

THE LETTERS OF ST. PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS – PART II

LIVING AS MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

I. The Introduction in the first nine verses expresses the themes of the call to holiness, the unity in Jesus Christ, true wisdom and gifts of God, and the looking forward to the end of all things.

A. The greeting is in the past tense, the thanksgiving in the present and conclusion in the future tense.

B. St. Paul identifies his authority as coming directly from God and addresses the letter to the community in the context of their call by God to nothing less than holiness.

1. Sosthenes was apparently the former synagogue official who has been beaten because of the faith. See Acts 18:17. There may be a subtle reminder of the fact that authority in the Church is based upon union with Christ, which involves suffering.

2. St. Paul speaks of them as called as a church, not simply individually, and the church is called together by Jesus and none other. Chapters 1 through 4 will deal criticize the party divisions that tear apart the Church and associate people with human wisdom or preaching.

2. Right from the beginning, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are a church called by God and that they are called to nothing less than holiness by the power of Christ. Chapters 5 through bring out this life of holiness in different ways and describe the unity with Jesus that the liturgy should bring about.

C. As is common, St. Paul continues with a thanksgiving, emphasizing a more positive note.

1. He speaks of the gifts and knowledge given to the Corinthians by God in Christ Jesus. There is something of an irony here because St. Paul will soon warn the Corinthians that the wisdom of the world that they seek is not divine wisdom. See 1 Cor. 1:18-2:16.

2. Later on, he will speak of the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ, with all gifts working together under the Spirit. See 1 Cor. 12-14.

D. The letter then turns toward the future, speaking of the day of the Lord that will come, and reminding them that it is the Lord Jesus Christ who keeps us firm and irreproachable until that day. Chapter 15 will especially deal with the resurrection that is the goal of the Christian life.

- The day of the Lord was described in the Old Testament as one of great trials and distress, but one that would lead to a new and glorious order. See, e.g., Joel 3:3-6; Amos 5:18-27; see also 2 Cor. 1:14; 1 Thess. 5:12.

II. The letter then gives a sharp critique of the dependence on parties and human wisdom in the Church.

A. St. Paul speaks of various factions that had arisen within the Church and condemns all such divisions.

1. St. Paul was the great missionary, Apollos the magnificent speaker, see Acts 18:24-19:1, 1 Cor. 3:6 and St. Peter the institutional head. Perhaps those who said they belonged to Christ were implying that they had special access to Jesus.

2. There is a call for agreement and avoiding dissensions. St. Paul will later recognize diversity with regard to gifts and styles (e.g., whether to hold one day more important than another), but on essential matters there should be agreement. Cf. John 17.

3. St. Paul asks three rhetorical questions: (1) whether Christ was divided; (2) was Paul crucified for them; and (3) whether they were baptized in the name of Paul. In themselves, the questions are rhetorical and lead to the obvious answer of no.

- However, in asking them, St. Paul is emphasizing: the unity of the Church in Christ; (2) the salvation through Christ's crucifixion; and (3) and the relationship established through invoking the name of Christ.

4. The letter will address these three issues. In chapters 2 through 4, St. Paul will answer the middle issue, i.e. how we are saved. The answer will be, not with human wisdom or the leadership of any one person, but through Jesus. Chapters 3 and 4 will then describe how leadership is exercised, pointing back to Jesus. Chapters 5 through 10 will describe that relationship signified by the name of Jesus. And chapters 11 through 14 will discuss the unity within the Church that is the Body of Christ, responding to the first question.

B. Associating the factional spirit with dependence upon human wisdom, St. Paul then discourse on the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of the Cross.

1. He quotes from Isaiah's prophecy that God would make the wisdom of this world foolish in its attempt to hide from Him. That time of overturning the wisdom of the wise would be a prelude for a glorious restoration. See Is. 29:11- 24.

2. Here the Cross become the dividing line between those "who are perishing," i.e. those whose trust is in this world, and those who are being saved. To one whose trust is in this world, the Cross makes no sense.

3. The letter sets the "folly of the Cross" in contrast with the wisdom of the Greeks and the signs of the Jews.

- The Greeks elements would have been proud of the philosophical background of the area, and the learning that they had gained. They would want a faith that was fully in accord with their reason. For this reason many Athenians either scoffed at St. Paul or deferred consideration of the faith. See Acts 17:16-34.

