



COMMENTARIES ON “I CORINTHIANS”

Chapter 16

1 Corinthians 16 opens with St. Paul mentioning a financial collection that he is arranging among various churches to help the poverty-stricken Christians in Jerusalem (16:1, 3; see Acts 11:29; Romans 15:25). He advises the Corinthian Christians to set aside a small amount of money at the beginning of each week - meaning Sunday - so that there will not need to be a big fund-raising drive after St. Paul arrives in Corinth (16:2). Fr. Lawrence Farley notes the significance of collecting the money before the apostle arrives in Corinth:

This is important, for the apostle does not mean this offering to appear to be one of hasty compulsion or to be a result of emotional impulse giving. Rather, it is intended as a calmly decided part of their ongoing discipleship to the Lord, their Sunday offering of worship.

In order to prevent anyone from believing that he was raising the money in order to keep it, St. Paul suggests that the Corinthians select a person they trust in the Corinthian church to take the money to Jerusalem (16:3).

St. Paul then briefly outlines for the Corinthians his travel plans. He will be traveling to them through Macedonia (16:5), but plans to stay in Ephesus until Pentecost (16:8). His reason for staying in Ephesus is that he has a tremendous opportunity for evangelism there, even though he also faces many people who oppose his work (16:9). When he does finally arrive in Corinth, he intends to spend a significant amount of time in the city (he mentions staying for the winter) (16:7). His reason for staying awhile in Corinth can be seen from the previous chapters in the book: after writing to the Corinthians about a number of serious problems, he does not want to simply pass through the city, but instead wants to spend time with the church and help them with their situation.

The apostle then instructs the Corinthians that, if St. Timothy should come before he has arrived in Corinth, they should receive him peacefully and honorably, and then send him on to where St. Paul is staying (16:10-11). Ambrosiaster explains the reasoning behind these instructions:

Although Timothy was preaching what he had learned from Paul and was a gifted evangelist, the apostle commends him since he did not have the same authority. Paul was afraid that Timothy might not be received as he deserved by dissidents in the church, that they would create a fuss, that Timothy would be afraid and that his coming would do nothing for their salvation.

Ambrosiaster states that the problem of dissidents in the church in Corinth was also the reason why Apollos refused to visit the city (16:12). Despite Apollos' being the bishop of Corinth, Didymus the Blind adds, he refused to return to the city until the divisions were healed.

St. Paul follows this with an exhortation to “watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong” (16:13). The encouragement to be watchful can have two meanings: it can mean to remain vigilant against the impulses toward sin against which St. Paul has warned throughout the book (see 15:34), and it can also refer to being watchful for the Second Coming of Christ (see 15:51-52). The two meanings are not contradictory: part of being watchful for Christ’s coming involves watching our thoughts and actions - in other words, it involves standing fast in the faith. At the same time, being brave and strong is holding to the faith isn’t enough: you must also do these things with love (16:14).

The apostle then tells the Corinthians to submit themselves to the household of Stephanus, who have devoted themselves to ministry (16:15-16). We know that Stephanus and his household were baptized by St. Paul (1:16), and his referring to them as the firstfruits of Achaia (the province in which Corinth was located) indicates that they were the first - or at least among the first - Christian converts in the region. The Corinthians are likewise encouraged to submit themselves to all the people who labor with St. Paul - not merely St. Timothy and Stephanus (16:16): this is a significant command for a group that was prone to splitting into rival factions.

Little is known about Fortunatus and Achaicus (16:17); many scholars agree with Theodoret of Cyr in saying that they were the ones who brought St. Paul’s epistle to Corinth. Ss. Aquila and Priscilla were highly influential people in the early church (16:19): they discipled Apollos in Ephesus, and St. Aquila later served as a bishop in the city with St. Timothy.

St. Paul’s exhortation to “greet one another with a holy kiss” (16:20) is a common ending to his epistles (see Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26). This also refers to a moment in the Liturgy when Christians gave each other a ritual kiss as a sign of unity.

Verse 22 is closely related to the encouragement to stand fast in the faith (16:13): those who love Jesus will stand fast in the faith, and therefore - contrary to the Corinthians’ acceptance of a wide variety of sinful practices - those who do not stand fast in the faith demonstrate that they do not love Jesus, and thus are no longer part of the body of Christ. This is significant because, as he points out in 15:33, Christians should avoid those who will lead them away from the faith.

As he does in other epistles, he closes by praying that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with his readers (16:23). He then adds that his own love is with them in Christ (16:24). Ambrosiaster explains the significance of this concluding statement:

Because the Corinthians did not love one another, Paul gives them this teaching from himself, in order that they might learn to love each other with the same love with which they were loved by the apostle, not with carnal emotion but in Christ Jesus.