

Wrapping it up

1 Corinthians 16:13-24

It's been quite a lengthy letter – and we've been looking at it for over six months now. Tonight we come to the end. How would you wrap up a letter like this?

I don't know if you've ever written a letter this long. It's around 14 A4 pages – though that, of course, will depend on the spacing and font size you use. It takes about 50 minutes to read out loud – and for most in the Corinthian church, that's how they would get this letter. There's a lot in it. It moves through quite a range of subjects – many of them subjects the Corinthians themselves raised. How would you conclude it?

Would you get out your old English notes – the ones that talked about how to write an essay – and see what you're supposed to do at the end? Would you be able to find your old English notes? Would you try to think through what you thought were the most important points and re-emphasise them? Would you just find your favourite quote and throw that in for good measure? Would you try to finish on a positive, uplifting note? That's all hypothetical of course – but it's interesting to think through what we'd do and then compare it with what Paul actually does. That in itself may tell us something significant about ourselves.

Five Encouragements

Verses 13 and 14 have five short commands. Because they are short, their exact reference isn't always clear. Some think they're just five short exhortations Paul could have put at the end of any of his letters. But I think it's

better to think through how they relate to this particular letter. After all, this is the letter in which they appear as part of Paul's concluding comments.

The first is *Be on your guard*. Other translations state: *Be watchful*. *Be on the alert*. It's a word often used in the context of Jesus' return. Jesus Himself expresses the idea in Matthew 24:42-44

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect Him.

But it's used in other contexts as well. Peter uses it in 1 Peter 5:8 to warn us to be alert to the devil – to be aware that he prowls like a roaring lion. Paul uses it in Acts 20:31 to warn the Ephesian elders to watch for those who distort the truth and seek to lead Christians astray. All are good warnings. All are important warnings. Which is more likely in this context?

In chapter 15, Paul reminds them Jesus will return. That's the times they live in – the time when Jesus' kingdom spreads through the preaching of the gospel; the time when they wait for His return and the perfection of His kingdom. That should impact their lifestyles.

- They shouldn't promote divisions in the church.
- They should expel those practising immorality.
- They shouldn't take each other to court.
- They should consider the single lifestyle.
- They should flee idolatry.

So that could well be the thrust of this command. Know

the time you live in and live accordingly.

But it could also equally be warning about the dangers they face. Their enemy is prowling about. He doesn't want them going ahead full steam for Jesus. He'd like to distract them from that task – both in their own lives and in their impact on their culture through the preaching of the gospel. Part of his prowling involves getting false teachers and false ideas into the way Christians think. One well-proven method for doing that is to have their surrounding culture infiltrate and side-track their church thinking.

- It worked well with Old Testament Israel. They frequently abandoned true worship of God to chase after the surrounding idols.
- It worked well with New Testament Israel. They were so influenced by their cultural way of thinking that they crucified God's Messiah.

And it was a problem for these Corinthians as well. They still clung to their cultural ideals of what was wise and what was impressive and how you judged church leaders and how you worked out where the real action was. They needed to be very alert to that sort of stuff. Paul keeps coming back to it again and again in this letter.

- It was undermining the centrality of the cross.
- It was causing divisions among them.
- It resulted in them boasting about immorality.
- It led them to wrongly think about spirituality and the place of spiritual gifts.
- It fed an attitude of arrogant boasting
- It even led them to think poorly of the apostle Paul.

They needed very much to be alert.

And so do Christians in all cultures – including us. Cult-

ure is such a big part of us – but it also tends to be an invisible part. It's what we're used to. We just take it for granted. But our Christian culture and how we operate within the non-Christian world must always be subject to the gospel. The gospel is to determine our values and attitudes and the whole way we view this world.

The second encouragement: *stand firm in the faith*. Often this command would be given at a time of persecution – keep going, don't give up, don't give in. But persecution doesn't feature much in this letter – except perhaps for all the trouble the Corinthians are causing Paul. Here the sense is to maintain true teaching – not to be led astray by wrong ideas that oppose the true gospel. Back in 15:1

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

Chapter 15 deals with an area where they were very much in danger of slipping away from the truth. Some taught the resurrection had already happened – that their current spiritual experiences were what it's all about; that they already experienced the resurrected life in the here and now. Paul says: No. The Christian gospel is far greater than that. Our Christian hope is more glorious than that. If you give up the certain expectation of a future resurrected body – a body that's imperishable and immortal – then you've moved away from the faith. You're not standing firm.

