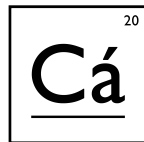


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# SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES

Volume 9

**I Corinthians - Philemon**

by  
**Cornelis Vanderwaal**

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# I Corinthians

## **1. Gratitude Comes First (1:1-9)**

*Proud Corinth.* A quick look at the map reveals that Corinth was an important center of trade. It was the place where all ships sailing to Greece stopped. The raucous chorus “Eat, drink and be merry” was heard there. The Greeks often spoke of “Corinthian living,” by which they meant that all sorts of things went on in the port city. Both the rich and the workers at the docks did as they pleased. The heathen Greek religion was no more successful than Greek philosophy in erecting a dam against moral collapse.

The Lord used Paul to bring the gospel of the offense of the cross to proud Corinth. Paul, who was not strong, worked there for a year and a half, first in the synagogue and then right next to it—literally. He was there long enough to see Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, “come over” to the church. It may even be that Sosthenes, the successor of Crispus, became a Christian as well. In any event, someone named Sosthenes is mentioned by Paul at the beginning of the letter as one of the senders (1:1; see also Acts 18:17).

*Paul's reason for writing.* The apostle, who was in Ephesus at the time, had a particular reason for writing this letter. Things were not going well in the church at Corinth. It appeared that the spirit of this great city of trade had set its stamp upon the church there. The people believed that the Old Testament no longer applied to them. Now that they had received the Holy Spirit, they rose above the ancient restrictions and confines, and everything was permitted.

To his dismay, Paul discovered that something he wrote earlier had led to misunderstandings. Therefore it was urgent for the apostle to direct the power of the Word at the proud Corinthians. Their abandonment of the Word on grounds of principle and their exclusive reliance on what they called “the Spirit” (which was really no more than the desires of their own hearts speaking to them) had led to unbridled license in doctrine and conduct. What could be more useless than salt that has lost its taste?

*Still room for thanksgiving.* Considering all this, the way Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians surprises us somewhat. What comes *later* certainly puts the Corinthians in a bad light. We throw up our hands in a amazement and ask: “How is it possible?” Yet . . .

Paul *begins* as follows: “To the church of *God* which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in *Christ Jesus, called* to be saints.” It is the Lord in His sovereign love who has called this church together. That’s Paul’s first point. Despite everything that has gone wrong, he does not forget to give thanks that God has seen fit to choose Corinth. He thanks God for the many gifts the congregation has received, for it has grown rich in Christ Jesus. And he assures the Corinthians that they will be sustained until the end, so that they will be guiltless on the day of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why does Paul write this letter? God uses him as an

apostle to admonish the saints He has called and to keep them in line. After praising God's work in Corinth and giving thanks for it, Paul takes up various points arising from the confusion in the life of the church there.

## **2. The Foolishness of God (1:10—4:21)**

*Favorite preachers.* What kind of preaching do you prefer? How do you think preachers should preach? This is a dangerous way of putting the question. When we ask people for their *opinions*, we're likely to get a different answer from each one we ask. When it comes to preaching, the important question for the church to ask is: How does *the Lord* want us to preach? He binds His servants to His well-defined instructions.

The Christians in Corinth were not at all convinced of this. Their own opinions were given priority because they did not bind themselves to Scripture as the established *norm*. They elevated themselves above Scripture and went beyond what is written (4:6). They sought the norm in their own hearts, in their own wisdom and knowledge. This led to dispute and discord; molehills turned into mountains, as individualistic pride set the tone.

The Christians in Corinth were in the grip of the sinful flesh—and not in the grip of the Spirit. You can well understand what this led to: each one had his favorite preacher, choosing on the basis of his own taste and feelings.

From the servants of a woman named Chloe, Paul, who was in Ephesus, found out that some of the Christians in Corinth had declared their allegiance to him, and others to Apollos or Cephas (i.e. Peter). There were even some who chose for *Christ*—as though Paul and Christ, or Paul and

Apollos, were competitors or rivals! The Corinthians acted as though their favorite preacher (e.g. the one who baptized *me*, the one through whom *I* was saved) was more important than the gospel.

Paul forcefully opposed this unjustified elevation of personal knowledge and instinct, this desire to live by human wisdom. Naturally “the world” (i.e. the Jews and the Greeks) seeks the fulfillment of its heart’s desires. The one wants to see a show with some convincing signs, while the other enjoys a flood of eloquence. How poor and foolish and weak the gospel of the cursed Man on the cross looks in the face of all those human desires!

