

ANY QUESTIONS? – ANY ANSWERS?



Study Notes on 1 Corinthians

The first letter of the Apostle Paul to the vibrant young church at Corinth, the letter we know as I Corinthians, is one of the longest, most diverse and controversial of his writings. Themes come across as a series of answers to issues and problems thrown up by Christians seeking to live for Christ whilst emerging from a largely pagan culture – A situation strangely similar, in some ways, to our own in the 21st Century and therefore well worth our consideration and reflection. Here are the key themes of 1 Corinthians about belief and practice under broad headings.

1. Focus, purpose and passion

– *Chapter 1 v. 1 – 17 & Chapters 3 & 4*

Opening greetings and thanksgiving for the church at Corinth introducing some of the later themes of the letter – v. 1 – 9.

A divided church is a contradiction of the Gospel. Don't focus on personalities and parties that lead to quarrels but on the Gospel of Christ – v. 10 – 17.

Different leaders have different roles – sowing, reaping, foundation laying, building on the foundations... We all have an important role as God's partners in his work. Our work will be tested by God and true wisdom will be revealed – Chapter 3.

Paul gives a passionate defence of the integrity of and motivation for his ministry, returning to the earlier theme of wisdom and foolishness in chapter 4. From this chapter, what do you recognise as the key characteristics of faithful service and ministry in Paul's view?

2. God's wisdom and foolishness

– *Chapter 1 v. 18 – 2 v. 16*

What are the aspects of the cross of Christ that seem foolish (to Christians/non-Christians) and how do we perceive God's wise plan in it all?

Paul contrasts human wisdom (for Jews and Gentiles, the religious and the secular) and God's wisdom displayed in the cross – Chapter 1 v. 18 - 25.

Paul draws on his own and his reader's experience to show that God uses weak and foolish things and people to bring about his purposes through his Spirit – 1 v. 26 - 2 v. 5. He invites his readers to experience a different kind of faith and reason than they have ever experienced under Greek or Hebrew cultures.

The wisdom and work of the Spirit are in contrast to the world's ways and wisdom – 2 v. 6 – 16. Remember Jesus' words about the Spirit in John 16 v 5 - 15.

3. Marriage, divorce, singleness and sex

– *Chapters 5, 6 & 7*

Paul confronts a culture that has no widely accepted moral code. The church in Corinth has been birthed in this culture and shows some of its effects, abuses and confusions. At least they did connect with their host culture and were not hidden away from it in a Christian ghetto! What are the specific similarities between the issues they faced and ours?

Paul is strongly against the moral abuses in the church but pastorally sympathetic to people who are caught in the struggle to free themselves of the old life in order to live for Christ. (Hating the sin but loving the sinner). Identify where and how this is the case in these chapters. How do his views and approach relate to our society and church?

What is the role of judgement here? – Ch. 5 v. 12 – 13, Ch. 6 v. 9 - 11.

Different values and standards of behaviour are expected of Christians, though this is not a return to legalism. Neither is it just persuasion to take good advice.

Paul never advocates an ‘anything goes’ approach to life: If our body is ‘the temple of the Holy Spirit’ how should that affect the way we use it? Ch. 6 v. 18 – 20.

He gives detailed arguments about staying married, staying single, being faithful to your partner and to the Lord. How do we follow through on these principles and opinions today? Where do we distinguish timeless principles from culturally bound opinions? His over-riding concern is for God to be honoured through the transformed lives of Christians in a hedonistic plural society.

4. Food, idolatry, recognition and reward

– Chapters 8 & 9

The specific instances here are far from our 21st Century western society but the concept of being pulled back to the bondage of old values and practices is not. Again, Paul shows compassion for those caught in this web but emerging painfully from it. At the same time is passionate for the truth about freedom through Christ from the old ways.

He shows great pastoral sensitivity towards ‘the weak’ – Ch. 8 v. 9. The test is WWJD – What Would Jesus Do? How and where do you apply this principle?

Chapter 9 indicates that his stance on this and other matters, (and no doubt some issues of personality and style) brings Paul into conflict, not just with those outside the church, but with some within it. He is concerned about fairness not status.

