

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OF FIRST CORINTHIANS

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The Church members in Corinth were having problems. Word had reached the Apostle Paul of various sins that were causing them to stumble in their progress toward eternal life. The epistle known as 1 Corinthians was a follow-up of a previous letter admonishing them concerning the conditions that existed among them. This previous letter has either been lost from the original New Testament or was never collected to become a part of that canon. Therefore we are left without knowledge of what Paul had previously advised. The letter we do have contains much worthwhile doctrine and counsel that if followed will also prevent members of the Church from likewise faltering along the path to exaltation in the kingdom of God.

The epistle is lengthy and includes a wide variety of subjects. This article is limited to those major problems within the middle chapters of the letter that Paul treats as stumbling blocks to the weak (see 1 Corinthians 8:9). Furthermore, since Paul addressed these problems, other stumbling blocks have surfaced in the interpretations of this letter, undoubtedly because of the loss of plain and precious truths from the original treatise. Thanks to the Prophet Joseph Smith, many of the misunderstandings of the present text have been clarified through his inspired work, now referred to as the Joseph Smith Translation.

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THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF IMMORALITY

Following a careful accreditation of himself as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 4), Paul launched into the most notorious problem in the community of Corinth. “‘To live like a Corinthian’ was . . . a phrase used both in Greek and Latin to express immorality.”¹ His counsel is full of doctrine and advice very fitting in our world, where similar moral problems abound.

The common problem of fornication had worsened in Corinth. At least one member was having an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. This grievous sin Paul recognized as beyond that of the Gentiles (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). He was further perplexed by the Church communities’ apparent lack of concern and action over the matter (see 1 Corinthians 5:2). The Joseph Smith Translation renders Paul’s decision on the matter as follows: “For verily, as absent in body but present in spirit, *I* have judged already *him who hath so done this deed*, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and *have* the Spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh” (1 Corinthians 5:3–5).²

He was declaring that when a Church court was held, the Church leaders would judge the offender as Paul was then judging if the decision was made by the Spirit. Such gross immorality meant an automatic excommunication in that day as well as today. This action was necessary for any hope of salvation for the offender (see 1 Corinthians 5:5). Some sins are so serious that the kindest thing to do is to take away Church membership and let the person get a fresh start.

Paul gave some further admonitions to the Church members. He reminded them that his previous letter had given a similar warning against association with fornicators (see 1 Corinthians 5:9). Such association cannot be totally avoided. It is a commandment of God to associate with the world, but it is not necessary to allow such association in the Church. Of course, those who are excommunicated can repent and regain more pure association (see 1 Corinthians 5:10–13).

Other Sexual Sins

Other sins of immorality were also enumerated by Paul. Adulterers, sexual abusers of children,³ and homosexuals shall not inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Corinthians 6:9–10). Although some of the Corinthian Saints had been guilty of such sins prior to their baptism, they were now

forgiven and were no longer free to indulge in such practices (see 1 Corinthians 6:11). Paul bore testimony that “all these things [immoralities] are not lawful for me, therefore I will not be brought under the power of any” (JST, 1 Corinthians 6:12). Just as Jesus taught that the truth would make people free (see John 8:32), so Paul was saying that observing the moral laws of God would keep people free from the bondage of sin. The prevalence of these types of sin in our world shows the universal relevance of Paul’s admonitions today.

Paul then presented an argument for chastity: “The body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (1 Corinthians 6:13). In support of his argument, he reasoned that a relationship with a harlot makes the two of one body. Therefore, the whole body is impure. In contrast, the unity of the body with the Spirit makes the whole body pure (see 1 Corinthians 6:16–17). Every sin committed is against *the body of Christ*; but fornication, Paul declared, is a sin against the body. Why? Because the body is the temple of the Holy Ghost, and when one is immoral, the Spirit withdraws from the body (see JST, 1 Corinthians 6:18–19; see also 3:16–17). Since men are bought by the Atonement of Christ, all men are born with the Light of Christ. Those who sin lose that inherited gift. Furthermore, the members of the Church have the Holy Ghost conferred upon them as another gift. This gift also withdraws from an impure body.