*The elevation of the lowly.* Paul was well aware that he had nothing to offer when measured by the usual criteria for popularity. He performed few baptisms in Corinth and did not acquire a following by that route (1:16-17). He was not a talented speaker (2:1-4, 13). It had not been his lot to live an elegant life that others would envy; on the contrary, he became a “spectacle to the world, to angels and to men” (4:9). While the people in Corinth were proud of all they possessed and all they had become, building themselves up in the eyes of others and acting as though heaven had descended to earth, Paul described himself as “the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (vs. 13). If Paul was examined in purely human terms, then, there was plenty of reason to despise his preaching and to seek more impressive preachers.

Yet, to a world lost in sin the gospel will always remain *foolishness*. God has no patience with proud boasting about human wisdom: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise” (1:19; Is. 29:14). What comes to the fore so clearly in the songs of Hannah and Mary is also proclaimed by Paul, namely, the humiliation of the proud and the elevation of the lowly.

Let the world in its foolish fancy look down on the

seemingly impoverished message of Paul. God chooses to save those who believe—through the foolishness of preaching. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1:25).

*Humble beginnings.* The members of the church at Corinth should think back to their own humble origins. No doubt many of them were once slaves employed at the docks. They were the scum of the earth, which tends to collect at such transportation centers as Corinth. Yet, they were just the sort of people God was looking for. “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1:27).

This was clearly illustrated in Paul’s work in founding the church at Corinth, an enterprise he undertook in fear and trembling. Despite his fear, the apostle managed to reveal the hidden wisdom of God through his simple way of speaking (2:7). The Spirit spoke through him (vs. 10ff). Anyone who despised Paul’s preaching demonstrated that he was not Spiritual. Let the church in Corinth bear that in mind.

At the same time, the Corinthians should not complain about Paul’s “simple” way of preaching to them. He adopted a simple style deliberately, for the congregation was still made up mainly of children in the faith, that is, immature Christians. The facts show that Paul was right in this judgment: the current discord was rooted in an immature personalism that became so infatuated with the *messenger* that it forgot about the *message*—which is the important thing, after all.

*No personality cults.* Preachers are servants sent by God to work in His church. Therefore the church must have nothing to do with any personality cult but must see to it instead that the servants do good work.

Paul had laid a solid foundation, but not everything that glitters is gold. Therefore the Corinthians would have to be on guard against popular teachers who catered to the world's tastes. Because such teachers build with wood and hay and straw, their work will not survive the fire on the last day.

Rather than glorying in particular people, we must see to it that the church, God's temple, remains holy. That's why the church cannot afford to play off one servant against another. "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas" (3:21-2).

Neither can we maintain the sanctity of the church by puffing ourselves up and saying harsh things about Paul, that "knight of the rueful countenance." Everything the Corinthians possess has been given to them (4:7).

*Follow my example.* In Corinth, where the magistrate was quite tolerant (Acts 18:12ff), the brothers paraded around like kings and looked down on Paul, who had to do battle with wild beasts, as it were, at Ephesus (15:32). Yet the apostle says: Follow the foolish example of the father and founder of your church.

Because of the gravity of the situation, Paul sent Timothy to the Corinthians, for he could not yet come himself. He warned them that he would not deal lightly with the proud spirit that despises grace (4:17ff).

### **3. A Social Reformation (5:1—6:11)**

*No toleration of sin.* Chloe's servants must have given Paul some information that induced him to let the lightning flashes of his criticism strike certain areas of life in Corinth. Apparently the Corinthians had become lax

with regard to discipline. Incestuous marriages were tolerated without criticism or admonition.

In his mind Paul had a clear picture of what to do about the situation. A congregational meeting would have to be held, which Paul would attend in spirit. At that meeting the sinners would be excommunicated from the synagogue.

The Lamb Jesus Christ has inaugurated the perfect Passover feast. Therefore the leaven of sin must be banished from the church. This does not mean that there may not be any contact with sinners who are *outside* the church. *God* will judge the people outside the church. But sin may not be tolerated *within* the church. The evil must be removed from the midst of the covenant community (Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 22:24; 24:7). We must not mix socially with those church members who are subject to discipline, acting as though there was nothing wrong. Paul calls for a social reformation!

