

As I lay there on the ground, bleeding and slowly coming to my senses, I felt a pair of gentle hands lift my head and pour water in my mouth. When I could open my eyes, I realized my nurse was none other than my former opponent, Priscilla. She and Aquila tended to my care as if they were the Good Samaritans.

Let me catch you up to that fateful moment. I was the leader of the synagogue in Corinth when Paul first preached there. We Jews were quite irate that Paul was successfully converting people to the cause of Christ, so we went to Gallio, the Roman proconsul of the region, to complain. We no more than started to raise our complaint when Gallio stopped us and told us that he was not concerned with our religious disputes, and he threw us out.¹

My fellow Jews were so upset at my being an ineffectual leader that they beat me in front of the Roman proconsul. He didn't pay any attention to my distress, and even seemed to enjoy it. My fellow Jews could see that Christianity was on the rise at the expense of Judaism and they reacted violently against their helplessness, even though I was powerless to change our plight.

So, there I was, beaten to a pulp. Enter Priscilla and Aquila.

It was their love that caused me to begin to listen...really listen... to Paul's teaching. And once I listened, it wasn't long before I became a Christian. Some time later, when they left for Ephesus, I went with Paul, Priscilla, and Aquila. I was still there when Paul wrote *First Corinthians*. In fact, he addressed the letter from him and me!²

In the middle of that letter to the church at Corinth, Paul addresses a problem that does not seem to face you in your world today. In Corinth, food that was offered to pagan idols was later sold in the market place for a cheap price. The question arose whether it was right for Christians to eat this food or not. I mean, after all, it was used in anti-Christian rituals, touched by...` In his letter, Paul rightly judges that it doesn't really matter. Eating the meat that was offered by someone else to an idol does not mean you are worshiping the idol. However, the facts of the situation are important to discuss for a variety of reasons that *do* impact people in today's world.

¹ Acts 18:12-17

² 1 Corinthians 1:1

Paul points out that anything you think is a sin to do...is a sin to you. Don't do it. Further, you shouldn't do anything that causes a fellow Christian to sin. Their good is much more important than you exerting any rights you think you have. If you cause anyone to stumble, you are sinning against Jesus. So, if you or another Christian believes it is a sin to eat meat that was offered to an idol, eat something else!

In pointing these things out, Paul addresses an overall thought process that should help the Corinthian church become more unified – Christians don't have personal rights because they are servants of Jesus. As the Corinthians know, Paul has given up all of his personal rights for the cause of Christ.

Rather than exerting his personal rights, Paul insists that he give up whatever it takes to bring people to belief in Jesus. In one of his most famous lines, Paul writes, "I become all things to all people, that by doing so I will save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel."³ None of us should seek our own good, but the good of others.

As a Jew, I am steeped in the knowledge of the Old Testament. I know that the history of the Jews is one of repeated worship of idols. This particular sin has been their historical downfall. So, it isn't a surprise to me when Paul switches the subject of the letter to that of avoiding idolatry. He defines idolatry as anything you do in which you participate in the worship of idols or demons. Paul makes it very clear that it is impossible to worship both the Lord Jesus and demons.

Paul gives a simple rule that will help the Corinthians avoid sin, while giving God the glory. He writes, "Whatever you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."⁴ If they have any questions about what to do, he advises them to imitate him, just as he imitates Christ.

I have to admit that I shuddered a bit when he wrote that. I was well aware that I wasn't a good enough imitator Christ that I would want others to imitate me. Would you want people to imitate you?

Paul moves on to another cause of strife among the Corinthians. A cause that may be hard for many of you to understand. Most Christians of your day still take communion, sometimes called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. For most of you the bread is a small bite of bread or cracker or a tiny wafer. The wine is a small sip of wine or grape juice taken from a large cup or a tiny cup.

In my time, communion was part of a meal. How could that possibly cause a problem, you might wonder? The Corinthians brought their own meals and ate them together, they did not do it potluck or community style. So, rich people ate sumptuous, large meals while the poor people had little or nothing to eat. By acting in this manner, the Christians were disrespecting

³ 1 Cor. 9:22-23

⁴ 1 Cor. 10:31

communion and Jesus. They were bringing judgment on themselves. Although people interpret some of his words differently, Paul gives some very important guidance on communion that is not found elsewhere.

Paul ends his discussion of causes of disunity by talking about spiritual gifts. The Corinthians seem to rank the importance of various spiritual gifts, and that is another source of dissension. Paul makes it clear that all spiritual gifts come through the Holy Spirit, and all are to be deemed equally valuable because the church body cannot work in harmony unless all members work together as the Body of Christ.

Paul's language makes perfect sense to Christians of my time because we see the gifts in action. However, over time the subject of spiritual gifts has mystified and confused many people, and caused much disharmony among Christians. That would have been very disappointing to Paul, who very much wanted churches to be in harmony and worship in an orderly manner.

However, one thing has not caused much dissension, and that is Paul's famous chapter on love, found in *First Corinthians* Chapter 13. This chapter has been so famous that it was often used in American public schools in previous decades to illustrate excellent prose. Until a few decades ago, any person in the United States would have been considered uneducated if not familiar with lines such as: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I am like a clanging brass or a tinkling cymbal," or "love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things," or "three things remain: faith, hope and love; but the greatest of these is love."

Movies and television shows have cheapened the concept of love immeasurably. Just think of this famous Hollywood line, "Love means never having to say you're sorry."⁵ What a dumb thing to say. Empty, really. To get a good sense of what love really is, I recommend that you spend time reading and re-reading *First Corinthians* 13. From that chapter you will begin to understand what love is.

Paul ends our letter to the Corinthians by reminding them that the true source of unity is faith in the gospel. This is one time when Paul ranks the importance of what he writes. He says that what he passes on to the Corinthians as the highest priority is this: Jesus died for our sins according to Scripture, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to Scripture, and he appeared to more than five hundred Christians and their leaders.

Paul ends his letter with that succinct message because many of the Corinthians are teaching that there is no resurrection from the dead. Paul is insistent that if there is no resurrection from the dead, then not even Jesus was raised from the dead. In that case, the faith of all Christians is futile and they are to be pitied above all people for living a delusion.

⁵ From the novel and movie *Love Story*, by Erich Segal

However, Paul insists that Jesus was raised from the dead, and that gives Jesus power over death and all other things. He finishes the letter by describing to the Corinthians about resurrected bodies and the end of time when Christians are raised and receive victory in Jesus.

Because we Jesus followers will be victorious, we have every reason to stand firm and give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord.

With that incredible message of hope, Paul encourages the Corinthians to act like the Lord wants them to. Paul knows this encouragement is needed, but ...he also knows this will not be the last letter he writes to them... they are kind of a mess.

Paul ends his letter with a batch of personal requests and greetings. My favorite line of his is, "Do everything in love." I wish he had sent that message to Corinth before my fellow Jews nearly beat me to death and left me laying on the floor in front of Gallio... No, I guess I don't wish that... Otherwise I may never have met Priscilla, Aquila, and Paul.