- The signs that the Jews wanted could mean miracles, see, e.g., Matt. 12:38-42; Mark 16:17; John 2:11, 4:54, or the overall reward of the just and punishment of sinners, see Ex. 10:1-2; Num 14:22.

- The Cross requires a faith that is beyond human reason and the desire for earthly rewards. It was a regular refrain of the Gospels that Jesus' message often appealed more to the lowly than to the powerful and the wise. See, e.g., Matt. 11:25-27, 18:1-5; Luke 10:21-22.

4. However, St. Paul does consider reasoning to be valid, and reasons with the people to argue against the reason of this world.

- First, he points out that the faith has spread rapidly mostly without those whom the world would consider great, and their own community does not compete with the world on this basis.

- Second, he points out that he himself did not persuade by worldly arguments. He calls for them to remember the original appeal of the Gospel.

- St. Paul does point out that there is a deeper wisdom that is mysterious but that the Spirit reveals to us. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament likewise speaks of Wisdom as there at the creation of the world, and leading people back to that primordial order and to friendship with God. See, e.g., Prov. 1:20-31, 8:1-9:12; Wis. 7:13-9:18; Sir. 4:11-19.

- In this context, St. Paul quotes Isaiah's praise of God's glorious works for His people. See Is. 64:3. But Isaiah was commenting on the

sinfulness of the people in general and the resulting destruction that came from it. St. Paul is arguing that the people of this world are sinful in God's eyes, and thus the wisdom of this world cannot in the end save us from destruction.

- St. Paul indicates in this context that it is folly to think that one can reduce the mind of God to human terms, or subject the gospel of God to human demands, referring back to the wisdom literature and the prophets of the Old Testament. See Wis. 9:17; Is. 40:13.

- St. Paul points out to the Corinthians (and by extension to all the faithful) that they should not let the world judge them, for they are to judge the world.

5. St. Paul concludes this section by saying that people who think in terms of worldly glory are fleshly and infants in the ways of God, although they may think they are more advanced.

C. St. Paul then directly attacks the whole idea of factions named after individuals on the grounds that they were only working for one who gave them all their gifts.

1. The emphasis is that he, Apollos, St. Peter, and presumably anyone else that the people are associating themselves with are all simply servants of Christ, and work together.

2. He begins with two images, that of the Church as the field of God and as the building of God.

- Isaiah had described Israel as the vineyard of the Lord, although in rather negative terms. See Is. 15:1-7. And Jesus likewise, described God's blessings as a vineyard, now given out to other tenants. See Matt. 21:33-42. The prophets sometimes spoke of the new kingdom as a glorious and fruitful land. See, e.g., Is. 65:21-25; Ez. 36:8-11, 47; Hos. 14:6-8; Joel 4:18.

- Here, the image is of a glorious vineyard, now claimed from wilderness to cultivation to be as pleasing as wine to God. He is merely a worker in the vineyard.

- The second, more extensive image is that of the people as a building of God, with different rooms, and different roles in building, but the one grand architect. The reference may be from Psalm 118, which said that the stone rejected by the builder would become the cornerstone. That Psalm warns against trusting in worldly powers, and calls for a complete trust in God. Jesus would take up the line about the cornerstone and apply it to himself. See Matt. 21:42; see also Acts 4:11; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:5-7.

- In verses 16 and 17, he takes the image of building even further to describe the church in Corinth as the temple of God. The temple was the place where God's glory dwelt, and the implication is that the glory of God dwells within them, making them and everything they do sacred. Here, the reference is to the community in general. Later, each person will be described as a temple of the Holy Spirit. See 1 Cor. 6:19.

- St. Paul then describes each person's work as built upon that foundation of Jesus, some work more permanent than others. The solid work leads directly to salvation; the imperfect work, but still united with Jesus leads to salvation but "as through fire," a possible reference to purgatory. Here again, St. Paul refers to the eschatological notion of a final and glorious day of the Lord that will bring fire to test all things in the light of true and eternal wisdom. See Is. 26:11; Dan. 7:9-11; Mal. 3:1-3.