*Judges in the Kingdom.* Reformation was also needed in instances of conflict between brothers. The Christians were not to regard themselves as above discipline (with which they were already familiar from the synagogue), and they were to settle their legal disputes *outside* the courtroom (another rule of the synagogue).

If a Christian who believes in the exalted legal norms of the Kingdom of God is done an injustice by a brother, is he to seek redress by turning to unrighteous unbelievers? The unrighteous are not heirs of the Kingdom of God; only the saints are given the office of judge in the Kingdom (Dan. 7:18, 22, 27).

Are the legal decisions of unbelievers somehow superior

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\*The term *unbelievers* (6:6) may be a reference to the Jews. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom still had to oppose the custom of swearing oaths in the synagogue. The Near Eastern churches, reduced to a minority position after the rise of

to those of the church of God? If we proceed on this assumption, we are lost right at the outset, for we fail to recognize the high office of the church, which is confirmed by baptism. We would be better off suffering injustice.

#### **4. The Body as a Temple (6:12—7:40)**

*Sexual extremes condemned.* There were some very “spiritual” Christians in Corinth. Some of them ruled out marriage altogether and advised people against getting married. As a result of the prevalent dualism in which body and soul were separated, there were even some who drew the conclusion that they were free to do as they pleased with their bodies. “All things are lawful for me,” they said in defense of this conclusion. On the one hand, then, marriage was looked down on as unworthy of a “spiritual” person, while on the other hand the door was left open to sexual intercourse outside marriage.

Paul deals with the latter problem in 6:12-20. He rejects any dualism—on the grounds that the Lord delivers the whole person. The body is for the Lord and is not to be surrendered to impurity; it is a temple of the Holy Spirit and will share in the resurrection of Christ. The fact that it is a temple must be taken into account in sexual life. We must glorify God in our bodies.

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Mohammedanism, followed the practice of establishing their own courts to deal with legal disputes. This so-called “millet system” was recognized by the Mohammedan governments and was joined to the hierarchy of the established church. The judgment would be rendered in the name of this hierarchy, which represented the church in its dealing with the government. What Paul was thinking of in I Corinthians 6 is a legal settlement made by the local congregation.



*Marriage problems.* In the much disputed seventh chapter, the apostle goes into this matter in greater depth, for the church had written for his advice regarding marriage. In the first five verses he deals with the question whether those who are already married should seek to transform their marriage into some sort of spiritual relationship.

Because it was a time in which people saw a great deal of wickedness and perversion in the relations between the sexes, it should not surprise us that there were some who chose to live a rigorously ascetic life within marriage. A survey of church history shows that celibacy and even “spiritual marriage” have often been defended by appealing to Paul: “It is well for a man not to touch a woman” (7:1).

*Augustine’s perspective.* The “conversion” of Augustine comes to mind in this context. Augustine tells us how “the chaste beauty of Continenence in all her serene, unsullied joy” appeared to him and said: “Close your ears to the unclean whispers of your body, so that it may be mortified. It tells you of things that delight you, but not such things as the law of the Lord your God has to tell.” According to Augustine, the desire for a woman is sinful in and of itself. To God he declared: “You converted me to yourself, so that I no longer desired a wife.”\* In Book XI of *The City of God*, Augustine devotes entire chapters to showing that Adam and his wife lived in Paradise without sexual desire for each other and without any lusts of the flesh.

For Augustine, the ideal is a life dominated by the *will*. This ideal also applies to the relationship between man and woman. According to his outlook, the notion of sexual

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\**Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 176, 178.

attachment as a creation of God is ruled out completely. Augustine viewed the attraction of one sex for the other as a consequence of original sin and declared that married people should have sexual intercourse *only* to bring children into the world. Although sexual contact beyond that could be forgiven, it was still sin.

There were indeed praiseworthy motives behind Augustine's extreme stand. He was lashing out against the wealthy people of his day, who had no more reason than the covetous poor to be opposed to large families but still advocated limiting families to two children. He also opposed the birth control methods used in those days. He was more offended by proud virgins than by chaste mothers. Yet, continence or abstinence remained the supreme ideal for him. As a result he did nothing to oppose the gradual dying out of the Roman race.

Augustine's pastoral perspective on marriage—and there were other prominent church fathers with similar views—deeply affected the life of the church throughout the ages. Even in our day, there are many Christians who believe that sexuality is a contemptible side of life, that it is something to be ashamed of. The doctrine that we are “conceived and born in sin” is then interpreted to mean conceived in a sinful way.

