

(S) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have an opportunity to learn to know the Bible. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme. Today we introduce the FIRST letter to the CORINTHIANS - PART 2. We will learn the characteristics and the main messages of 1 Corinthians.

POINT 6. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF 1 CORINTHIANS

First. Christian freedom is the main line running through the letter.

The evils at Corinth were especially sexual immorality, spiritual pride and abuse of Christian freedom in various areas. According to 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 10:23, the Corinthian Christians took their starting point in the rule, that to Christians "everything is permissible". They believed that Christians were free to do what they want. The apostle Paul corrects this wrong understanding of Christian freedom throughout the letter.

One. Christian freedom is a privilege and not a rule. The apostle Paul taught that Christian freedom is a right (9:4,5,12) in the sense of a right to decide to do something or to give up doing something (9:15), thus a freedom of choice. Christian freedom is *the privilege of Christians to choose how they may behave in certain circumstances*, but it is never *a rule how Christians ought to behave under all circumstances*. All things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, but not always edifying! They may be good, but are not always the best! Christians *may* do these things, but there is *no must* to do these things.

When Christian freedom is elevated to the status of a governing principle, two dangers emerge: *The first danger* is that the things that are really forbidden by God under all circumstances are thought to be a choice and therefore permissible under certain circumstances. *Freedom then turns into permissiveness and the disintegration of morals*. And people are tempted to do things that are forbidden. For example, at Corinth certain church members fell into sexual immorality. *The second danger* is that the things that are permissible for one person in certain circumstances are thought to be compulsory for all people in all circumstances. *Freedom then turns into a tyranny and the enforcement of behaviour patterns*. And people are forced to do things that do not build them up. For example, at Corinth there was the tendency to make the speaking in tongues during the church meetings the standard of Christian behaviour.

Paul set himself as an example of one who gave up his rights or freedom in order to attain his goals. In 1 Corinthians chapter 9, the apostle Paul says that he has the right and freedom to marry and the right or freedom to receive support from Christians. However, he chose not to make use of his rights or freedom. *He gave up his rights* in order to promote the progress of the gospel without hindrance (9:1-18). *He gave up his identity* and set an example of accommodating himself to the customs and scruples of different kind of people in order to save some. *He gave up his comfort* and subjected himself to rigorous spiritual training in order not to be disqualified and miss the prize.

Two. Christian freedom always has boundaries. The apostle Paul taught that although all things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, not all of these things are beneficial or constructive. And although all things that are not forbidden in the Bible are permissible, a Christian should not allow himself to become a slave of anything (6:12; 10:23). Freedom without boundaries leads to disintegration of morals and to tyranny. The apostle Paul taught that Christian freedom has boundaries! *The boundaries or limits of Christian freedom are whatever is beneficial, constructive and not enslaving!* Christians must know what to do or not to do in every concrete case. If the consequences of any permissible act are harmful for himself or for another person, the Christian no longer has the freedom to do it. If any permissible act causes him or someone else to become a slave or addicted, or if any permissible act causes him to sin against his own conscience or another person's conscience, then he, then the Christian no longer has the freedom to do it!

Three. Christian freedom should be ruled by God's word. In 1 Corinthians 4:6, the apostle Paul said, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another". Paul warned that spiritual pride leads to the emancipation from God's word. The Corinthian Christians were puffed up over against the apostles of Christ and over against one another. They regarded themselves as above other Christians. Their spiritual pride was rooted in the many spiritual gifts and blessings they had received, especially of speaking and knowledge (1:4-7). They behaved as if they had not received these gifts and blessings by God's grace. They imagined that they had already arrived at spiritual perfection. *The consequence of their sinful pride was that the Corinthian Christians felt and behaved as emancipated from God's word*. They probably held their spiritual gifts and the contents of the utterances by their spiritual gifts much higher than the words in the Bible! Paul admonished them not to go beyond the limit or boundaries set by the Bible! Spiritual pride shows itself by not submitting to the Bible or by exceeding the limit or boundaries of the Bible! You become really free when you are bound to Christ and to his words in the Bible. But you really become a slave when you regard yourself as free from Christ and his words in the Bible. Christians are responsible to subject themselves to Christ and the Bible and never to become subject to anything or anyone else (3:23; 6:20; 7:23; 9:21).

