

#32 Bible Study~06-08-21~1 Cor. 16.1-11

It is a relief to move into this clear, uncontroversial, but highly practical and interesting window into the day-by-day matters of one of the earliest New Testament churches. Compared to chapter 15, on which perhaps over forty times as many research articles have been written, chapter 16 is refreshingly free from scholarly disputes and has relatively few exegetical and theological conundrums.

In summary, this chapter emphasizes themes of mutuality, hospitality and love. More specifically Paul takes up two remaining questions posed by the Corinthians' letter to him: a special offering for the people of God in Jerusalem (vs. 1-11). He then closes with some final instructions about their relationship with Apollos and the respect they should have for their local leaders, not just the apostles (vs. 12-18). Paul closes with greetings and adds his own handwritten warning and prayers for them (vs. 19-24).

This chapter is not just an idle P.S. to the letter. It reminds the Corinthian congregation how faith acts out the love of God in their relationships in the body of Christ. Responsibility for sharing material goods picks up on the importance of bodily acts in the previous chapter and elsewhere in the letter. That the Corinthians should share their wealth to promote the gospel links well with their indebtedness to the first church in Jerusalem to proclaim the resurrection of Christ.

Themes such as mutuality, hospitality, reciprocity of love and generosity run through the epistle. Paul has just emphasized abundance and faithful action because of the resurrection of the dead through Christ the Lord. What better motivation for generous sharing of our goods with others than the fact they are part of the same hope?

The chapter is also very interesting for a number of subthemes it touches on: Sunday versus sabbath worship, how pastoral wisdom in financial matters is crucial for credibility, a theology of giving, Paul's evangelistic methods and follow-up, the dating and place of origin of the letter, respect for coworkers and leaders, Paul-and-Apollos relations, Paul's personal interests, models for wealthy Christian patrons, and the substance of the earliest Christian prayer recorded.

EARLY MUTUALITY AND HOSPITALITY (1 Cor. 16:1-11)

Christian love expressed in concrete actions underlies especially this early section of the chapter. Such love expresses itself in mutuality and hospitality. There are three matters Paul brings up: the special offering (vs. 1-4), his own travel plans (vs. 5-9), and Timothy's visit (vs. 10-11).

Often the sharing of material goods has bound diverse Christian groups together in solidarity. But we must be careful that our understanding of stewardship does not tempt us into becoming benefactors (patrons) who create dependency rather than foster true mutuality and the joy of equal membership. "As one considers the evils of welfare systems, racism, sexism, and economic imperialism, it can be said that dependency is the common thread. Any system is evil if it makes one person or one group dependent on another. For the Christian the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ creates mutuality (Gk. 'koinōnia') not dependency.

Lutheran World Relief does an excellent job with this. Yes, there are times that emergency help is needed, but better yet is helping people to independence. It is better to dig wells and provide a way for people to get good clean water regularly than just keeping on sending water indefinitely. Water availability means they can keep poultry and cattle alive. It allows them to grow crops and create food supplies.

Now about the collection (16:1) signals another question in the Corinthians' letter to Paul. The collection (GK. 'logeias', offerings) occurs only here in the New Testament but frequently in the papyri for financial collections, especially ad hoc offerings. This was not a tax or a tithe but a freewill offering. Paul calls it a gift (v. 3, GK. 'charis'), stressing generosity (cf. 2 Cor. 8:1-5). Other places Paul calls the same fund a "service" (Gk. 'diakonia', 2 Cor. 8:4), a "fellowship" or "sharing" (Gk. 'koinōnia', Rom. 15:26) or a "priestly service" (Gk. 'leitourgia', 2 Cor. 9:12). This could form the basis of a helpful theology of giving.

The same collection is evidently referred to also in Acts 24:17 (also Rom. 15:25-27; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Gal. 2:10). From these additional passages we learn that the collection was for famine relief (cf. Act_11:27-30) and was a material way for Gentiles to show their indebtedness to the Jews into whose Abrahamic covenant stock they had been grafted through the Messiah, Jesus.

It was a way of uniting Jewish believers with Gentile Christians, since for the Jews to accept the gift would have in that culture signaled that they were accepting the Gentiles as equal partners in the gospel. "The collection was a key way of uniting the Gentile Christians with the Jewish Christians. Paul did not allow the Gentiles to become dependent on the Jerusalem church. He empowered the Gentiles to become equal partners.

But would Jerusalem accept the gift? Perhaps Paul was quite concerned about this very matter as he planned to take the gift. "Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the believers there" (Rom. 15:31 TNIV).