*Defending marriage.* Is an appeal to Paul justified in defending this outlook? When Paul writes, “It is well for a man not to touch a woman,” he is addressing the congregation in Corinth, just as when he says, “All things are lawful for me” (6:12; 10:23). In 7:2-5 Paul makes it clear that he wants nothing to do with “spiritual marriage,” for such marriage clearly creates opportunities for Satan to exploit.

This argument also needs to be emphasized today. “Do not refuse each other,” Paul advises, “except by mutual consent, and then only for an agreed time, to leave

yourselves free for prayer; then come together again in case Satan should take advantage of your weakness to tempt you” (7:5 JB). Paul, who reminds the Christians at Corinth that both husbands and wives have “conjugal rights” (vs. 3), is clearly a defender of marriage as an institution created by God. “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving” (I Tim. 4:4).

*Marriage and divorce.* In 7:6-9 Paul goes on to speak of those who are no longer married. When he speaks of the “unmarried” in verse 8, mentioning widows in the same breath, he clearly has widowers in mind as well. As a former rabbi, he must have been married earlier in his life, for this was required of all rabbis. Because of the work he was called to do, he thought it better not to marry again. But anyone not possessing the gift of being able to abstain from a second marriage would be better off remarrying than being consumed by the fires of temptation. Such a person was not to be looked down on or regarded as less “Spiritual.”

In 7:10-24 Paul goes further into the problems of marriage. Those who are married must not seek to live as sexless beings, for this would amount to undoing the marriage. Even if a Christian is married to someone who has not yet accepted the Lord, such a course of action is not justified, for we are called to live in peace. Only if the unbelieving partner deserts the other is the way open for a dissolution of the marriage. “In such a case,” Paul explains, “the brother or sister is not bound,” i.e. to the law of the Lord (vs. 15).

*The question of remarriage.* In 7:25-39 the apostle turns his attention once more to the “unmarried.” Here the New English Bible speaks of “the question of celibacy,” but this is based on a mistaken reading of the passage.

It has been established by scholars that the Greek word used here can refer to men and women who did not enter into a *second* marriage. Paul advises such people not to marry *again*, but his reason is simply that it is a time of persecution. It's not an easy matter to "let goods and kindred go." Moreover, Paul lets it be known that he is not giving an absolute command received from the Lord (vs. 25).

The apostle makes it clear that he is not only addressing people who have never been married, for he asks: "Are you free from a wife?" (vs. 27). The New English Bible reads: "Has your marriage been dissolved?" The individual must decide for himself. Paul declares simply: "If, however, you do marry, there is nothing wrong in it" (vs. 28 NEB). It may be that Paul is dealing with levirate marriage in 7:36-8, for in verses 39-40 he gives the widow the freedom to marry anyone she chooses—provided she marries *in the Lord*.

Paul's words in this chapter are highly relevant to our time. He is not seeking to rob life of its legitimate pleasures. Rather, his battle is against those who regard sexuality as something lower, something apart and separate from the service of God.

The calling to marriage (Gen. 1:28 and 9:1) is not cast into doubt by his words. Instead Paul affirms this calling and opposes the idea of marriage as a mere matter of appearance. His sensitive pastoral approach to the problems of the formerly married demonstrates a fine grasp of the nuances.

## **5. Stumbling Blocks in the Path of the Weak (8:1—11:1)**

*Food offered to idols.* In the previous section, Paul began by answering questions the Corinthians had sent to him. Apparently he was also asked about eating meat that had already been sacrificed to idols.

Meat was offered for sale in the meat market. One could even buy a meal there. Sometimes the meat came from a heathen temple, where it had been offered to some idol or other. Could Christians run the risk of buying and eating such meat?

There were many in the congregation in Corinth who said no. They even refused to eat such meat at parties or social occasions. After all, hadn't they broken with all idolatry?

There were others, however, who regarded themselves as strong enough to eat such meat. Idols aren't real anyway! And they were willing to visit heathen temples to obtain meat. What is a temple but a heap of stones? Moreover, one could hardly expect Christians to break off all "social" contacts with their non-Christian acquaintances by refusing to eat their food. What good would it do if those who don't believe in idols stayed away from all parties and feasts? The people outside the church wouldn't understand their reasons anyway!

Thus a struggle had broken out in Corinth between those who abstained completely from meat offered to idols (the "weak") and those who did eat it (the "strong"). Paul was now asked to settle the dispute between the two parties.