The early chapters deal with another area where they faced real danger of drifting away. They ignored God's

wisdom in favour of their world's wisdom. Their world looked for impressive displays of power and strength. The cross looked weak and foolish. Now, it's unlikely they wanted to ditch the cross altogether, but it seems they were in danger of thinking it insufficient – of adding some impressive bits; of overshadowing it with things more appealing to their culture. They needed to return to God's wisdom: the cross. They needed to keep it central in their thinking and teaching. Otherwise they weren't standing firm.

This encouragement remains true for all Christians. We are to know the truth – the faith. We're to study it and meditate on it and get it to seep through to the very core of our beings. We must take care not to drift from it or to dilute it. Don't lose sight of the gospel of Jesus crucified and risen. This gospel entrusted to us is the power of God. It's the heart of our lives – both as individuals and together. It's the core of our life and faith.

The third instruction: *be men of courage*. The Christian life requires courage. They needed courage to go against their culture. There are reasons our culture has such a strong grip on us.

- It's what we've always known. We simply think it's normal – it's the way things are always done. We don't realise it may be wrong – that there are other, godly ways of doing things.
- And it's what's still always going on around us. We don't like being different. We like to fit in – to go with the flow.

Their culture was competitive and status-seeking and looking to make a good impression – not all that different

from our culture really. Paul told them Christianity is the way of the cross.

- They struggled with that in their heads. It wasn't how their culture operated. It wasn't how their culture worked. That just wasn't the way to get ahead and become someone in the world.
- They also struggled with that in terms of how their culture evaluated things. How could they present that sort of message to other Corinthians? It just looked so weak and foolish. They'd simply laugh.

It takes courage to go against that.

- Courage to care for the weak and nobodies – for those who can't give you anything in return.
- Courage to stand out in the area of sexuality.
- Courage to turn your back on your culture's idols.
- Courage to run the risk that others will think you a nobody – a person of no real consequence.

It's no different today.

- It takes courage not to get drunk with everyone else
- It takes courage not to sleep around.
- It takes courage to have your spending habits **not** focus on self.
- Courage to forsake the idol of self-gratification.
- Courage to do an honest day's work.
- Courage not to join in the latest gossip.
- Courage to spend time with other Christians.

It's an ongoing thing. It's not just a one-off stand that you get over and done with. It's the pressure day after day after day.

Unfortunately, sometimes it takes courage to do these things in the church as well – especially if the church is still overly influenced by the surrounding pagan culture

such as in Corinth. Sometimes the church puts pressure on Christians not to go overboard. There can be a subtle mocking of those truly wanting to seek righteousness – of those concerned to put aside self-interest for the sake of the gospel and serving others. We can put pressure on each other to settle for a lower level of godliness than that which God says is desirable.

The fourth instruction: *be strong*. In ourselves, we're not strong. Our strength must be in God. Back in 10:12 Paul instructed them:

So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

Know the strength God supplies. Increase in making use of that strength. In our culture, many people work at improving their physical strength. They exercise. They buy equipment for home. They go to gyms. They work out. It takes time, money and effort. It's the same in the Christian life – within the context of trusting God. You won't trust God without the equivalent of the time, money and effort of getting to know Him. Study His word. Get to know His will. Practise relying on what He says. Pray for help. Meet regularly in fellowship. Look for ways to serve others. Fulfil your responsibilities.

We have great freedom in this country. We have large material resources available to us – both in terms of our finances and in terms of the Christian books and DVDs and CDs and so on. Yet, would you say the Australian church is a strong church?

- Are we strong in studying God's word?
- Are we strong in sharing the gospel?
- Are we strong in serving one another?

The fifth encouragement: *do everything in love*. This harks back to chapter 13 – the great love chapter. They're to be loving in the way they do church and the way they use their spiritual gifts. The gifts are to build up others – not to focus on self. Someone can have impressive gifts – the faith to move mountains or the ability to speak angelic tongues – but if they use those gifts without love, then they're nothing.

But it's not just chapters 12 to 14. It's not just the stuff about spiritual gifts. It's in everything they're to show love. It's in all the other things Paul mentions in this letter:

- their quarrels and divisions (1-3)
- their lawsuits with one another (6)
- their husband and wife relationships (7)
- their abuse of the weak (8-11)
- their abuse of the less fortunate and the have-nots at the Lord's Supper (11)

In the way they approach all these issues – in the way they act towards each other in all these things – they're to show love.

They also need to be loving in the way they exercise their Christian freedom. Sure, they're free to eat the meat that's made its way to their tables via the pagan temples. But they should think about others before they do so. Their consciences may not yet be at that stage. They may think it's wrong to eat that sort of meat. The loving thing to do is to refrain because you care for them. You don't want to

do any-thing to cause them to stumble. You're not there to advance yourself and demand your own personal freedoms – you're there to serve your brothers and sisters. You're not there for your own personal gain – you're there to bring benefit to the welfare of others.