Paul’s testimony about his own ministry is vivid here and elsewhere: a race and a prize – Ch 9. v. 24 – 27 & 2 Timothy 4 v. 7 & 8.

How may I be ‘all things to all people so that by all possible means I may save some’? – Ch 9 v. 22. Examine the three ‘alls’.

5. Heritage, freedom, worship and respect

– Chapters 10 & 11:

Paul connects with his Jewish roots to round off the points about moral issues by stating that we are all tempted and vulnerable – Ch 10 v. 1 - 13.

He then sets out instructions about worship and especially the Lord’s Supper, but still against the background of ignorance, abuses and selfishness – Ch 10 v. 14 – 22. Freedom from the burden of sin does not mean licence to do as we please or to trample on other people’s sensitivities Ch 10 v. 23 – Ch 11 v. 2.

Hair and hats are not major issues for us today, though they were significant then for cultural and religious reasons. Paul holds to the headship of man but recognises that this is not to be oppressive and that love is the hallmark of the relationship of husband and wife – Eph. 5 v. 22 – 33.

To avoid chaos and to encourage understanding and fellowship, Paul gives precise instructions about the Lord’s Supper: Ch 11 v. 17 – 34: Reverence the Lord as you remember his story, repent of your sin, look back to the origins of this meal in the escape from Egypt (Exodus 12), proclaim Christ’s victory until he returns.....

How do you visualise this communion? How can our communion be more like this – vibrant, inclusive, honest, expectant.... ?

6. Spiritual gifts

– Chapters 12, 13 & 14

This is a continuation of the teaching on worship. The Corinthians combined moral confusion with vibrant Spirit-filled worship. This also raised issues about the use and abuse of ‘supernatural’ gifts.

List the gifts of the Spirit from Ch 12 v. 4 – 11 & 27 - 28. How are these evidenced today in your church or group?

Sometimes these gifts are divisive but the intention is that Christians function together as a body with Christ as the head – all parts being important to the health of the whole – Ch 12 v. 12 – 31.

Ch. 13 - Love is the most important gift and sign of the Spirit – ‘agape’ love – unconditional, gracious, modelled on Christ and a product of his Spirit living in us and transforming our lives. See also: John 15 v 9 - 17, 1 John 3 v. 11 – 24.

Discuss the relationship of faith, hope and love in the life of the Christian – Ch 13 v. 13. How do I express these key characteristics?

Ch. 14 – More detailed discussion on the use of the gift of tongues – a language of praise and prophecy. It seems that the Corinthians were a little obsessed with this gift above all others and Paul seeks to put it into perspective. Note Ch 12 v. 31. What would he have in mind as ‘higher gifts?’ See Acts 2 v. 1 – 4: The coming of the Spirit for the mission of the church.

How do you respond to the ‘supernatural’ activity of God?

7. Resurrection and postscript

– Chapters 15 & 16

Paul started his letter with the foolishness of the cross and ends it with the triumph of the resurrection which he boldly states is our only hope for salvation. The fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is indisputably the most unique aspect of the whole Gospel story and the foundation of Christian hope and faith – Ch 15 v. 1 – 11.

The resurrection of Christ is the means of our resurrection to eternal life v. 12 – 34 and, in answer to some of the questions that this throws up, those who follow Christ will have identifiable new resurrected bodies in heaven v. 35 – 55. In this hope we stand firm and press on in life and witness v. 56 – 58, 2 Corinthians 5 v 1 - 10, also John 14 v 1 - 14 & 1 Thessalonians 4 v. 13 - 5 v. 12.

Resurrection life cannot simply be abbreviated as ‘heaven’. What do we know, need to know and not need to know about it? How would you explain this to a bereaved person?

Whilst Paul continues several of the themes in this first letter in 2 Corinthians, it is remarkable that he comes ‘down to earth’ in the final chapter, 16, with some homely practical details, encouragement to be courageous in the fight of faith, greetings and requests. In doing so he sets profound theology, practical instruction and warm pastoral care alongside each other.