*Freedom and consideration.* Paul begins his answer by admitting that we know that idols do not exist as real powers in themselves. From Scripture we learn that there is nothing to them.

Unfortunately, not all recently converted members of

the church understand this fully. To them idols are still *realities*; they are not entirely free of them yet. Therefore they shudder at the thought of temples and sacrificial meat.

What are the “weak” Christians to think when “strong” Christians enter a heathen temple and join in a meal during a feast? Isn’t there a definite danger that the weaker brothers will be led astray, that they will go into the temple and fall back into their old sins? Such “weak” Christians are not helped by their “stronger” fellow believers. Instead they are made to stumble and fall; they are led into sin (ch. 8).

Now, one could conceivably stand up for his rights and argue that the Christian has the *freedom* to enter a heathen temple and eat meat offered to an idol there. But freedom, Paul points out, has certain *limits*. He makes this clear by pointing to his own life.

Doesn’t Paul have the *freedom* to demand payment for his work in the church? Isn’t the laborer worthy of his wages? But Paul’s acceptance of financial support would surely be misinterpreted. Therefore he does not make use of his right to financial compensation for his work in Corinth. He goes about his task in such a way as to stir up the least possible opposition to the gospel. Hence he provides for his own support through manual labor. He does this for the sake of the gospel, knowing that he will ultimately share in the benefits of salvation (9:1-27).

*Paul’s warning.* Paul sets himself up as an example to the loveless “strong” Christians who are only concerned about what *they* are permitted and do not worry about the scruples of fellow Christians. Such Christians may think they have “arrived,” but they should be on guard. After all, what happened to Old Testament Israel? Passing through the Red Sea was Israel’s baptism, and eating the manna was the Lord’s supper. Yet, the generation that received all this grace did not reach the promised land.

Despite all their advantages, the Israelites succumbed to temptation and joined in feasts to honor idols.

Therefore the “strong” Christians should think twice about what they are doing, for there are no “spiritual supermen” in the church. They should not act as though heathen services in which sacrifices are offered to idols could not possibly hurt Christians.

*No contact with idolatry.* It’s true that idols are not real powers in themselves. Yet, heathendom is really the invention of demons and evil spirits, and heathen sacrifices are offerings made to heathen spirits. How could anyone combine the communion table or the table of the Lord with the table of devils? “We must not put the Lord to the test.” The upshot of the matter is that Paul *rules out* any and all visits to temples (10:14ff).

He also admonishes the Corinthian Christians to be concerned about the salvation of others. If they know that meat has been prepared in accordance with some idolatrous ritual, they should not eat it—for the sake of their brothers in the faith! “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God,” Paul declares (10:31).

This famous text must be understood within the context of the debate about meat offered to idols. The text is not talking about a life of gratitude in general or about the comprehensiveness of the Kingdom of God. No, it must be read as a rule about the communion of the saints. Christians should not look out for themselves first of all; the welfare of others should be their primary concern. That’s the proper use and limiting of the freedom we have been granted in Christ.

## 6. Circumspect Conduct in Public Worship (11:2-34)

*Emancipated women.* There's freedom—and then there's freedom. The Christians in Corinth understood freedom as license, as an excuse to erase all the natural boundaries and to encourage egoism and self-love. But Paul advocated the freedom we use to *serve*, the freedom that takes God's ordinances into account and respects them.

Therefore Paul could not give his approval to the efforts made by women in the church at Corinth to emancipate themselves. These women refused to recognize their place and tried to assume a man's role. As a symbol of their attitude and approach, they removed their veils.

The issue here is not fashion, or what women should wear on their heads. No, the important thing is to uphold the order created by God, the order under which the woman must accept the leadership of the man—out of respect for the angels (11:10). The veil worn by a woman symbolizes that she is to serve, just as a soldier's beret underlines his status as someone who serves under others.

*“Love feasts.”* There were also irregularities in connection with the Lord's supper. The Christians at Corinth, who may have been following the example of the synagogues with their sabbath meals, organized communal “love feasts” in connection with the Lord's supper. But this practice led to all sorts of freeloading, as the false freedom raised its ugly head again! Instead of building up the community, the “love feasts” had the effect of creating differences and hostilities.