The first day of every week (v. 2) was not the sabbath (Saturday) but Sunday, the day of the resurrection (Acts 20:7; Rev. 1:10), when presumably the Corinthian church gathered for worship, as did other early churches (Acts 20:7). But how did the Jewish sabbath get eventually transferred to Sunday in many church traditions? Today many call the Lord's Day (Sunday) "the Christian sabbath" and transfer some of the Mosaic sabbath restrictions, including complete rest from work to it. It appears that such "sabbatarianism" did not actually begin until medieval times, rather than in the New Testament or patristic period.

The Corinthians were to set aside privately a sum of money, each in keeping with his income (v. 2, Gk. 'euodoō'). The word can also mean "how you may fare" or "whatever you can afford" or "as each can spare." Saving it up seems strange. Did they not have any church treasury?

It should be noted that Paul exercises wise pastoral steps in this whole process of the special offering. First, the process is highly participatory and democratic. Everyone, young and old, wealthy and poor, slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female, educated and illiterate, can have a part. This defuses the motives of those who wanted to be recognized as the patrons or benefactors of the poor and thus increase their status.

Second, giving according to one's ability, in private, eases the competitive spirit and puts all on an equal footing, something the Corinthians needed desperately. Third, Paul wisely indicates that he will give letters of introduction to the men you approve (v. 3), not ones chosen by him—Gentiles, not Jews! Fourth, if they think it advisable (v. 4) in light of the circumstances at Jerusalem (see Rom. 15:25-32), Paul will go also, accompanied by those chosen.

Handling money and other donated goods wisely, with utter integrity and accountably, is as important to the success of the gospel as any preaching or witness may be. Lack of financial accountability plagues the church in the Western world as well in Third World countries.

PAUL'S PLANS AND CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY (1Cor. 16:5-9)

Hospitality was quite important to the early church as well. In the Didache (second century) Christians are exhorted to entertain visiting leaders for three days. After that they were to work or to move on! Early the church began to select leaders who could and would show hospitality (1Tim. 5:10; Shepherd of Hermas; Similitudes 9.27).

Paul, as 1 Corinthians 9 revealed, deliberately refused support from the churches, choosing to work to avoid criticism (the Cynics were traveling leeches). However, he did expect that the churches would support his travel to the next place on his itinerary and that they would with Christian hospitality welcome him into their fellowship as long as he could stay (v. 6).

Paul is currently in Ephesus (spent three years there, Acts 19:1-41), and because there is a great opportunity for him to teach and proclaim Christ, he plans to stay awhile longer, until Pentecost (v. 8). After he leaves Ephesus he plans to pass through Macedonia (north of Greece), where he had founded churches five years earlier (A.D. 49-54). Then he plans to visit with the Corinthians (v. 5).

This was planned as his second visit but turned out to be his third (2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1). The first was when the church was established on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-17); the second, "painful" visit we know little about (2 Cor. 2:1-2; 12:14; 12:21; 13:1-2). His plans did not go exactly as he had projected (see introduction), and the Corinthians accused him of misleading them (2 Cor. 1:15-24; 2:12-13).

The references to many who oppose Paul at Ephesus could be the same as the "wild beasts" of 1 Cor. 15:32. A short time later a mob gathered in the twenty-four-thousand-seat amphitheater to stir up hostility against Paul (Acts 19:23-41). We have no references to Paul being cast into an arena with actual wild beasts. But it was a wild mob which is described in Acts 19. I believe that is a reasonable interpretation of I Cor. 15:32.

TIMOTHY'S VISIT (1 Cor. 16:10-11)

Timothy was a regular associate of Paul in his missionary travels and seems to function now as Paul's representative to the Corinthians, a sort of apostolic ambassador. He may have also, along with the three men mentioned in verse 17 (Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus), carried this letter back to Corinth. Why should he have nothing to fear (v. 10) or be treated with contempt (v. 11)?

Timothy was relatively young and inexperienced (1Tim. 4:12), a biracial Jew and Gentile (Acts 16:1), a "nobody" compared to Paul, Peter and Apollos. But more likely these factors were outweighed in Paul's mind by the fact that Timothy would fully represent him, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am (v. 10). Whatever reception Paul might have anticipated for himself after his letter was read to the Corinthians might now be experienced by Timothy. So they are exhorted to treat him with Christian hospitality and care and to send him back with peace (not hostility) to Paul, who is expecting him (v. 11).

16:10 seems to not be in harmony with 1 Cor. 4:17-21. Actually only the timing is in question. I think the best explanation is to consider 1 Cor. 4:17-21 as Paul issuing a warning, whereas 1 Cor. 16:10 is now the actual travel plan.

Next: 1 Cor. 16:12-24, The end of our First Corinthians study. We will continue with Second Corinthians.