

All for your building up
(2 Corinthians 12:19-13:14)

The Building Up – the Acknowledgment of Sin
(12:19-21)

In this last study we come to the concluding words in his letter. He had put his case to the Corinthian church, explaining to them what true ministry is. It is ministry in Christ and in the Spirit, i.e. what Christ and the Spirit were doing in their midst, and we participate in that ministry. They had been reconciled to the Father through the work of Christ on the cross. This truth was written in their hearts by the Spirit. They had become one body and thus should widen their hearts to others, and this included the giving to the impoverished Judean church. He then put in the hard words against the super apostles exposing their errors.

Paul had finished his polemics against the false apostles. In this last section of the letter he then turned his attention to the state of the Corinthian church and explained that all that he had written was to build up those whom he loved.

Getting to the end of his letter Paul wanted to get to the point of his writing and that was to build up the Corinthian Christians in the faith. From what Paul had said in his letter it would appear to them that he was defending himself. However, that was not the purpose of Paul in writing. He wanted to set right the error that was in the Corinthian church. In doing so, he needed to appeal to the truth, the truth of who God is and the truth of what God is doing. The latter is the ministry of the word and Paul participated in that ministry in proclaiming the word. Paul was ‘speaking in Christ’ (12:19). It is in this way that the Spirit works, i.e. through proclamation. Of course, this was what Paul was doing. So, it would appear that while stating how God works, he was defending himself. We know that that was not his primary purpose. He had to state the truth to correct an error.

‘Quarrelling and jealousy’ are not two issues picked out at random. They form the core expression of our sin, the party spirit dividing the church. These dissensions within the church are the ‘how not’ to build up the church. We need to mourn for our sins and that is our true comfort because there is forgiveness. That must be the start to building up, the abolition of all that destroys. One cannot build while there are issues gnawing at the foundation.

Paul was aware that his next visit might require harsh words to deal with the sins in the midst of the Corinthian church. However, he was also aware that this would need to be done in humility, humility not of his own doing, but by the hand of God, that ‘God may humble me before you (v. 21)’. He expanded on this later on. This also includes a vicarious ministry, ‘that I may have to mourn over many’ (12:21).

The Building Up – Dealing with Sin
(13:1-4)

Dealing with sin in the midst of the congregation is not an easy task. We fear the outcome. We want to keep the peace, but can there be true peace when there is enmity towards God? Paul was aware of all that and the turmoil that might result from speaking out against the sins in the congregation. We cannot simply deal with sin by our words and actions, yet we need to deal with it. How? Before we can deal with what is wrong, the charge ‘must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses’ (13:1). Paul did not want to deal with hearsay or suspicion.

Paul knew that he needs to deal with them in humility (see above). There is a harshness, but there is also a weakness. This is the classic Pauline contradiction (2 Cor. 12:10). Yet he knew the power of God in Christ and it is this power that will deal with sin (13:4).

Paul did not make it clear as to how this power works in dealing with sin. He gave a few clues. Firstly, it was Christ speaking in him (13:3). The Corinthian Christians wanted proof of that. What they wanted were the impressive articulation and the performance of signs and wonders as Paul had hinted earlier in his letter. No,

Paul was not buying into that. As an apostle of Christ, he would be speaking the words of Christ, i.e. proclaiming what Christ had done on the cross. That is the message of reconciliation that was given to him.

Secondly, it was the power of Christ among them (13:3-4). In proclaiming Christ and the Spirit, Paul was holding out this incredible power in their midst. In other words, in this proclamation Paul was mediating the power of God in transforming them. If they rejected this, then this became the message of judgment.

The Building Up – Christ in You

(13:5-10)

Having told them about the power of Christ, Paul now told them that there was something that they needed to do. Paul says, ‘Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.’ (13:5). ‘In the faith’ (13:5) could be interpreted as ‘living in the faith’. It is in contrast to living according to the law. Faith is the reality of Christ in us. When they were living in the faith, then it would be possible for the church at Corinth to correct itself so that when Paul came, he ‘may not have to be severe in my (*his*) use of the authority’ (13:10). It is not a self-correction, but a consciousness that comes through the indwelling Christ.

What is this test and what constitutes failure (13:6)? The test was not to gather evidence to see if they were in the faith or not. They were in the faith. The context suggests that they needed to examine themselves in order to realise how they began in the faith, i.e. how Christ was in them. Paul wanted them to relive the time when they responded to the gospel and came to Christ. In reliving that they would be able to remember the gospel that was preached to them. When they realised the grace of the gospel then they would appreciate what Paul was saying to them in the letter. It was about the faithfulness of Paul in preaching the gospel and the way the Corinthians received the grace of God. That is why Paul used to first person plural, when he wrote, ‘we have not failed the test’ (13:6), i.e. he had proclaimed the gospel faithfully and the Corinthians received the message with gladness. They needed to go back to where it all began in order for them to see how far they had gone away from that experience.

This was how Paul saw as the solution to the problem in their midst. It is another way saying what he said at the beginning of 1 Corinthians.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18)

It is only as they could see again that their salvation was through the cross that they can understand the problem in their midst. It is their restoration in Christ that will correct things. If that was achieved then Paul would not need to be severe in his use of the authority that the Lord has given him (13:10).

A quick summary.

Before we look at the final Triune Benediction, I want to make a quick summary of this letter. Paul started with presenting God as the ‘God of all comfort’ (1:3). The thought behind this is the presence of God with His people (*parakalew*, called to the side of). He then went on to the gospel of Christ. It is the gospel of the triumph of Christ with Christ leading the victory procession. This knowledge is like the fragrance of the temple sacrifice in Israel. This straightaway links the victory of Christ with the suffering of the cross, a theme that he continued in the letter.

