

the younger son, but this does not fit the tenor of the passage which, as we have seen, was in the context of the first-born. The other may also have been circumcised, once the principle had been established, and Zipporah's bitter taunt to her husband that he was to her a "husband of bloods" (plural), as she cast the evidence at his feet, may have signified that fact.

A split family

So what could the family do now? The convalescents were in no fit state to continue the journey, and the assumption must be that it was at this point that Moses sent Zipporah home to Midian, for she and her two sons do not feature again in the Divine record until the children of Israel had been brought out of Egypt and were encamped near the mountain of God. Jethro had received them and taken care of them until he sent the message that he was coming to Moses and bringing with him his wife and her two sons (Ex. 18:2-5).

Out of all the uncertainties in the narrative concerning the incident at the lodging place, and

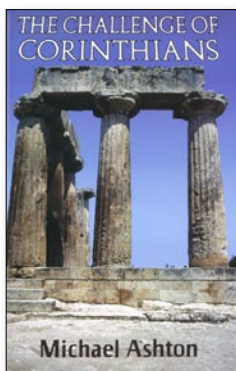
the possible explanations of it (of which what has been set out in this article is but one), some of the details are incontrovertible fact. The first is that the covenants God makes are inviolate and cannot be ignored, or bent, or broken. They were for all generations of the children of Israel. The second is that Moses had been weak in the face of his wife's objections to the circumcision of their two sons. And the third is that Zipporah was driven to the extreme before she would relent. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3, AV). The outcome was that Moses was relieved of further family distractions as she went back to her kith and kin, and he went forward to be helped and supported by those of his own flesh and blood in the great struggle with the forces of darkness in Egypt, even a "darkness that can be felt". He himself had left a prince, learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and mighty in words and deeds (Acts 7:22). He was to return a pauper, but with the wisdom and power of God in his hands.

(To be continued)

Two-part review

Bible letters for today (1)

John Nicholls



The Challenge of Corinthians, Michael Ashton.

248 pages. Illustrated with pictures, maps, charts and tables.

Price: £10 plus postage and packing.

Available from The Christadelphian, 404 Shaftmoor Lane, Birmingham, B28 8SZ, or www.thechristadelphian.com/bookshop.

THE SERIES of articles by Brother Michael Ashton on the two letters to the Corinthians, published in the *Christadelphian* several years ago, has now been revised and enlarged and published as a book. In many ways this book is

highly relevant to the Brotherhood today, for so many of the problems facing Corinth nearly 2,000 years ago are facing the Brotherhood now. In his preface to the book Brother Ashton writes:

"The liberty of the Corinthians who lived in those far-off days was of the same stamp as that which is valued by modern society—the freedom to choose, the freedom to indulge in self-gratification, the freedom to express individuality. The effect of the teachings of the gospel upon this worldly and self-centred society was bound to create tensions, and the apostle's measured and sound advice, based often on the Old Testament scriptures, was designed to help individuals from many different backgrounds draw together to serve their new Master".

The only other complete exposition of the Letters to Corinth in the Brotherhood was written some forty-six years ago by Brother Fred Barling,

and much has happened in the ecclesial world since then. There have been changes in society that have had their impact on the meetings, and abroad the Truth has been taught in many new places, bringing both opportunities and also new problems. Brother Barling's fine book has been a most helpful work to the reviewer, and no doubt to many others, setting out the principles of understanding and expounding the two letters. From the pen of Brother Ron Abel, verse-by-verse expositions of 1 Corinthians 9–13 and 2 Corinthians 1–5 have been available for some years, and of course Brother Thomas wrote *Anastasis*, a treatise on the resurrection of the dead that expounds much of 1 Corinthians 15. Brother Ashton's balanced and careful exposition is therefore very welcome for a new generation of brethren and sisters who need the counsel of the Apostle Paul in this 'Corinthian' age in which we are living.

Background and summary

The first chapter of the book deals with the background geography and history of Corinth, and the reviewer does not remember seeing this material in the magazine articles. There are maps and photos to make this a most useful resource, but most interesting here are the author's comments about the "landmark decision" of the proconsul Gallio and his summary dismissal of the case against Paul (Acts 18:12-17).

Chapter 2, entitled "Paul's contact with Corinth", is an introduction to the two letters and their links with all the other communications between Paul and the ecclesia. Those studying Corinthians for the first time should read this chapter more than once, for it pieces together all the visits Paul made to the ecclesia and the letters exchanged between them. There is a useful summary box at the end, and more maps.