3. St. Paul then gets back to the theme of God's wisdom putting human wisdom to shame by reference to the first speech of Job's friends in the Book of Job and Psalm 94, both of which speak of God's providence, but in the context of the seeming triumph of the powers of the world. See Job 5:13; Ps. 94:11. Both references are probably meant to show that, even in Old Testament wisdom literature, human wisdom came up lacking in the eternal plan of God.

D. St. Paul then more specifically describes his own ministry and the folly of making it the center of attention.

1. He first points out that he is simply a steward and cannot himself know whether he will succeed or fail.

- St. Paul is cautioning against any hero worship, assuming another person is without fault. There is much hidden that we simply cannot know, and it is folly to put final trust in any one human leader.

- Once again he speaks of a day when all will be known, but we should not try to anticipate it now.

2. St. Paul then points out that all human glory comes from another, and finally (if good) from God, and thus no person should boast of it.

- He says that they are being satisfied with the paltry glory of this earth, acting as kings, when in fact the great kingdom awaits them. He will say in chapter 6 that they will judge angels. Jesus said that those who are faithful to Him will receive great estates and be in charge of cities, images of a greater glory than any on this earth. See Matt. 25:21-23; Mark 10:29-31; Luke 19:11-27.

3. St. Paul then points out that his authority has led to less in the eyes of the world, becoming a spectacle to the world. The implication is that they should not judge greatness by human standards.

4. St. Paul concludes this section with an image of himself as a father trying to guide children back by love in opposition to mere rhetoricians trying to impress.

- The reference to guardians (paidagogos) is a boy leader, a more senior student in charge of others; the implication is that their leaders in Corinth (many of whom may have been leading these factions) are themselves not adults in the faith either, but still deserve respect.

- He contrasts the family image with empty talk that has not the power of God. The contrast between speech and power would resonate particularly in an area that heavily valued rhetorical skills.

III. St. Paul then turns to issues of morality and marriage in the context of glorifying God, avoiding either laxity or excessive rigorism.

A. Chapters 5 and 6 describe at length condemnations of both sexual immorality and bringing lawsuits against fellow Christians before unbelievers, with the message that a moral life is needed for salvation.

1. Here as elsewhere, St. Paul combines two seemingly unrelated topics in an effort to draw a connection between them. The two issues here are sexual morality and unity in the community, the vices against them being immorality and lawsuits between Christians. There are several possible connections including:

- Both vices offend against the body, in one case the physical and future risen body of the person, and in the other case the body of Christ that is the Church.

- On a related point, both vices make the faith look worse before unbelievers.

- Both vices also ignore the future glory to which we are called.

- And St. Paul may use those vices as examples because they were particularly common in Corinth, being a political center.

2. Chapter 5 condemns sexual immorality, including an infamous case of incest that the Christians seem to be tolerating.

- St. Paul calls for the offending to be "delivered to Satan for the destruction of his flesh" paradoxically for his salvation. St. Paul probably means that the community is to send him out that he may repent. Cf. Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Tim. 1:20. Or it could mean imposing some physical discipline. Whatever the meaning, the punishment seems to have worked to bring about repentance. See 2 Cor. 2:5-11.

- The analogy to the offender as leaven that affects the whole loaf refers to the unleavened bread that was used in the Passover and the accompanying seven day Feast of Unleavened Bread. See, e.g., Ex. 12:15-20; Duet. 16:3-4. Any leaven would make the bread and the household consuming it unfit. The implication is that the whole community is a sacrificial offering for God and should be pure for him.

- Verse 11 makes it clear that such scandals and the need for discipline apply not only to vices against purity, but to a range of destructive sins.

- But, apparently in response to a misunderstanding from a previous letter of his, St. Paul emphasizes that Christians do not need to refrain from all dealings with sinful people, for that would mean to take them out of the world altogether. See John 17:15. There is a difference between dealing with someone as a matter of practical affairs and calling another person a brother in the faith.

3. The first 9 verses of chapter 16 then criticize lawsuits against other Christians.

- Here again the Christians are called "holy ones" or saints; we are called to a life of holiness and should see each other as potential saints.

- St. Paul points out again that we are preparing for great authority, including judging all the world. Cf. Matt. 19:28-30; Dan. 7:22; Wis. 3:8. The implication is that we should be preparing for that day by exercising right judgment even now.

- As an additional argument, St. Paul says that it would be better to endure injustice than to injure each other in lawsuits.

4. In verses 9 through 11, St. Paul emphasizes that violations of moral law generally will keep one from the kingdom of God.