Celibacy

Another stumbling block related to immorality is the question of celibacy. One justification for this incorrect doctrine comes from 1 Corinthians 7. As this chapter is recorded in the King James Version, it appears that Paul was opposed to marriage. Much theory and speculation have resulted from this corrupted text. Again, thanks to the Prophet Joseph, greater light is shed on Paul’s views in the Joseph Smith Translation.

Paul’s declaration that “it is good for man not to touch a woman” (1 Corinthians 7:1) is clarified in the Joseph Smith Translation as a statement by the Corinthian Saints in a letter previously written to Paul. He responded to the statement in reference to the subject being addressed—fornication. Marriage would be a great deterrent to the sin. This is not to be considered the major reason for marriage, as other scriptures would confirm, but the natural consequences of marriage would satisfy innate sexual desire in mankind. As a further precaution against adultery for those

who are married, Paul advised the members to be considerate of each other in their sexual desires and aware of Satan's temptations during long abstinence. Paul wisely and carefully labeled these admonitions as his own opinion. In other words, he was speaking by way of reasoning and not by revelation.

UNBELIEVING SPOUSES

Paul next gave advice to the woman who was married to a husband who was not a Church member. He advised the woman not to leave her husband because she might be a positive influence towards his conversion. However, if the unbelieving husband chose to leave his wife, Paul advised her to let him go because she might not be able to convert him (see 1 Corinthians 7:13–16). The fourteenth verse may be misconstrued as suggesting that a good woman's conduct will somehow save her deviating husband who does not repent—an idea that could cause people to stumble. The Prophet Joseph Smith received a revelation clearing up such a possible misinterpretation:

For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; else were your children unclean, but now are they holy.

Now, in the days of the apostles the law of circumcision was had among all the Jews who believed not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it came to pass that there arose a great contention among the people concerning the law of circumcision, for the unbelieving husband was desirous that his children should be circumcised and become subject to the law of Moses, which law was fulfilled.

And it came to pass that the children, being brought up in subjection to the law of Moses, gave heed to the traditions of their fathers and believed not the gospel of Christ, wherein they became unholy.

Wherefore, for this cause the apostle wrote unto the church, giving unto them a commandment, not of the Lord, but of himself, that a believer should not be united to an unbeliever; except the law of Moses should be done away among them.

That their children might remain without circumcision; and that the tradition might be done away, which saith that little children are unholy; for it was had among the Jews.

But little children are holy, being sanctified through the atonement of Jesus Christ; and this is what the scriptures mean. (D&C 74)

Paul said that the salvation of the children is the important consideration. If the woman is able to keep her children in the faith while she is married to an unbeliever, she should remain with him in hopes that her influence might bring about his conversion. However, if the children are going astray because of the influence of their father, it was Paul's opinion that she should leave him for the sake of the children. Before those children were accountable, they were saved automatically by the Atonement, but as they became accountable, their salvation was more important than that of the husband, who was already an unbeliever. Such advice, although not a revelation, would be applicable in today's world as well.

MISSIONS AND MARRIAGE

Next, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to fulfill their callings and to abide in the Lord regardless of their marital status (see 1 Corinthians 7:20–25). Paul encouraged them not to change their marital status so they would be able to concentrate their efforts on their callings and do a better job (see 1 Corinthians 7:26–27). The Joseph Smith Translation makes this clear:

I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, I say, that it is good for a man so to be. (KJV, 1 Corinthians 7:26)

I suppose therefore that this is good for the present distress, *for a man so to remain that he may do greater good.* (JST, 1 Corinthians 7:26; emphasis added)

However, if they were married, they were not sinning, but Paul said the newlyweds would be given no special considerations, "For I spare you not" (JST, 1 Corinthians 7:28).

Having spoken in general concerning their callings, Paul now became specific concerning those who are called as missionaries, as the Joseph Smith Translation clarifies:

But this I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none;

And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not;

But I speak unto you who are called unto the ministry. For this I say, brethren, the time that remaineth is but short, that ye shall be sent forth unto the ministry. Even they who have wives, shall be as though they

and they that buy, as though they possessed not;

And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.

