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COMMENTARY ON THE WHOLE BIBLE

1 Corinthians

by Matthew Henry

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AN EXPOSITION, WITH PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS, OF

THE FIRST EPISTLE OF ST. PAUL TO THE

CORINTHIANS

Corinth was a principal city of Greece, in that particular division of it which was called *Achaia*. It was situated on the isthmus (or neck of land) that joined Peloponnesus to the rest of Greece, on the southern side, and had two ports adjoining, one at the bottom of the Corinthian Gulf, called *Lechaeum*, not far from the city, whence they traded to Italy and the west, the other at the bottom of the Sinus Saronicus, called *Cenchrea*, at a more remote distance, whence they traded to Asia. From this situation, it is no wonder that Corinth should be a place of great trade and wealth; and, as affluence is apt to produce luxury of all kinds, neither is it to be wondered at if a place so famous for wealth and arts should be infamous for vice. It was in a particular manner noted for fornication, insomuch that a *Corinthian woman* was a proverbial phrase for a strumpet, and *korinthiazein, korinthiasesthai* — *to play the Corinthian*, is to play the whore, or indulge whorish inclinations. Yet in this lewd city did Paul, by the blessing of God on his labours, plant and raise a Christian church, chiefly among the Gentiles, as seems very probable from the history of this matter, ^{<481>}Acts 18:1-18, compared with some passages in this epistle, particularly 12:2, where the apostle tells them, *You know that you wee Gentiles, carried away to those dumb idols even as you were led*, though it is not improbable that many Jewish converts might be also among them, for we are told that *Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord, with all his house*, ^{<488>}Acts 18:8. He continued in this city nearly two years, as is plain from ^{<481>}Acts 18:11 and 18 compared, and laboured with great success, being encouraged by a divine vision assuring him *God had much people in that city*, ^{<489>}Acts 18:9, 10. Nor did he use to stay long in a place where his ministry met not with acceptance and success.

Some time after he left them he wrote this epistle to them, to water what he had planted and rectify some gross disorders which during his absence had been introduced, partly from the interest some false teacher or teachers

had obtained amongst them, and partly from the leaven of their old maxims and manners, that had not been thoroughly purged out by the Christian principles they had entertained. And it is but too visible how much their wealth had helped to corrupt their manners, from the several faults for which the apostle reprehends them. Pride, avarice, luxury, lust (the natural offspring of a carnal and corrupt mind), are all fed and prompted by outward affluence. And with all these either the body of this people or some particular persons among them are here charged by the apostle. Their pride discovered itself in their parties and factions, and the notorious disorders they committed in the exercise of their spiritual gifts. And this vice was not wholly fed by their wealth, but by the insight they had into the Greek learning and philosophy. Some of the ancients tell us that the city abounded with rhetoricians and philosophers. And these were men naturally vain, full of self-conceit, and apt to despise the plain doctrine of the gospel, because it did not feed the curiosity of an inquisitive and disputing temper, nor please the ear with artful speeches and a flow of fine words. Their avarice was manifest in their law-suits and litigations about *meum* — *mine*, and *tuum* — *thine*, before heathen judges. Their luxury appeared in more instances than one, in their dress, in their debauching themselves even at the Lord's table, when the rich, who were most faulty on this account, were guilty also of a very proud and criminal contempt of their poor brethren. Their lust broke out in a most flagrant and infamous instance, such as had not been named among the Gentiles, not spoken of without detestation — that a man should have his father's wife, either as his wife, or so as to commit fornication with her. This indeed seems to be the fault of a particular person; but the whole church were to blame that they had his crime in no greater abhorrence, that they could endure one of such very corrupt morals and of so flagitious a behaviour among them. But their participation in his sin was yet greater, if, as some of the ancients tell us, they were puffed up on behalf of the great learning and eloquence of this incestuous person. And it is plain from other passages of the epistle that they were not so entirely free from their former lewd inclinations as not to need very strict cautions and strong arguments against fornication: see 6:9-20. The pride of their learning had also carried many of them so far as to disbelieve or dispute against the doctrine of the resurrection. It is not improbable that they treated this question problematically, as they did many questions in philosophy, and tried their skill by arguing it *pro* and *con*.

It is manifest from this state of things that there was much that deserved reprehension, and needed correction, in this church. And the apostle, under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit, sets himself to do both with all wisdom and faithfulness, and with a due mixture of tenderness and authority, as became one in so elevated and important a station in the church. After a short introduction at the beginning of the epistle, he first blames them for their discord and factions, enters into the origin and source of them, shows them how much pride and vanity, and the affectation of science, and learning, and eloquence, flattered by false teachers, contributed to the scandalous schism; and prescribes humility, and submission to divine instruction, the teaching of God by his Spirit, both by external revelation and internal illumination, as a remedy for the evils that abounded amongst them. He shows them the vanity of their pretended science and eloquence on many accounts. This he does through the first four chapters. In the fifth he treats of the case of the incestuous person, and orders him to be put out from among them. Nor is what the ancients say improbable, that this incestuous person was a man in great esteem, and head of one party at least among them. The apostle seems to tax them with being puffed up on his account, 5:2. In the sixth chapter he blames them for their law-suits, carried on before heathen judges, when their disputes about property should have been amicably determined amongst themselves, and in the close of the chapter warns them against the sin of fornication, and urges his caution with a variety of arguments. In the seventh chapter he gives advice upon a case of conscience, which some of that church had proposed to him in an epistle, about marriage, and shows it to be appointed of God as a remedy against fornication, that the ties of it were not dissolved, though a husband or wife continued a heathen, when the other became a Christian; and, in short, that Christianity made no change in men's civil states and relations. He gives also some directions here about virgins, in answer, as is probable, to the Corinthians' enquiries. In the eighth he directs them about meats offered to idols, and cautions them against abusing their Christian liberty. From this he also takes occasion, in the ninth chapter, to expatiate a little on his own conduct upon this head of liberty. For, though he might have insisted on a maintenance from the churches where he ministered, he waived this demand, that *he might make the gospel of Christ without charge*, and did in other things comply with and suit himself to the tempers and circumstances of those among whom he laboured, for their good. In the tenth chapter he dissuades them, from the example of the Jews, against

having communion with idolaters, by eating of their sacrifices, inasmuch as they could not be at once partakers of the Lord's table and the table of devils, though they were not bound to enquire concerning meat sold in the shambles, or set before them at a feast made by unbelievers, whether it were a part of the idol-sacrifices or no, but were at liberty to eat without asking questions. In the eleventh chapter he gives direction about their habit in public worship, blames them for their gross irregularities and scandalous disorders in receiving the Lord's supper, and solemnly warns them against the abuse of so sacred an institution. In the twelfth chapter he enters on the consideration of spiritual gifts, which were poured forth in great abundance on this church, upon which they were not a little elated. He tells them, in this chapter, that all came from the same original, and were all directed to the same end. They issued from one Spirit, and were intended for the good of the church, and must be abused when they were not made to minister to this purpose. Towards the close he informs them that they were indeed valuable gifts, but he could recommend to them something far more excellent, upon which he breaks out, in the thirteenth chapter, into the commendation and characteristics of charity. And then, in the fourteenth, he directs them how to keep up decency and order in the churches in the use of their spiritual gifts, in which they seem to have been exceedingly irregular, through pride of their gifts and a vanity of showing them. The fifteenth chapter is taken up in confirming and explaining the great doctrine of the resurrection. The last chapter consists of some particular advices and salutations; and thus the epistle close.