The overview in chapter 3 is also very helpful, with an analysis of 1 Corinthians. In the course of this chapter Brother Ashton lists ten problems the ecclesia had written to Paul about, and poses a question to the reader:

"How would you grade these ten problems? Which would head your list as the one most urgently in need of resolution? Would you tackle first of all the case of the man who had taken his father's wife? Or the misunderstandings about the doctrine of the resurrection? Or the chaos at the breaking of bread?"

He goes on to say:

"Paul considered subjects that were not in their letter much more in need of serious attention . . . we can be guided by the Apostle Paul in

setting priorities as problems arise that we have to face" (p. 22).

The issues of the discord in the ecclesia and the case of the incestuous man were in fact dealt with by Paul before he turns to any of the questions that the Corinthians had written to him about (1 Cor. 7:1).

The power of the Word, not worldly wisdom

The message of the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians is that no flesh should glory in God's presence, and that human wisdom is invariably wrong, especially in ecclesial matters. Brother Ashton makes the point powerfully:

"The Corinthians only had to look at the apostle's example. He was not a great philosophical orator; he did not appear in a dazzling display of riches or finery. He arrived in Corinth on his own after his brush with the Jews of Thessalonica and the philosophers in Athens! He was of unprepossessing appearance (2 Corinthians 10:10), and may have been suffering from the recurring weakness which was his constant reminder that he must not 'be exalted above measure' (2 Corinthians 12:7, cp. Galatians 4:14). And he came with a simple message—'Christ crucified'. The ecclesia in Corinth . . . was not founded on a silken-tongued message whose effect would soon disappear like froth blown by the wind. They were introduced to 'the power of God', and beside that all human pretence swiftly fades.

"Imagine the scene as these words were first read aloud to the assembled ecclesia in Corinth. All who had proudly stated their allegiance to one faction or another must have hung their heads in shame as the truth of the argument gradually sank in. Paul led them once again to consider Jesus. He is our wisdom, for the only true wisdom is the message he brought. Through him only can men and women be counted righteous; they are set apart in him, and he is their redeemer (1 Corinthians 1:30)" (pp. 33,34).

Sin and fellowship

In his seventh and eighth chapters Brother Ashton writes about the incestuous brother and the withdrawal of fellowship from him. Sadly, sexual weaknesses and sins are always with ecclesias, and how to deal with them rightly exercises many a meeting, with much sorrow and argument. After discussing the background of the Corinthian case, Brother Michael writes, "But whatever circumstances were involved, the problem was that an

Dennis Sharman



Ruins of the sixth-century-B.C. Temple of Apollo at Corinth, restored by the Romans in 44 B.C.

obviously sinful act was not troubling the ecclesia. Even more seriously, there was an element of pride in the situation" (p. 49). He shows that Paul's command to put away that wicked person was based on the provisions of the Law, and then says, "Only after talking about the process that was intended to encourage the brother to repent of his sin does the apostle turn to its effect on the ecclesia: 'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?'" (p. 51).

The main thrust of Paul's counsel was that the sinful brother should turn from his wrong ways and be restored to fellowship again, as indeed proved to be the eventual outcome of this case. Brother Ashton argues that, instead of turning to withdrawal of fellowship as the last stage of all efforts to win back erring brothers and sisters, it should, in some cases, be used early on to deny the benefits of fellowship so that a return is sought on right principles, and both the individual and the ecclesia "Purge out . . . the old leaven" (5:7).

These chapters of the book and the relevant passage in Corinthians should be read and re-read by any individuals or ecclesias stricken with similar problems, as Brother Ashton's words are balanced and weighed carefully. As he writes: "Carried out in the right spirit and for the right objective, withdrawal of fellowship is a loving act to be undertaken by an ecclesia" (p. 60). The concluding thoughts of the author, on page 63, present to us the benefits, to both an erring individual and his or her ecclesia, of dealing faithfully with problems caused by sin.

Chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians concerns two issues: going to law against our brother in Christ, and the sexual immorality which was prevalent in first-century Corinthian society, as it is in our own society today. Brother Ashton takes the view that the angels to be judged by the saints (v. 3) are Gentile rulers, but whether this is correct or not, the immortalised saints will be in charge of all kingdoms, and it is imperative that now, in the time of our probation, disputes should be settled in the spirit of Christ as our training for much greater authority in the age to come. The great example of the young man Joseph in running away from Potiphar's wife's enticements is cited in connection with the prevalent sexual immorality: "fleeing from temptation must become habitual. Unless this attitude is a daily practice, a moment of weakness or a particularly strong temptation will result in disaster" (pp. 68-69).