But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord.

But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife. (KJV, 1 Corinthians 7:29–33)

had none; *for ye are called and chosen to do the Lord's work.*

And *it shall be with them who weep, as though they wept not; and them who rejoice, as though they rejoiced not, and them who buy, as though they possessed not;*

And *them who use this world, as not using it; for the fashion of this world passeth away.*

But *I would, brethren, that ye magnify your calling.* I would have you without carefulness. *For he who is unmarried, careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord; therefore he prevaieth.*

But he *who is married, careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife; therefore there is a difference, for he is hindered.* (JST, 1 Corinthians 7:29–33; emphasis added)

The mission calling was a full-time responsibility, and those who were married would be expected to devote themselves wholly to that labor as if they were not married, thus not becoming distracted from their work (see 1 Corinthians 7:35).

Paul conceded one exception to his advice concerning the missionaries' marrying. He who had espoused a virgin, or who was engaged, should fulfill the promise of marriage before he left if it were probable that she would be beyond childbearing age before his return (see JST, 1 Corinthians 7:36). Paul added that being unmarried was better yet.

So then he that giveth *her* in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth *her* not in marriage doeth better. (KJV, 1 Corinthians 7:38; emphasis added)

So then he that giveth *himself* in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth *himself* not in marriage doeth better. (JST, 1 Corinthians 7:38; emphasis added)

Paul gave a further reminder that the woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive; following his death she may remarry but only if done in the manner of the Lord (see 1 Corinthians 7:39). In his judgment, which he felt was influenced by the Spirit, she would be happier if she waited until after his mission (see 1 Corinthians 7:40). Thus much enlightenment on Paul's views on marriage is shed through Joseph Smith's inspired work.

THE STUMBLING BLOCKS OF IDOL OFFERINGS

The Corinthian Saints had apparently asked if it were against the newly restored religion to buy and eat things that initially had been killed as sacrifice to gods of other religions. In a conference of the elders and Apostles previously held in Jerusalem, this question had been considered. The main concerns in Jerusalem seemed to be whether or not the surplus meat from these festive occasions had been properly bled (*orset*; see JST, Genesis 9:10), and over whether it had been sacrificed to other gods (see Acts 15:20, 29). Whether the question by the Corinthian Saints had been prompted by this decision or whether the decision of the Jerusalem conference was not known to them is not stated. However, Paul's reply gives some further reasoning on the decision of that conference. He gave three bits of counsel regarding the matter. Following a treatise on the danger of knowledge and the value of charity, or the love of God (see 1 Corinthians 8:1–3), Paul said that the “things which are in the world offered in sacrifice” are not affected because they were offered to a god that does not really exist since “there is none other God but one” (JST, 1 Corinthians 8:4).

Second, to those who have a true knowledge of God there is no problem. Eating meat is not against the law of God, but the danger lies in the possibility that some weak in the faith might assume that those members who eat the idol offerings are doing so as a religious act. This misinterpretation may cause the observer to be misled and worship falsely. Therefore, Paul concluded, it is wisdom that they do not follow any practice that may be a bad example to others (see 1 Corinthians 8:7–13).

Third, Paul gave instructions regarding being invited to a feast and being served meat that had possibly been sacrificed to idols. Paul advised the Saints to ask no questions but to go ahead and eat. However, if someone called it to the guests' attention, then Paul counseled them not to eat lest it be a stumbling block to the observer (see 1 Corinthians 10:27–33; note JST, v. 27). Today as the Church becomes more international, this

advice will become more appropriate. Many Church members may wonder about the propriety of eating ritually prepared foods or other special religious products. The same three guidelines given by Paul would be applicable in such situations.

