

The Greek city of Corinth had been utterly destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., and a new Roman colony was built there about a century later. In time, it was the least Roman of the Roman, for people settled there from many nations: Latins, Greeks, Syrians, Asiatics, Egyptians, and Jews, making it not only the least Roman, but also the least Greek of the Greek cities.

Strategically located on the narrow peninsula that join the Peloponnesus to the rest of Greece, it became very rich. It was also intellectually alert and morally corrupt. It was a very important place, and the inhabitants knew it. They were very individualistic and ready to indulge their desires. The Corinthian man recognized no superior and no law except his own desires. It was to this city that Paul and his companions brought the Gospel. It was there he met and stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, who had been expelled from Rome with other Jews by Emperor Claudius. It appears that Paul’s ministry was very successful among the pagans and great numbers of them came to Christ, but there was only a tiny response among the Corinthian Jews.

The occasion for this epistle was a letter that Paul had received from someone in Corinth. Things were not well at Corinth. There were cliques in the church. There was a moral scandal. There was pride and pretentiousness. Some were mistaken about the resurrection. There were contentions about marriage and celibacy; about food offered to idols, about public worship and spiritual gifts. The sins of the city at large had great influence in the church. There was a quarrelsome spirit. Some of the vain and restless people who troubled the church there even dared to call the authority of the Apostle Paul into question.

It is a magnificent letter. Although written for particular concerns about particular needs and faults in the Corinthian church, yet it deals with issues that have concerned the church in all times and in all places. It is very relevant for our time, especially in the United States in the 21st century, for we are very much Corinthian in our attitudes and failures. We are very rich, very independent, very indulgent of our desires and our sins. But let us look at the words.

Vs. 1. Paul affirmation of the authority granted to him by the will of God. No one can call himself as an Apostle of Jesus Christ. There are no apostles today, for their work has been concluded as witnesses of the truth concerning the life and teaching of Christ. The foundation of the church has been laid in accordance to the words of Scripture: the church is built upon the apostles and prophets, Christ Himself the cornerstone. This means their doctrine, and the church is bound to hear and obey the apostles who were sent forth by Christ Himself. Their doctrine stands in all ages. Paul adds the name of Sosthenes, his companion, for he had been the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, but was now a brother in the faith. The Corinthians would know him with affection and esteem.

Vs. 2, 3. We are sanctified because of our union with Christ; a union that is the work of the Triune God: set apart in the eternal decree of the Father; sanctified in the obedience, especially the sufferings on the Cross, of the Son; and sanctified by the calling and effectual work of the Holy Spirit in uniting us to Jesus Christ by faith. We are called to be separated unto God, and Paul sets one of his themes here, for one of the failings of the church at Corinth was their failure to put off the old lifestyles of the Corinthians, and put on the new man, Jesus Christ. But even with all their failures, he gives them the name of church, and obviously holds them in great regard and affection. Calvin says:

“This is a passage that ought to be carefully observed, that we may not require that the Church, while in this world, should be free from every wrinkle and stain, or forthwith pronounce unworthy of such a title every society in which everything is not as we would wish it. For it is a dangerous temptation to think that there is no church at all where perfect purity is not to be seen. For the man that is prepossessed with this notion, must ne-

cessity in the end withdraw from all others, and look upon himself as the only saint in the world, or set up a peculiar sect in company with a few hypocrites.

Vs. 3 is Paul’s ordinary greeting, uniting the names of the Father and the Son, and recognizing God as the fountain of grace and peace.

Vs. 4. Why could Paul show this thanks? Because the signs of the Gospel were practiced among them. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were observed. There was regular preaching of the gospel. They named the name of Christ and called Him Lord. These were all gifts of the grace of God. Paul was not flattering them, but recognizing that with all their faults, some of the gifts of God’s grace were found among them.