Four. Christian freedom should be ruled by love. In 1 Corinthians 16:14, the apostle Paul taught, “Do everything in love!” In 1 Corinthians 13, he taught that if a Christian does not have love, “he is nothing” and “he gains nothing”. And in 1 Corinthians 8:2, he teaches, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up!” If any permissible act becomes an expression of self-love that tears another person down, then the Christian has stopped to love. The knowledge of the strong Christians about which things are permissible may be right. For example, a Christian may know that he may eat everything. However, not knowledge, but Christian love has to determine his conduct! There is an important relationship between knowledge, love and building up. *Freedom* is always concerned with your own individual rights and interests. But love is always concerned with other people’s interests. Love is always concerned with the interests of the whole Christian community and with the non-Christian environment. The proper basis for Christian ethics in behaviour is not knowledge, but love. And love is the application of knowledge in a way that builds others up! In summary, Christian freedom is not *to do what we like to do*, but rather *to do what we should do*.

Second. The question about the organisation of the Corinthian church.

Because no mention is made of elders and deacons in the Corinthian church, some Christians have argued that the church at Corinth was still in a primitive stage and that there were no officers like elders and deacons in the church. They argue that the Corinthian church had a direct, spiritual government and was led by the Holy Spirit through the ministry of the spiritual gifts. This is not correct, because a government of the church by spiritual gifts only is definitely not presupposed. The apostle Paul functioned as one of the leaders and he gives clear directives (11:17) and commands (14:37) to the church. Moreover, the fact that no elders or deacons are mentioned does not prove that there were none!

One. Paul speaks of the appointment of church leaders for the world-wide Church. The first letter to the Corinthians presupposes a certain organisation. The church was already a distinct community that could be differentiated from those outside the church (1:18; 5:13; 14:23). Moreover, 1 Corinthians 12:28 says, “God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers”. The appointment of these offices is arranged in order of importance above all the other spiritual gifts. This verse cannot be understood of the local church at Corinth only, because this church at least had no apostles. Rather, the local church at Corinth is viewed in terms of the whole Body of Christ world-wide and its organisation is viewed in terms of the whole of the world-wide church’s organisation. Generally speaking, in the earlier letters of Paul like Galatians, Thessalonians, Romans and Corinthians, Paul does not direct himself to the ordinary church leaders like elders to summon them to preach the pure word of God, to exercise discipline, etc. The reason is that all these churches were still young, the ordinary ministries had just begun to develop and much that was needed to be done was still done by the extraordinary church leaders like the apostles and their co-workers, people whom we would call *missionaries* or *evangelists* today. In the later letters of Paul like Ephesians, Philippians, Timothy and Titus, the ordinary church leaders like the elders come more to the foreground. But this fact does not mean that there were no ordinary church leaders in the beginning period and that the church was governed only by people with spiritual gifts.

Two. Paul already speaks of ordinary church leaders. The fact that he mentions functions as “those able to help others” and “those with gifts of administration”, shows that the church had a regular ministry. These two spiritual gifts could well have been associated with the functions of deacons and elders, even if these offices as such are not in the least bound to these spiritual gifts. The fact that according to Acts 14:23, Paul and his co-workers appointed elders in every church, also points to the existence of elders in the church of Corinth. The church at Corinth was founded during Paul’s second missionary journey in A.D. 50. The first letter to the Corinthians was written about 6 years later. Although it was a relatively new church, it was already well established. We do not read about the appointment of elders at Corinth, but if according to Acts 14:23 Paul already appointed elders in every church he founded during his first missionary journey, why would he not appoint elders at Corinth during his second missionary journey?

Third. The question about persecution at Corinth.

The first letter to the Corinthians presupposes that there was peace at Corinth. No mention is made of persecutions or any form of hindering or limiting the freedom of Christians at Corinth. It is true that according to Acts 18:12ff, the Jews had taken strong action against the apostle Paul, but they did not do the same against the church members. This situation was probably due to the fact that Corinth was an international city and a large trading centre that attracted all kinds of people. There were people from different countries and they had different religions. By giving one another the freedom and quiet each desired, the city had peace and the people could get on with their trade or other business.

POINT 7. THE MAIN MESSAGES OF 1 CORINTHIANS

First. The foolishness of worldly wisdom.

According to chapter 1-2, the gospel concerning Jesus Christ crucified was a stumbling-block for Jews and foolishness for the Greeks. The Jews demanded something they could see and grasp physically. They needed signs of power and they despised weakness. They expected a political Messiah who would free them from the yoke of all other nations. The Greeks demanded something they could grasp intellectually. They needed scientific evidence and philosophic wisdom

and they despised the teachings of someone who never studied at Athens or Rome. But Paul did not preach Christ the conqueror or Christ the philosopher, but Christ the crucified. The wisdom of the Jews and the Greeks was *foolish, because it could not save people and did not reckon with God.*

Second. The uselessness of proud judgement.