THE PLURALITY OF GODS

In answering the question of meat offered as sacrifices, Paul also offered the solution to another problem raised about the doctrines of the restored Church. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is criticized for believing in a plurality of gods rather than in only one God. This criticism comes in various forms based on the critics' beliefs. The Christians who believe in the trinitarian God justify monotheism through the three-in-one concept. As Joseph Smith taught, the teachings of the New Testament are explicit about the three separate members of the Godhead. He referred to Paul's quoting of Psalm 82:6 as further evidence of the plurality of Gods (see 1 Corinthians 8:5) but also emphasized that there was "but one God—that is *pertaining to us*."⁴ That one God is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ, the administrator of this world by divine investiture of authority.⁵ The usual interpretation of Paul's comments regarding the Psalm is that he was referring to the many pagan gods. Joseph Smith refuted this explanation:

Mankind verily say that the Scriptures are with them. Search the Scriptures, for they testify of things that these apostates would gravely pronounce blasphemy. Paul, if Joseph Smith is a blasphemer, you are. I say there are Gods many and Lords many, but to us only one, and we are to be in subjection to that one, and no man can limit the bounds or the eternal existence of eternal time. Hath he beheld the eternal world, and is he authorized to say that there is only one God? He makes himself a fool if he thinks or says so, and there is an end of his career or progress in knowledge. He cannot obtain all knowledge, for he has sealed up the gate to it.⁶

The Bible is very clear on the subject of the Godhead when read under the influence of the Holy Ghost and in light of the Prophet Joseph's explanation. The philosophies of men as determined in uninspired councils have led the world to confusion.

THE APOSTLESHIP

Chapter 9 is Paul's defense of his privileges and responsibilities as an Apostle. Obviously, many of the Corinthian Saints had challenged his position (see 1 Corinthians 9:3). Is this not a stumbling block in our world as well? To those who would discredit some or all of the modern Apostles, a review of this chapter should rouse them to their senses.

Paul argued that he was free (from the bondage of the law) through the acceptance of Jesus Christ. He had seen the Lord personally (see 1 Corinthians 9:1–2). Are not latter-day Apostles special witnesses of Christ who are free from the sins of the world? Although the scriptures justified Paul and the other Apostles in being sustained monetarily for their work, Paul had not accepted such pay. Nonetheless, he had labored diligently to bring souls to salvation. What was his reward? His reward was gaining eternal salvation (see 1 Corinthians 9:4–19). Paul had become all things to all men in an attempt to save some and at the same time save himself (see 1 Corinthians 9:20–27). Do not current Apostles labor diligently, often under trying circumstances, to bring salvation to all who will listen? Through their service will they not assure, or have they not already assured, their salvation?

THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF TEMPTATION

The Apostle next warned his fellow Saints against the evils of temptation. He used the example of the Israelites, who were led by Christ in the wilderness yet yielded to sins such as idolatry, fornication, failure to recognize and worship Christ as their leader through the symbol of the serpent, and their murmuring, which allowed Satan to overcome them (see 1 Corinthians 10:1–11). These same styles of temptation are prevalent in the world today. The same formula given by Paul for avoiding these sins is applicable today. Paul said: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Modern rationalizations or excuses of being tempted beyond endurance are swept away by this scriptural injunction. The Book of Mormon gives a second witness of the validity of this formula (see Alma 13:28), and the Doctrine and Covenants adds a third (see D&C 64:20). However, man has agency and must choose to follow the Lord's "way of escape," or the formula is void and he will succumb to the devil's way.

THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF GENDER

In our own day, society has reared its ugly head in a manner apparently similar to that among the Corinthians in Paul's day. Although we have no specifics about the practices and philosophies being taught, the instructions in 1 Corinthians 11 imply that questions regarding the role of men and women had been asked, or problems had been drawn to Paul's attention (see 1 Corinthians 11:17–19). Basing the principles upon the customs of that day, Paul reminded the people of the eternal verities of the gospel plan. "The head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). This is not a dictatorship or even a democracy but a theocracy, an order of governing based on revelation and sustaining, or common consent. While the roles of men and women are separate, they are unified through Christ. "Neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:11). The position of the Church in this regard was beautifully stated by President Joseph Fielding Smith:

I think we all know that the blessings of the priesthood are not confined to men alone. These blessings are also poured out upon our wives and daughters and upon all the faithful women of the Church. These good sisters can prepare themselves, by keeping the commandments and by serving in the Church, for the blessings of the house of the Lord. The Lord offers to his daughters every spiritual gift and blessing that can be obtained by his sons, for neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man in the Lord.⁷