- He seems to make this point for at least two reasons. First, St. Paul is emphasizing that we do not need to punish all offenses against us, for God will also inflict justice; and thus if one does not receive justice through a lawsuit, God will make it right. Second, he is

applying the principles of morality generally, saying that a moral life is necessary to inherit the kingdom of God.

- There is a reminder of the potential for forgiveness as St. Paul says that some current Christians were in the immoral classes.

5. Verses 12 through 20 then refute the argument that what one does with the body is irrelevant, or that desire can be satisfied without consequence.

- First, he responds to the argument, which some had apparently raised, that all things are created good, and thus there should not be a law against them. St. Paul points out, as he does in Romans, that some things are wrong because they enslave the soul, including here lust. See Romans 6.

- Second, he responds to two arguments at once: (1) the argument that, as the desire for food and drink were meant to be satisfied, so too sexual desire should be satisfied; and (2) since the body will be destroyed anyway, it does not matter what we do with the body. St. Paul argues that: (1) the body was given to us by God that we may serve Him, as the Lord used His body to serve us; and (2) as Christ was raised from the dead, so too our bodies will be raised, and therefore are very important.

- St. Paul then argues that (whether a person intends it or not) sexual activity joins one person to another, citing the creation accounts of Genesis. And, through the faith, we are also joined to Christ. St. Paul points out the grossness of immorality being joined to Jesus.

- In verse 18, St. Paul points out that sexual sins offend against the body itself, which during life is connected to the very self for the use this precious gift for base purposes.

- In verse 19, St. Paul argues that the body is also a "temple of the Holy Spirit." The implication is that each person is meant to be the dwelling place of the glory of God, as the Temple of old was, and thus worthy of the greatest respect. (The Temple was still standing at the time of the letter, although its centerpiece, the Ark of the Covenant, had been lost 650 years earlier.)

- Finally, in verse 20, St. Paul reminds the Corinthians that Jesus purchased their salvation at the price of His own death on the Cross, and that thus that they should glorify God out of gratitude and reverence, and not waste their life and body on passions.

B. Chapter 7 then deals with marriage and celibacy. St. Paul here defends celibacy as a great offering to God, but marriage as holy as well.

1. There would be some people who said that married couples should not have intercourse on the grounds that it was evil or too worldly. Being unmarried was also sometimes popular, not for service of others, but rather out of a rejection of the world, or marriage, as unworthy of one. St. Paul wishes to refute these ideas.

2. St. Paul points out that, in marriage, a husband and wife give even their bodies to each other, the height of generosity in reserving nothing for themselves.

- He says that, as such and because of the potential for temptation otherwise, conjugal relations are good in their rightful context.

3. In general, St. Paul upholds the permanence of marriage, saying that even if the marriage is to an unbeliever, one is still obligated, and can in fact bring the other person to the faith. (Church history is filled with examples, such as those of Saint Cecelia, Saint Monica, Saint Clotilda of France, Ignathus of Spain, and Bertha of Kent, who converted their husbands and often through them whole peoples to the faith.)

- However, he does say that, if the unbeliever will not live with the believing spouse, the spouse may remarry.

4. Verses 17 through 24 emphasize the fact that one's social status is not as important as one's faith, and thus the emphasis should be on holiness of life, not change in state.

- Slavery is here accepted as a condition in the world as it was. But verses 22 and 23 make clear the equality of all people, and the fact that slavery should be avoided if possible, for Christ by His blood purchased our freedom from sin and death.

5. The remainder of the chapter praises celibacy for the sake of being free to serve the Lord, but not for a rejection of the world or selfish desires.

- However, St. Paul makes clear that marriage is perfectly moral and decent and that celibacy should not be taken on unless God calls one. Cf. Matt. 19:10-11.

- St. Paul says in verse 29 that time is running out, and follows that statement up with advice to focus on eternal things, rather than on earthly ones. He could have been referring to life itself as only for a brief time. Or he could mean that the time of peace before

persecutions is ending.

6. Verses 36 to 38 appear to refer to situations in which a man and woman had determined to have only a spiritual marriage and not formally to marry, or perhaps even to marry and not have conjugal relations. St. Paul approves of this arrangement, assuming that it is voluntary, but also says there is no sin to marry.