That remains true for us. Jesus said:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another.

Further Relationships

In verse 16, Paul has a different sort of instruction for them: *submit* to the household of Stephanas and those like them. We don't know much about this guy – just what's written here and back in 1:16. He was one of the *first fruits* in Achaia – *the first converts* may be a bit strong. He probably brought the Corinthians' letter to Paul and would probably return with Paul's letter to them. And he was a person who served the church.

There's a pretty strong implication that, as with Timothy, Paul's dealing with an area of tension here. We don't have all the details – and so there's some reading between the lines that goes on here. While it appears that Stephanas has some recognition within the Corinthian church, he's not having an easy time as a leader.

- Maybe he serves with genuine humility – and so doesn't measure up to the Corinthians' worldly standards of what impresses them.
- Maybe he's loyal to Paul – and so faces rejection from those questioning Paul's credentials.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to submit to Stephanas. Why? Because he's *devoted himself to the service of the saints* – because he *labours* at it. Again, we're not given the details of this.

- Perhaps he freely provides his house for the church to use for their meetings – including the Lord's Supper.
- Perhaps he's diligent in caring for other Christians – taking it on himself to minister to everyone in practical ways.
- Perhaps he has a teaching role in the church.

The idea of submission does suggest his role probably included some level of teaching.

For those with worldly values, they often require encouragement to submit to this humble form of leadership. They're used to people bossing them around and exercising authority over them – that's the sort of leadership they respond to in everyday life. When they receive Christian leadership of the sort Stephanas offers, there's a good chance they'll treat it inadequately.

- They won't recognise it as leadership and so won't treat it with appropriate respect. Nor will they think it something they should emulate.
- They'll eagerly and selfishly receive the service offered – and treat those offering it as doormats.
- They won't take up their own responsibility to exercise humble service – rather they'll simply presume themselves worthy to be served by others.

Because they live on the basis of worldly values and think those values to be right, they won't even recognise the reality of what's offered them. It's the sort of attitude that led people to call for Jesus' execution. Jesus said His church is to be different.

whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

It remains a lesson that some are slow to learn.

Paul then sends greetings from those with him – several churches in Asia, Aquila and Priscilla and their church, and the brothers who are with Paul. As I mentioned last week, Apollos is missing – so it's likely he'd travelled somewhere else in the service of the gospel. These sorts of greetings are fairly usual in Paul's letters.

- It's also fairly common for Paul to write the final bit with his own hand – after having used someone else to write the bulk of the letter for him.
- It's also normal for him to close by wishing them God's grace in their lives.

Something Surprising

What isn't usual is verse 22.

*If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him.
Come, O Lord!*

At the end of 2 Thessalonians, there's a warning about those not obeying Paul's instructions in that letter – but it's not as strong as this. The closest is probably in the opening verses of Galatians, where Paul curses those who preach a different gospel – for any other gospel is a false gospel and fails to deliver salvation and will leave people facing judgment and eternal destruction.

Throughout this letter, Paul has warned them against deviating from the truth of the gospel. Now he sums that up in terms of loving Jesus. If you love Jesus:

- will you pursue human wisdom that devalues the cross in favour of something you think looks more

impressive?

- will you engage in sexual immorality and other behaviour that displeases Him?
- will you take your brother to court?
- will you toy with idols in your life?
- will you arrogantly boast of your own spirituality and personal achievements?
- will you pursue things that divide the church or treat your brothers with contempt?

The issue isn't about whether they like Paul or not. Nor is the issue specifically whether or not they'll obey Paul – although that is involved at a secondary level because of Paul's status as Jesus' apostle. The issue is whether they love Jesus – and thus whether they'll try to please Him, to obey Him. And so they need to take seriously the things he's written. Their stance on some of these issues is moving them dangerously close to abandoning the true gospel. That's a serious matter – and Paul uses serious language.

Verse 24 is also somewhat unusual. Verse 23 is Paul's usual ending – verse 24 is additional. It's as if he wants to soften the blow of verse 22 – perhaps soften the strong things he's said throughout. He wants to assure them that to write as he has is an indication of his love for them. He's not setting out to be vindictive or to extract revenge. He has their best interests at heart. He wants to see the salvation begun in them brought to completion. So even the strength of the warning in verse 22 should be seen in that light. Those in danger of drifting from the truth need to be brought back. Drifting isn't trivial. It's deadly dangerous. It sums up the underlying thrust of the whole letter. It's the basis for Paul's final instructions to them.