let everyone continue before God in the condition which was his when God called him.

iii. *Vows of virginity* (Ch. 7: 15-38)

Now you ask about those who have vowed to remain celibate. I have no commandment of the Lord which applies to such people, but I give my judgment as one who has experienced the Lord's mercy and is therefore responsible to be faithful to Him. In view of the present emergency, I think this is good—namely, that a man should remain celibate. Are you married to a wife? Do not try to undo the marriage tie. Are you unmarried? Do not seek a wife. But if you do marry, you have committed no sin; and if a woman who has dedicated herself to a life of virginity with you marries after all—well, she has committed no sin. But people in such a case will have trouble in their temporal relationships, and I would like to spare you this. What I mean is this, my brothers: the present lease of time is limited, and thereafter those who have wives will be as though they had none, and those who weep now will have no more cause to weep, those who rejoice will have no more cause for joy, those who buy will have no tenure of their purchase, those who make use of this world's goods will have no opportunity to use them to the full; for the present world-order is passing away.

I want you to be free from care. The unmarried man cares for the Lord's interests; his concern is to please the Lord. But the married man must care for things belonging to this present order; his concern is to please his wife, and so his attention is divided. So too the unmarried woman, living a life of virginity, cares for the Lord's interests; her aim is to be holy in body and spirit alike. But the married woman must pay attention to this world's affairs, so as to please her husband. It is for your own advantage that I am saying this; I don't want to restrict your liberty by throwing a noose round you, so to speak; but I do want you to live in a way that is seemly and devoted to the Lord, without distracting cares.

If however, a man thinks that he is behaving unfairly towards

the woman who has vowed to live with him in a state of virginity, now that she is past the flower of her age, if there is no other help for it—well, let him do as he thinks fit; he is committing no sin; let them get married. On the other hand, here is a man who maintains his purpose steadfastly; he is under no constraint in the matter, but his will-power is firm, and he has made up his mind to keep his own virgin companion as such; what do I say of him? This, that he will do well to follow this course. In short, the man who marries his virgin companion is acting with complete propriety; but the man who refrains from such a marriage will be acting in an even more praiseworthy manner.

iv. *Widows* (Ch. 7: 39-40)

A wife is bound by the marriage tie so long as her husband lives. But if her husband falls asleep in death, she is free to marry whom she will—provided that the union be a Christian one. Still, she is more to be congratulated if she remains a widow—at least, that is my judgment, and I think that I too have the Spirit of God to guide me.

(b) *Idolatrous food* (Ch. 8: 1-13)

Then, with regard to the flesh of animals which have been sacrificed to idols, we know that (as you claim) "we all have knowledge." Knowledge inflates; it is love that builds up a substantial structure. If anyone thinks he has achieved knowledge, he knows nothing yet as he ought. But all who love God are brought within the perfect knowledge of God.

Well then, with regard to the meat of animals which have been sacrificed to idols, we know that "an idol is a mere nonentity—nothing in the world" and that "there is no God but one." Well said: for even if there are so-called gods in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are—many "gods" and many "lords"), yet we know but one God, the Father, from whom all things proceed and to whom we live; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist, ourselves included. Yet this clear knowledge is not enjoyed by all. Some, Christians though they are, through force of habit and familiarity with the idea of the idol, still regard such food, when they eat it, as having been sacrificed to an idol. They have a tender conscience in this matter, and it is stained with a sense of guilt if they ignore it and eat the food.

Now food will not do us any good in the sight of God; we are none the worse if we do not eat it, and none the better if we do. Take care that this liberty of yours does not prove an obstacle to

those whose conscience is tender. You “have knowledge” and can sit at table at an idol feast, assured that the idol has no existence; but if someone sees you doing so, and he has a tender conscience in such matters, he may be encouraged to follow your example and eat idolatrous food against the dictate of his own conscience. Thus by your show of superior “knowledge” irreparable harm is done to your brother with the weaker conscience than yours—your brother for whom Christ died as much as He died for you. When you sin against your fellow-Christians in this way and outrage their tender consciences, you sin against Christ Himself. Therefore if food proves a spiritual obstacle to my fellow-Christian, I will abstain from eating flesh my whole life long, sooner than cause my brother to stumble in his spiritual life.

(To be continued)