We should learn the role of both man and woman and submit ourselves to the Lord in those separate roles. This will overcome false notions of society, of which President Spencer W. Kimball warned: "Some people are ignorant or vicious and apparently attempting to destroy the concept of masculinity and femininity. More and more girls dress, groom, and act like men. More and more men dress, groom, and act like women. The high purposes of life are damaged and destroyed by the growing unisex theory. God made man in his own image, male and female made he them. With relatively few accidents of nature, we are born male or female. The Lord knew best. Certainly, men and women who would change their sex status will answer to their Maker."⁸

THE STUMBLING BLOCK OF THE SACRAMENT

The law of Moses was a law of ordinances and performances practiced daily to remind the Israelites of Christ (see Mosiah 13:30). The sacrament was instituted to remember the greatness and love of our Savior in bringing about the Resurrection and the Atonement. The primary purpose of meeting together, in Paul's day and our own, is to worship the Lord through partaking of the sacrament. "When ye come together therefore into one place, *is it not to eat the Lord's supper?*" (JST, 1 Corinthians 11:20; emphasis added).

The Lord has given the same commandment today: "And now, behold, I give unto you a commandment, that when ye are assembled together ye shall instruct and edify each other, that ye may know how to act and direct my church, how to act upon the points of my law and commandments, which I have given. And thus ye shall become instructed in the law of my church, and be sanctified by that which ye have received, and ye shall bind yourselves to act in all holiness before me" (D&C 43:8–9).

We bind ourselves through the covenant made in partaking of the sacrament. Through partaking of the bread, we remember the body of Christ and His Resurrection (see 1 Corinthians 11:24; see also 3 Nephi 18:6–7). Through partaking of the water, we remember the blood of Gethsemane or the Atonement (see 1 Corinthians 11:27; see also 3 Nephi 18:10–11). To partake of the sacrament requires us to be worthy. Therefore, we must reflect or examine ourselves before partaking (see 1 Corinthians 11:27–28). To partake unworthily will cause us to stumble and bring about sickness, either physical or mental, and, as Paul said, may even bring death (sleep; see 1 Corinthians 11:29–30). Such is the order revealed to the Corinthians by Paul and verified in the Book of Mormon as a second witness (see 3 Nephi 18:28–32; Mormon 9:29). The sacrament is thus either a stepping-stone or a stumbling block.

CONCLUSION

The gospel is eternal. Although customs and traditions become linked to their practice in various locations, the truths and principles of salvation are the same. The devil is always opposing the Lord's plan for bringing to pass the immortality and eternal life of man (see Moses 1:39). These temptations of Satan were called stumbling blocks by Paul since they obstruct our progress on the path to eternal life. As indicated in the above analysis, these stumbling blocks seem almost as eternal as the gospel. There are

certain things that Satan always tosses in our way. The sins are the same even if they are dressed charmingly in varied robes of deceit. However, the road signs given us by the Lord's Apostles to avoid the detours and chuck-holes are also eternal and will lead us through the rough places of the wilderness of Satan to the bosom of Christ.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Willard Robinson, *The Life of Paul* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928), 136.
2. Joseph Smith Translation quotations not available in the Latter-day Saint edition of the Bible are from Thomas A. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005).
3. As footnoted in the 1979 publication of the Bible by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Greek word translated *effeminate* in the King James Version is *catamites*. A catamite is a sexually abused young boy. This is the basis for the idea that Paul chastised sexual abusers of children.
4. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 370. This paper will not fully treat the Trinitarian concept; however, the reader should carefully study this explanation given by Joseph Smith.
5. See "The Father and the Son: Doctrinal Exposition of the First Presidency and the Twelve," quoted in James E. Talmage, *Articles of Faith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1949), appendix 2, section 11, 465–73.
6. Smith, *Teachings*, 371.
7. Joseph Fielding Smith, Conference Report, April 1970, 59; see also "Magnifying Our Callings in the Priesthood," *Improvement Era*, June 1970, 66.
8. Edward L. Kimball, *The Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1982), 278.