Following this Paul thrust himself into the heart of the matter, i.e. the real ministry is the ministry of the Spirit taking the things of Christ and engraving them in our hearts (3:3). This is even more glorious than all that they knew of the past. Though this may be so, yet we are participants in this ministry (4:1), like jars of clay holding on to this treasure (4:7). This being so, we should have the confidence to continue with this calling of God and not to give up.

So, the gospel of Christ is that the work of reconciliation has been accomplished in Christ and our task is to proclaim the completion of this work to the world, i.e. to proclaim the message of reconciliation. This is the new creation in Christ. As the people are touched by the love of Christ which drives us from now, we are to open (widen) our hearts to others in Christ, with a warning not to be embedded with unbelievers.

When people respond to the gospel, Paul highlighted the difference between worldly and godly repentance. Godly repentance knows the grace of God and embraced that. Worldly repentance is the work of the human heart and this is merely remorse.

As a reconciled community in Christ, we should be moved to respond to the needs of others.

Finally, Paul needed to expose the errors of the false apostles in the last four chapters and concluded with the Triune Benediction.

Final Greetings – the Triune Benediction

¹¹ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. ¹³ All the saints greet you.

¹⁴ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

This is the Triune benediction which we often use at the conclusion of our services. While we may use it, yet oftentimes it does not relate to what has gone on before in the service. In other words, we use it as a kind of a formula to end a service though we may not have said much about the Triune God in the worship or the sermon. It sounded good, but not here with Paul. In concluding his letter to the Corinthians this way, Paul was mindful that all that he had written was based on the work of the Triune God. I will give another resume of the letter highlighting the Triune emphasis that Paul had given here.

The Triune Godhead is a cardinal statement in our doctrinal stand. We acknowledge it but so often we do not really have too much to say or do about it. Part of the problem is that the doctrine is clouded with terminology from the patristic age. The doctrine is always expounded with the terms person and substance, i.e. three persons in one substance. To complicate things further, the Eastern church used the terms, hypostasis and essence. What does all these words mean to the modern man educated in science and technology? Nothing. The Triune God cannot be understood mathematically or logically. Furthermore, the terms, Trinity and Triune are not words from the New Testament. It may be presumptuous to say that Paul knew nothing of person and substance. Paul had an intimate knowledge of what Christ had done for him and the way the Spirit of God had worked in his heart. Paul was of course a strict monotheist as he was grounded in the Old Testament. He had probably recited the *shema*¹ thousands of times in his life.

First of all, we need to note that Paul understood the Triune God relationally. Father, Son and Spirit are related in a oneness of origin and purpose. In other words, they are uncreated beings and they work for the same purpose. Father, Son and Spirit share an intimate relationship as they indwell one another.

The fatherhood of God is not absent from the Old Testament and Paul knew that well.

A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? (Mal. 1:6)

Israel has been called God's firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). If so, then God is Father. Paul used the term 'father' freely as he wrote to the Corinthians. God is Father (2 Cor. 1:2) and also Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:3, 11:31). And because of what Christ has done, God is also Father to us (2 Cor. 6:18). Paul's understanding of God was not a simply a divine being in the remote sphere, but a person with whom he related to intimately as father. In addressing God as 'Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', he also spelt out an intimate relationship within the Triune Godhead.

¹ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. (Deut. 6:4)

Christ occupies centre stage in the epistle. Paul was an apostle of Christ, commissioned by Him and set apart for the proclamation of the gospel of Christ, i.e. to proclaim all that Christ has done. This work is phrased as the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), the ushering in of the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ. The new creation is a new relationship in Christ. The relational aspect of this new creation is by the reconciling work of Christ. The Godhead is involved in this, 'God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself' (2 Cor. 5:18). The restoration of the relationship between God and humanity took place in the person of Jesus Christ. And so, we need to be 'in Christ' (2 Cor. 5:17, 13:5) in order to have a part in this restoration. We will see below that it is the Spirit that takes us into Christ. This being so, then we are the servants of Christ (2 Cor. 11:23). Paul had no part in trying to define the Trinity. He was more concerned with the reality of the saving work of Christ in his life and from this he shared this new experience with the rest of humanity.

The work of Christ is complemented by the Spirit who makes real to us all that Christ has done. It is the Spirit who writes in our hearts all that Christ has done. Our acknowledgment or realisation of the reality of the work on the cross is done by the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:3). This is in contrast with the written law on tablets of stone. The legalism of the past is now replaced with the freedom in the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). While this is still to be fully expressed, the God-given Spirit is a guarantee of that final reality (2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5).

That is the reality of the Triune God in our lives. It is relational and the work of the Triune God in us is experienced in a real way. The doctrine is not cerebral but relational. And it is only as it is understood relationally and experienced in life that the mention of the Triune God is meaningful to us as it must.

With this new relational reality, the response from us must reflect the work of the Triune God in us. Just as the Father completed the work in us through Christ and the Spirit, in like manner we respond to the Father through Christ and the Spirit. So, Paul wrote the 'love of Christ controls us' (2 Cor. 5:14). Just as the Spirit works upon our hearts, so our hearts are open to others (2 Cor. 6:13, 7:2). Similarly, the giving to the impoverished is also from the heart (2 Cor. 9:7). The response to God is the response from the Triune work in us.

Thus, the doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract dogma, but a practical dogma understood and experienced in our lives by the work the Triune God in each of us. We will not understand the Triune doctrine through thesis. We need 'a sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor. 11:3), to see the way Christ and the Spirit are working in our lives. Only in this way will we know the reality of the Triune doctrine.

So, as we conclude this series of studies, we can meaningfully and truly pray with Paul those words in his letter. I will conclude today's study with the Triune benediction, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all'. (2 Cor. 13:14)