

1 Corinthians 16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians chapter 16 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, and perhaps I will stay with you, or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey wherever I go.

For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers.

Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity. Be watchful. Stand firm in the faith. Act like men. Be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

[1 : 27] Now I urge you, brothers, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. Be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and labourer.

I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas, and Fortunatus, and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.

The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church and their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord come. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Chapter 16 ends the first letter to the Corinthians. The end of such a letter is a reminder that we are reading other people's mail. We can consider some of the reasons why Paul and the other New Testament writers might have employed the epistle as the means for spreading their message.

[2 : 37] Michael B. Thompson has written about this in terms of the holy internet. He describes the dissemination of information in the earliest church. He observes that contrary to theories of isolated communities built around the varying messages of different apostles and early church teachers, the first churches were bound together in a large network, within which messages travelled with regularity and relative speed.

And this is something that we see in chapter 16 of 1 Corinthians. Thanks to the vast infrastructure of Roman roads and the sea lanes of commerce that joined places across the empire, it was possible for first century travellers to enjoy considerable mobility.

There were also key hubs of communication for the early church, places like Jerusalem, Rome, Ephesus or Corinth. Christians in these and other localities would be expected to show hospitality to Christians from other parts of the world.

And the epistle is a medium that was bound up with such a network. While we tend to regard epistles merely as texts, especially as we encounter them in our Bibles, if we imaginatively resituate them within their natural network of communication, other purposes can be revealed, purposes that that particular medium was able to serve.

For a fledgling movement, the holy internet that Thompson describes was a critical means by which the church could be built up. In the book of Acts, we repeatedly see this internet in action.

[4 : 02] While we may be tempted to read the accounts of the apostles' travels as if they were just filler, it was a crucial part of the means by which the early church was strengthened, encouraged and made secure in the truth.

The holy internet created bonds of mutual knowledge, concern, gift, support and service between churches. It established churches as examples to each other. It connected the church with its origins in apostolic testimony.

It ensured that believers were rarely more than a couple of degrees of separation from multiple eyewitnesses of Christ's ministry and resurrection. This network is one of the reasons why the apostles could boldly state that the work of Christ wasn't something that occurred in a corner.

News could travel fairly fast, especially in a closely networked set of communities, such as those of the early church. Paul mentions several ministers here who are moving from place to place, who would be known to people in Corinth, but also to people in Ephesus, in Antioch and maybe also in Jerusalem.

At the beginning and the end of various New Testament epistles like this, we can get a sense of the network. As we want to get to the ideas, we can be inattentive to the way that the early church was established, not merely through ideas, but through the constant circulation of apostles, evangelists, missionaries and various other servants to the church, through gifts, messengers, travellers, letters, news and other things like that.

[5 : 26] If we resist the urge to top and tail Pauline epistles, as if there were carrots being prepared for cooking, we might discover much insight in parts we would otherwise discard.

For instance, even before Paul visited the city of Rome, he knew a great number of Christians already active there, people who would welcome his visit. The book of Romans isn't merely a book of theological ideas, it's a book paving the way for a visit, a book appealing to and developing existing connections and anticipating the establishment of a greater future bond between Paul and the church at Rome.

The hospitality of churches to strangers was part of the means by which the holy internet was made possible. There are various mentions in the epistles of Paul seeking a place to stay, seeking provisions or praising Christians for their hospitality to others.

The degree to which Paul's apostolic teaching was bound up with an intense practice of networking can be seen in his extensive description of his movements and various practical missions in such places as the end of Romans.

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles was not merely a theological notion for Paul. It was something to be worked out through such things as the contributions of the Christians of Macedonia and Achaia to the poor saints in Jerusalem.

[6 : 42] For if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings. The Jerusalem collection strengthened the ecclesiastical and theological web of connection between Jewish and Gentile churches.

It enabled Gentile Christians and churches in the wider empire to participate in the needs of the saints in Jerusalem. And the call for the collection with which Paul begins this chapter is a reminder of this dimension of his ministry.