Vs. 5. Two major things they had: utterance and knowledge. These would have been things that they would have been proud of. “Utterance” means ability in thought and word. They were smooth and practiced in the expression of ideas and clarity of thought. They were eloquent. This was a good thing. It is a good thing to be able to express things clearly, but the Corinthians put too great a dependence upon clarity of thought and smoothness of eloquence. Paul lacked eloquence, yet there was a spiritual power in his preaching, because his preaching was of the power of God, not in the wisdom of words. He also mentions knowledge, for the Corinthians not only had understanding of the power of speech, but they labored in the content, to understand what was meant by the words. They knew the truth, and they were able to express it clearly. This was a very good thing; but it is not the only thing, as Paul will tell them in due time. In chapter 12 he will combine these two ideas in the phrase: “The word of knowledge.”

They were enriched in Christ in these things. This is also important, for they labored in the things of Christ and understood things that only come from Christ. As we said before, these were good things and not to be despised.

Vs. 6. The testimony of the Lord was sealed in the Corinthians through these things. The work of God is manifest in two different ways, as Calvin says: either by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit or by miracles. But miracles are the lesser of the two, as Jesus said, “A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign.” The most powerful work of the Holy Spirit is the confirmation of the Gospel in the hearts of his people, for that is how these words should be taken, I believe. “Testimony of Christ” is the Gospel, for that is what the Gospel is: the witness that God has given of His son. I John 5: 9

“If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son. 10 He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself: he that believeth not God hath made him a liar; because he believeth not the record that God gave of his Son. 11 And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 He that hath the Son hath life; *and* he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.”

Paul is touching on another theme that will be developed—that the Corinthians need to be less enamored of the spectacular and be more impressed with the quiet and inward work of the Holy Spirit—the testimony of God concerning His Son is in the doctrine of the apostles and prophets—the spectacular would pass away, but the doctrine would continue. He would also remind them subtly that the Gospel is about Christ, not about them. There was much too much about men in Corinth, and that was the reason for their fixation with the spectacular gifts, for these could serve their ambition and pride—their lust for position and power. “It’s not about you,” the apostle seems to be say-

ing, “the testimony is about Christ.” “Hey,” Paul is emphasizing, “We came preaching about Christ; how come it has become about you, your party, and your gifts?”

No wonder there was strife in Corinth. Only by pride comes contention; the flesh produces the works of party strife, arising from ambition and worldly pride. It will serve Satanic purposes even more if it also arises from the work of the Gospel—Satan’s attack comes from many different angles—some of his best work arises from religious flesh.

Vs. 7. God had showered them with gifts of His grace. This is the meaning of all of this to this point. They were second to none when it came to the manifestation of the gifts of God. “Ye come behind” means to be late for it. This was not the case of the Corinthians: they had been greatly blessed of God with spiritual gifts. They were not like Esau, who came short of the grace of God; they had not let these things drift by them; they were bright, active, and zealous in wisdom and knowledge. They were greatly blessed of the Lord. There was no question about the gifts of God: the problem among the Corinthians lay in another direction.

Vs. 8-9 The end of the work of the Gospel is to restore man to fellowship with God. One again, the apostle is striking a theme that will be developed more fully in the epistle. The Gospel is not primarily about knowledge, eloquence, and gifts: it is about fellowship with the Triune God.

Man’s problem is his alienation from God—it is not lack of power, or lack of knowledge, or lack of gifts from God: it is alienation. This alienation comes from one source: the sin of Adam, for all his seed is born in sin and under the curse of God. But what was lost in the first Adam, is gained for us in the last Adam, Jesus Christ.

Christ suffered for our sins, that we might be restored to fellowship with God. This is the very heart of the Gospel, and the Corinthians were in danger of being moved away from this from their preoccupation with the gifts of God.

What a subtle idolatry this is; for idolatry is when we worship and serve the creature more than the creator—when we value His gifts more than we do Him. How subtle and how dangerous this is—especially when we value what He does for us, than God Himself.

God told Abraham, Genesis 15:1 “After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I *am* thy shield, *and* thy exceeding great reward.”

May God bless you.