According to chapter 4, the Corinthians were puffed up with their own importance. Consequently they judged others and even one another. They regarded their opinion of themselves and the opinion of other people as the most important thing to reckon with. However, Paul teaches that all people stand before three courts of judgement: the judgement of other people, the judgement of their own conscience and the judgement of Christ. People like to believe all the good things said about them and they resent unfavourable criticism. Therefore, Christians should beware of the judgement of their friends, because they may be too favourable in their opinion about them. Christians should not even judge themselves, because they really do not know themselves as well as Christ does. The One who will ultimately judge all people is Jesus Christ and from his judgement there is no escape.

Third. The danger of sexual immorality.

According to chapter 5-7, sexual immorality is a great danger to Christians and the church.

In chapter 5, the Corinthian Christians neglected to exercise discipline against a brother who lived in sexual immorality. They not only tolerated sexual immorality in their midst, they even continued to associate with such Christians and thus gave those people the impression that sexual immorality was acceptable within the Christian church. Paul strongly urged them to judge those inside the church, that is, to cut unrepentant Christians off from membership of the church and not to associate with them as long as they remain unrepentant.

According to chapter 6, the Corinthian Christians did not realise that God would punish sexual immorality. Because God created every human being, he owns every human body and *he* only has the right to decide how that human being should live. God wants to live in the body of human beings through his Holy Spirit. Because God is holy, he cannot and will not live in people who misuse their bodies for sexual immorality. People, who continue to live in sexual immorality, will be excluded from the kingdom of God. This is a powerful stimulus for Christians not even to consider doing any of these things.

According to chapter 7, all Christians face “the present crisis or need”, which consists of the irresistible urge of his sinful nature to behave against his normal wishes. It is a compulsion from which he cannot free himself. Although Christ has conquered sin, the consequences of sin are still felt. Christians still have sinful fallen natures and they ought to get married unless God has given them a special gift to remain single. All Christians face this present crisis or need until the second coming of Christ. The present crisis or need refers to the following three things: the many troubles in this present life that are a consequence of sin (Gen 3:16; Rom 8:18f); the time that is very short in this last age; and world in its present form that is definitely passing away (7:28-31; cf. 1 Jn 2:17).

Fourth. The warning about taking God’s covenant blessings for granted.

Chapter 10 teaches that Christians may not take their salvation for granted. Although God granted his blessings to entire Israel at the beginning of the wilderness journey, at the end of the wilderness journey he gave that kind of blessings only to a few! Although all the Israelites were baptised into Moses, ate the manna and drank the water, yet in the end of the wilderness journey, God was not pleased with most of them. *Only a remnant* of them were not scattered and destroyed in the wilderness! This teaches that it is possible that God may begin to grant his covenant blessings to a group of people, but in the end not all of them will still enjoy those blessings. Paul does not say that genuine born-again Christians can lose their regeneration or salvation. But he does say that not everyone who outwardly behave like Christians or who participate in the Christian church activities are genuinely born-again. In verse 6 and 11 he gives a serious warning that this not only applied to God’s Old Testament people, but also applies to God’s New Testament people.

Fifth. The origin and purpose of the spiritual gifts.

According to chapters 12-14, the Corinthian Christians were coveting the more showy spiritual gifts, such as the speaking in tongues. They were using these gifts as ends in themselves, desiring to be someone with power and recognised by others. Their spiritual gifts became a means to boost their spiritual pride, in stead of using their spiritual gifts to serve others and build up the church. Paul teaches that God sovereignly determines the place of each Christian in the Body of Christ, his spiritual gift, his ministry and the way in which he manifests his ministry.

Sixth. The resurrection from the dead.

According to chapter 15, there were some Christians at Corinth who could not believe in the physical resurrection from the dead. Paul teaches that the resurrection of Christ guarantees the truth and reality of the gospel as well as the future physical resurrection. The body of a Christian will be raised *imperishable* - it will never be able to die again. It will be

raised in *glory* - it will share in the fruits of Christ's work and also share in his glory. It will be raised in *power* - sickness, pain, disabilities and all other weaknesses will be overcome and the body will have power to live eternally. It will be raised a *spiritual body* - it will be a real body that is completely renewed and governed by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, for the Christian, *death* is no more a terrible enemy, but the deliverance from the perishable, weak and natural body. Death and resurrection is the gateway to this reality and to a closer fellowship with Christ than ever before.

Seventh. The greatest Christian characteristic is love.

According to chapter 13, Christian love should govern all the behaviour of the Christian. 1 Corinthians 16:22 says, "If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him". The meaning is, that he who does not love Jesus Christ or other Christians, is *abandoned to God's judgement*. Whoever rejects God's love must face God's judgement. There is no escape!

ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK

First. During the next week, read 2 Corinthians 1-13. Next week we will introduce 2 Corinthians.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom" and Internet on www.dota.net

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".