We read about this in Galatians chapter 2 verses 7 to 10. On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised, for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles, and when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

Only they asked us to remember the Paul, the very thing I was eager to do. Now Paul is meeting with them in the context of bringing a gift from the Christians at Antioch to the Christians in Jerusalem.

This is an expression of the unity between Jews and Gentiles, and this separation of ministries, one to the circumcised, the other to the uncircumcised, is going to be brought together through the expression of love in providing for the saints who need provisions in Jerusalem.

[8 : 10] So the gift of the Gentiles is an expression of the theological unity of Jews and Gentiles in the gospel. The gathering of a Gentile gift for the Judean and especially Jerusalem church might also be a way of fulfilling end-time prophecy.

Isaiah chapter 2 verses 2 to 3, It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills, and all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come and say, Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways, and that we may walk in his paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Also Isaiah chapter 60 verses 10 to 16, Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you.

For in my wrath I struck you, but in my favour I have had mercy on you. Your gates shall be opened continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession.

For the nation and kingdom that will not serve you shall perish, those nations shall be utterly laid waste. The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the Cyprus, the plain and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary.

[9 : 26] And I will make the place of my feet glorious. The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet. They shall call you the city of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, with no one passing through, I will make you majestic forever, a joy from age to age. You shall suck the milk of nations, you shall nurse at the breast of kings, and you shall know that I, the Lord, am your saviour and your redeemer, the mighty one of Jacob.

Paul here suggests that the Gentile Corinthians bring the gift to Jerusalem themselves. This would enhance the symbolism. It's Gentiles bringing the gift of the nations to the Jews.

The sending of epistles was also a way in which the form and the content of the apostolic message and ministry were closely related. Most of the epistles of the New Testament are addressed to Christians in a particular city or to a specific person.

Such epistles strengthened and built upon existing connections, ensuring that each church could be nourished by the ministry of others. They were a form of resistance to sectarian and isolationist tendencies, establishing unity through mutual sharing and ministry in a body.

- [10 : 39] The epistles consistently remind their recipients of their place within a larger body of Christians, the recipients of the epistles, are also frequently called to pass on the messages that they have received to others or to ensure that a wider audience hears them.

The epistles weren't mass-produced, digitally replicated or accessed online. They were written and transmitted by hand. Paul often makes reference to the individuals that bear his letters, individuals who would fill the recipients in on his news and all that was happening in the city from which they had been sent.

In many instances, the bearers of the epistles, people like Epaphroditus, Dickicus or Onesimus, Phoebe and others like that would have probably performed their contents to the recipients of the letters.

It's important that we consider what the effect of this mode of the epistles transmission would be. They were forms of personal communication, not mere abstract doctrine. When we read most of the New Testament then, we are reading other people's mail.

Yet the mail was sent to particular recipients with the intent that they should pass it on. The similarities between the mode of transmission here and Paul's accounts of the gifts of the Spirit in chapter 12 is worth reflecting upon.

- [11 : 51] The Spirit has been given to the whole church. However, the gift of the Spirit is represented in the numerous diverse gifts of the Spirit to individuals. These gifts of the Spirit conscript Christians into God's own giving process.

Likewise, receiving an epistle from Paul conscripted you into a giving process. Paul, who had been given his message by revelation of Christ, gave his letters to particular churches and persons.

It was given to them especially, but with the expectation that, through them, it should be given to all. The letter was given not for private ownership, but as the stewardship of a gift to the whole church.

And it wasn't just an abstract piece of theology that they were passing on, but a letter concerning their particular congregation and its issues. The circulation of the epistles called churches to share themselves with the whole body of the church as examples, in both positive and negative respects.

Perhaps we should imagine a sharp intake of breath in Corinth when they received this particular correspondence from Paul. Further, in passing on their mail, they would typically be sending servants of their churches to other churches, forging firmer bonds of relation and affiliation, and mutual service and hospitality.

- [13 : 05] Another important feature of the fact that Paul is writing letters is that they are texts directly addressed to persons and churches. We often try to derive abstract theology from Paul's letters, treating them as if they were detached reflections on theological truth from an ivory tower.