Marriage questions

1 Corinthians 7 is the first of Paul's replies to the written questions made by the ecclesia. Brother Ashton writes, "Against the background of rampant immorality in Corinth, it is understandable that a view had developed in the ecclesia that 'It is good for a man not to touch a woman' (1 Corinthians 7:1)" (p. 72). Paul was fully aware of the human need for companionship, and the chapter shows that faithfulness in marriage was a thing to be desired in immoral Corinth. Brother Ashton suggests that it is unlikely that Paul never married, as membership of the Sanhedrin was open

only to those who were married, and so he could have been a widower, or perhaps his wife left him when he put on Christ. Though several times Paul points out the benefits of being single, as he was at that time, nevertheless he recognised that not everyone would be able to be like him, or would wish to be like him.

The apostle addresses the problem of those new to the Truth whose spouses had not accepted it with them. If the unbelieving spouse was happy to remain in the marriage, then the believing spouse should remain and make no attempt to break the marriage bond. The children would benefit from this position, as they could learn about the Truth from their believing parent. But if the unbelieving spouse broke the marriage and departed, then the believing partner was not under bondage in such a case. There is much more in chapters 10 and 11, and the reader will benefit from the author's careful discussion of what the apostle says.

Meat offered to idols

1 Corinthians 8–10 is devoted in the main to the problem of meats offered to idols, a problem which at first sight does not concern us in the twenty-first century. But, as always, the expositions made by Paul from the Old Testament are so powerful and helpful that we cannot but benefit from studying these chapters. Here we have the unity of the Godhead endorsed, the separateness of His Son, the great exhortation from the athlete, and the example of Israel in the wilderness as we too struggle in the twenty-first century wilderness (Rev. 17:3). In his closing comments on these three chapters, the author says:

"We should be deceiving ourselves if we thought these chapters do not apply to modern disciples . . . the issue was more to do with a believer's association with the world than strictly about idol worship or what to do about meat offered to idols . . . Before engaging in any activity in the world, it is worth asking the following questions, which are all derived from Paul's teaching:

- can I offer thanks beforehand, and thus commit what I am doing to God? (Romans 14:6)
- will it be edifying? (1 Corinthians 8:1)
- will it cause my brother or sister to stumble? (8:11)
- can I do it to the glory of God? (10:31)
- can I share it with my brethren and sisters as an act of fellowship? (10:21)

- would I do it if the Lord Jesus was with me?" (pp. 93,94).

Head coverings

Brother Ashton devotes two chapters to 1 Corinthians 11, one on headship and head-coverings, and the other on the breaking of bread. As today, there was a sort of feminist movement in first-century Corinth, and the head-coverings worn by respectable Jewish and Greek women were being discarded. The subject is treated very faithfully by the author, and we all have to recognise that the wearing of head-coverings by sisters during prayer and worship, and the bareheadedness of brothers, is based on foundation teachings in Genesis and not on any passing human customs. It seems to the reviewer that the older sisters among us should be setting a good example here, as they should have a clear understanding of the principles set forth by the apostle; but, sadly, they do not always do so. This section should be read and read again by all ecclesias troubled as to what course they should follow about head-coverings. The concluding summary table on page 102 is very helpful.

The breaking of bread

And so Paul came to the breaking of bread (1 Cor. 11:17-34). In those days the breaking of bread formed part of a larger meal, which Jude calls a "love-feast" (Jude v. 12, RV). The bad practices mentioned in Corinthians spoiled the Lord's Supper. Brother Michael concludes another interesting chapter with these observations:

"Paul's response to the riotous behaviour at the breaking of bread was threefold:

1. To give the remembrance its original character and emphasis, as defined by the Lord's words.
2. Each brother and sister should attend only after carefully considering their relationship to the sacrifice that is symbolised by bread and wine.
3. The meal itself should be regarded as wholly symbolic. Anything more than this would be likely to detract from its true significance" (p. 109).

Paul writes about other subjects in this first letter, and also in the second letter, which is of a very different kind. The way that Brother Ashton expounds these things will be the substance of the second part of this review next month, God willing.

[\(To be concluded\)](#)