

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

After spending four chapters on the causes of division in the church, Paul takes up a different series of problems in the next 4 chapters. In chapter 5 he deals with the first of a number of moral issues whose effect would be primarily on the few people directly involved. Each would also cause stresses in the church as others became aware of the problems and either took sides or were influenced by someone else's example.

The first issue was incest.(5:1) It is often assumed that the sexual relationship referred to was between a man and his step-mother, rather than his birth mother, but there is no reason for this assumption. The phrase 'father's wife' is the one used in Lev.18:8 where this is a forbidden sexual relationship and clearly means 'mother'. Such things were common in the Roman world of those days. The Emperor Nero was widely believed to have such a relationship with his mother so it was one of those situations where Christians could easily be drawn into an acceptance of the behaviour of the society around them.

It is highly unlikely that Paul would have reacted in such a severe way if he had simply heard rumours based on gossip because he had some very strong things to say about gossip being on the same plane as murder.(Rom.1:29) The fact that they were 'arrogant' implies that the couple involved were openly proclaiming their relationship and insisting that it was fine as far as God was concerned.(5:2) The modern term for this, in for example a homosexual relationship, is 'coming out', even to the extent of wanting a marriage ceremony to gain public approval. If so they were contradicting the word of God. Others were taking up their teaching and so they were false teachers. Not only would that part of scripture be undermined but those who followed them would soon learn to question or deny any other passage in the Bible which did not suit them.

Paul is concerned that they should deal with this teaching and those who proclaimed it at once. This could be done by showing the church the appropriate part of Leviticus and reaffirming their faith in the whole Bible. He would be 'with them in spirit' in the sense that they knew exactly where Paul stood on the full inspiration of scripture.(II Tim.3:16,17) 'Delivering the false teacher to Satan' was a way of saying that those who insisted on being led astray despite warning had chosen to follow the consequences of their teaching.(I Tim.1:20) Paul makes it clear that this did not condemn a man to hell, but rather allowed him to learn the hard way where his teaching pointed people.(5:3-5)

Paul illustrates his message with an everyday image of leaven or yeast in a lump of dough.(5:6-8) A little piece of false teaching so easily takes over and corrupts our whole way of thinking on every issue. To the Jews the picture would be a familiar one. All sacrifices containing flour required the flour to be unleavened except the one offered on the day of Pentecost.(Lev.2:4,5,11; 23:6,17) Jesus also uses leaven as a picture of false teaching,(Matt.16:6,11,12) and presumably this is also His meaning in Matt.13:33.

He now has to resolve confusion in the mind of the Corinthians as to whether they were to avoid sinners or mix with them so that they could witness. He chooses a number of the everyday problems of Corinth to bring home the obvious conclusion that to escape contact with such behaviour they would have to leave this planet!(5:9-11) He wants them to be in contact with unbelieving sinners to bring them to Christ by example as well as teaching. His warning is to avoid the false teachers who claim to be believers because to associate with them is to support their teaching. Jesus also explains how we should deal with such issues of behaviour in Matt.18:15-17.

His own dealings with Gentiles and tax-gatherers make it clear He is not talking about avoiding people but of the impossibility of Christian fellowship with those who are not trusting the Lord.

Paul returns to the question of judgement to make clear why the teaching of this chapter does not contradict the warning against judging in the previous chapter.(5:12,13) In chapter 4 the Corinthians were judging Paul's behaviour which was none of their business. In chapter 5 he is dealing with Bible teaching which is to be the business of all of us.(I Cor.14:29) We are responsible to judge every sermon, lecture or message we ever hear with open Bibles, checking to see whether it is the truth in part or in whole.(Jn.7:24)

In chapter 6 Paul turns to two further moral issues among them.

6:1-6 Q.1 What problem is happening among the Corinthians Christians? Why would you expect this to be an issue in a place like Corinth? How are they handling it? Why is their approach wrong? What glimpse does this section give us of our future ministry as believers?(Dan.7:18,22,27; Matt.19:28) What practical solution does Paul suggest?

6:7-8 Q.2 Having proposed a way by which the church should deal with such matters, Paul now proposes an even more radical solution? What is it? How does Jesus teach a similar approach?(Matt.5:38-42) Is this a realistic way to settle problems in the modern world? What is the secret of making such a plan work?

6:9-11 Q.3 Paul lists a series of behaviours. What four aspects of life are covered here? Would they have been important in Corinth? Does he mean that whether or not we get into heaven depends on whether or not we do these things? If not, what is his purpose in giving such a list? What would these behaviours have to do with taking each other to court? What solution does he now suggest to the problem of dealing with those whose behaviour damages us?

6:12-14 Q.4 What problem has preaching a message of grace had in a place like Corinth? How had some chosen to misunderstand and misapply this message? How do similar problems happen today? What principle does Paul suggest for sorting out such misunderstanding? How should our knowledge about heaven guide us in making life-style decisions?(I Cor.15:35-49) Would it not be easier to go back to some simple rules on which we all agree?(Col.2:20-23)

6:15-20 Q.5 Now what trouble are they getting themselves into? How does Paul suggest they view themselves to help them understand why this is not helpful to their Christian lives? What startling statement does he make here about what constitutes marriage? How would this affect their present behaviour? How should it change our thinking about our relationship with the opposite sex before marriage?