Yet Paul is speaking to concrete people in concrete situations, with all of the passion and the urgency that can come with that. We can translate the letters of Paul into abstract theology without even recognising what we are doing.

As an example, let's look at the first four verses of Ephesians chapter 1. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Asked to describe what Paul is saying here, many of us might say something to the effect that Paul is teaching that God has chosen a certain group of people in Christ before the foundation of the world, in order that they might one day be blessed and sanctified.

[14 : 21] But this is to obscure the fact that it is a word with multiple addressees. Paul is not teaching that here. He is communicating Christ's blessing to the Ephesians.

And he's praising God, not about some abstract theological truth, but about something that is true of the Ephesians. God has chosen them before the foundation of the world in Christ.

He has blessed them in Christ with every spiritual blessing. He isn't teaching so much as he is blessing, praising, and exhorting the Ephesians to join him. His words are not about abstract truths, but actively express the way that the work of God in Christ electrifies and transforms all our relationships.

It is a word of address, not a word of abstract theological reflection. We need to learn to hear the scripture in this way more generally. In this chapter, we have glimpses into the sort of world that the early church inhabited.

Apostles, their representatives, and other missionaries moving to and fro. Timothy has an especially close relationship to Paul, it appears. Elsewhere, we find out that he's like Paul's son and representative.

[15 : 28] Paul mentions Pentecost. Perhaps this suggests that Jewish feasts were still recognized and practiced by many Jews in the early church. However, he also refers to gathering the collection on the first day of the week.

Sunday already seems to have been a day of significance for the early church, perhaps indicating that the shift from Sabbath to Sunday was well underway. Sunday was the day of resurrection.

It was the day of new creation and it also anticipated the final day of the Lord. Paul concludes by moving to general exhortations. Watchfulness, steadfastness, manliness, strength.

Richard Hayes suggests that Paul may be alluding to Psalm 31 verses 23 to 24 at a few points in these final verses. Love the Lord, all you his saints.

The Lord preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in pride. Be strong and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord. There is a pronounced sense of expectation here.

[16 : 27] The virtues emphasized by Paul are those required to withstand trial and to await the coming judgment and deliverance of the Lord. Verse 14 perhaps sums up the driving force of the letter.

Let all that you do be done in love. Just before Paul draws to a conclusion, he encourages the Corinthians to honour Stephanus and his household for their long-standing faith, their faithful service and their devoted labour.

The point here isn't that they have an official position but that their service itself is deserving of honour and that the church should look to those who excel in such service for guidance.

This is where the material of faithful leadership is to be found and these are the sorts of people who should be granted recognition. Note how in the example of Stephanus and his household we find the virtues that would provide a fitting and powerful alternative to the self-serving and self-advancing attitude of the strong in Corinth.

Matters like this shouldn't be detached from the theological thrust of the wider correspondence. If the Corinthians are going to deal with their problems, part of the way in which they will do so is by looking to people like Stephanus and his household for leadership.

- [17 : 39] The letter communicates the greetings of the churches in Asia and from Aquila and Prisca. Paul is doing work to strengthen the holy internet here. Aquila and Prisca are Priscilla and Aquila.

The ordering of the names is something that some people have placed a lot of emphasis upon elsewhere but which is probably of little significance. It has more to do with the form of their names. They are sent greetings but they are also charged to greet each other with a holy kiss.

This is a close and intimate greeting. It expresses close kinship and clearly quite contrasts with their divisive and self-advancing behaviour described in the letter.

If they are going to recognise each other and receive each other in this way, the sort of appalling practice that Paul describes at the Lord's Supper in Corinth will be much harder to sustain.

Paul writes the greeting with his own hand. Presumably the rest was written by an amanuensis. He ends with a curse upon anyone who has no love for the Lord and calls for Christ to come, communicating a blessing and then his love.

- [18 : 45] A question to consider. Looking through this chapter, what are some of the examples of the instructions, exhortations and other things that Paul teaches here that speak into issues that he has raised previously in the letter?