

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART SEVENTEEN

On the face of it, the last chapter of this book is just a collection of personal notes and a few final instructions, and therefore unimportant. On the contrary it takes the teachings of the previous fifteen chapters and illustrates them effectively in a series of situations and in the lives of those known to Paul and his audience. Nothing in the Bible is there for nothing!

First Paul took one more aspect of Christians meeting together in which grace needs to be worked out, that of financial giving. He urged them to look ahead in their giving rather than making it a last minute afterthought. At the beginning of the week when they still had money, he wanted them to put aside what they would give rather than to wait until the collection plate was put under their noses and they had to dig into their empty pockets. Notice there is no percentage to contribute. Under grace all we are and have belongs to the God who has lavished everything upon us. As we trust Him He will guide us in the use of all of it. Notice too that the collection was not going into the church bank account but to needy Christians elsewhere. Paul had already dealt with support of Christian workers in chapter 9. They had no buildings to construct and maintain. This was strong pastoral advice not the 11th commandment.

Paul recognised too that giving is not just money, useful though that would be to the hungry and homeless. We wanted some of those who gave money to give themselves for a time by taking the gift in person to Jerusalem. He was very much aware of how those who were facing hard times would appreciate spiritual and personal encouragement as much as the gift. He was not just giving them good advice but was prepared to go with them, dangerous though it would be.(16:1-4)

Paul often shared not only his travel plans but some insight into his expectations from his trips. He knew some specifics of what God wanted him to do but not others. Sometimes he made minor changes to his itinerary for which he knew he did not need to apologise.(II Cor.1:15-17) This teaches us that even Paul did not have a complete road map of his future and that he was content to live with a degree of uncertainty until the Lord was willing to fill in the gaps. God's grace in planning means that we can be faithful but relaxed about the will of God. Paul's 'wide open door' meant that someone had a wide open heart not that there was an absence of opposition, as we so often assume. He was writing from Ephesus where he conducted a Bible school for over 2 years which reached out to the whole province and produced profound spiritual and social change, and also fierce opposition from those for whom religion was a profitable business.(16:5-9; Acts 19:23-41)

As well as working out what God wanted him to do next, Paul also had some suggestions to make to his fellow workers as to what might be helpful for them to do. Timothy was responding to his urging to go to Corinth,(4:17) but even with his 'son in Christ', he left him to make his own decision, so he says 'if' not 'when'. His concern was that they should treat Timothy well, not give him a hard time. Paul had a special sense of responsibility for Timothy in whom he saw immense potential but also a vulnerability.(I Tim,4:12) It may well have been that Timothy was one of those who had briefed Paul on how badly things had gone wrong in Corinth.(16:10-11) Apollos on the other hand had also been strongly encouraged to visit Corinth. He agreed with the idea of going but this was not the time. Paul graciously accepted his decision. His visit would no doubt be very helpful in settling the partisan attitudes of chapters 1 and 3.(16:12)

Paul gave five brief exhortations in parting, four of which sound like a general speaking to his troops – 'be alert, stand firm, act like men and be strong' using a similar picture to his description

of the armour of the Christian in Ephesians 6. The last exhortation seems out of place in an army – ‘let all you do be done in love’, but Christ’s army is to be like no other.(16:13,14)

He now identified three Corinthians who had come to him with their concerns so that there need be no suspicion about who had reported their behaviour to Paul. Such sources are always better acknowledged openly rather than by ‘I have heard rumours...’. Paul reminded the Corinthians that Stephanas and his household had been the first whole family in Corinth to trust Christ, and to be baptised by him.(1:16) As such they would have had a respect among the other believers which allowed them to go to Paul for help without everyone being offended. Paul now wanted to build on this respect by commending the leadership roles of Stephanas and his two friends. Mature, wise and gracious leadership was urgently needed in Corinth at this time. These three had already shown this. They had even encouraged Paul at a time when he had been down over the news from Corinth.(16:15-18)

A lot of greetings passed back and forth between Paul in Ephesus and the Corinthian Christians. Greetings can be just formal and meaningless or a really deep acknowledgement of the bond of love which God puts between those who have walked a Christian path together. Aquila and Prisca (or Priscilla) were such a couple. They were his first hosts in Corinth.(Acts 18:2,3) On his first visit to Ephesus he had quietly planted them there in anticipation of his return.(Acts 18:18,19) Wherever they went their home became a meeting place for Christians.(Rom.16:3-5) Of all Paul’s friends they knew very well how to greet graciously those whom God brought to their door, whether promising or unpromising. A kiss is the form of greeting in some cultures and not others. The kiss of a Christian would have a meaning to it beyond mere good manners.(16:19,20)

Not all of Paul’s letters were written in his own handwriting.(Rom.16:22) On one occasion his writing was very large suggesting that his eyesight may have been failing.(Gal.6:11) Paul closed by using yet again two of his favourite words, love and grace. God loved the Corinthians and showed it by His grace. Paul loved them too but all of that would be of no help unless they loved the Lord and looked forward to His coming back. ‘Marantha’ is an Aramaic word meaning ‘Our Lord, come’ and may well have been a common greeting among Christians at that time. If by their own choice they rejected His coming, into them now and into the world in the future, they were accursed, lacking in grace.(16:21-24)