The food was brought by the people attending the meal, of course. But the first ones there would not bother waiting for the others to arrive so that they could share with them; no, they would quickly begin on their own. Of course the



church members who were servants would not be free as early in the day as some of the others. Therefore they would come to the “love feast” later—with the result that they didn’t get as much to eat as those who came earlier. Hence they were not included fully in the fellowship of the church. The Lord’s supper, which would be celebrated afterward, then became a caricature of the communion of the saints, for the presence of “cliques” in the church had been clearly illustrated in the “love feast” beforehand.

In an effort to straighten out this sorry mess, Paul reminded the Corinthians of the purpose of the Lord’s supper. It was not intended as a meal where anyone could stuff himself but as a way for the church to commemorate Christ’s sacrificial death. That’s why it was so important for the Corinthian Christians to celebrate it in a worthy manner. If they did not do so, they would be calling down God’s wrath on the church.

The people would have to bear in mind what the Lord’s supper was all about: the “body of the Lord” (the church as a community of saints) had to learn to *distinguish* and examine itself. The Lord’s supper was to be celebrated in a sensitive and worthy way (11:26-9).

Moreover, when Christians come together for a communal meal, they should wait for each other before beginning (vs. 33). And the Lord’s supper *must* be celebrated regularly. But the church must safeguard its character as a sacrament; otherwise the clouds of judgment will gather above the church (11:27ff).

*Celebrating the Lord’s supper.* This passage on the Lord’s supper had a definite effect in the life of the church, for people today conduct themselves in a very restrained manner at the Lord’s supper. This is partly due to misunderstandings. Many people believe that the Lord’s supper is not supposed to be a happy occasion but a somber one. Moreover, many have stayed away from the

Lord's supper because they felt "unworthy" and did not want to eat and drink judgment to themselves.

Those who entertain this fear should remember that a sermon they hear but fail to respond to can also bring them closer to judgment. Besides, the word *unworthy* in 11:27 does not refer to anyone's spiritual condition: Paul is talking about anyone who "eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord *in an unworthy manner.*"

Anyone who comes to the communion service properly prepared will be well aware of his sin and *unworthiness*. But this should have the effect of pressing him on to the table of Christ. Paul warns us here not to celebrate the Lord's supper in an "unworthy" manner, that is, thoughtlessly or indifferently. We must view the Lord's supper as a way of building up the community of the saints.

## **7. The Holy Spirit and Church Order (12:1—14:40)**

*"Spiritual" drunkenness.* I Corinthians 13 is sometimes regarded as the New Testament counterpart to the Song of Songs. And it is indeed a love song—a song about *Christian* love.

Unfortunately, this chapter, like the Sermon on the Mount, has often been lifted out of its context and applied to human relations in general, that is, to human relations outside Christ and His church. We must not fall into this mistake, for I Corinthians 13 stands within a definite framework or context. Let's begin by examining that framework.

We have already seen more than once that the Corinthians fell prey to a false concept of Christian freedom, and also that they tended to elevate the

“spiritual” at the expense of the “bodily” things. We might add that they wanted to use the Holy Spirit for their private emotional indulgence and enjoyment. They regarded themselves as so “spiritual” that they could even cut the tie between the Spirit and the Word.

They were enchanted with their own gifts (*charismata*); one would set himself up as a “spiritual matador” at the expense of the others. Brother A could “speak in tongues” so beautifully, just as though Pentecost had come again in Corinth! But Sister B brought about a newer Pentecost with an even more spectacular display of speaking in tongues—although no one had any idea what she was talking about. While all this was going on, Brother C would be busy prophesying and would get a still more enthusiastic reception from his group of admirers. Where there should have been quiet service and devotion to the Word, there was spiritual fanaticism. Glossolalia (the gift of tongues) had become a means of self-glorification.

Here again we see that there’s nothing new under the sun. Think of all the movements in our time that believe they are blessed with outpourings of “the Spirit” during their worship services. But what they call “the Spirit” is not the Holy Spirit at all—even though their prophets do in fact speak in various languages. What they call “the Spirit” is really a human spirit—and not the Holy Spirit.

On this point, too, Paul had a few things to say to the church in Corinth. At one time its members had been in the grip of the dumb powers of heathendom. After choosing for Christ, they learned through the Spirit to accept a *fixed confession*. Therefore, speaking in tongues was of no importance in itself. In fact, it could lead to spiritual drunkenness.

*How the Holy Spirit works.* The Spirit speaks with a clear voice. If someone says in a frenzy, “Jesus be cursed!” he cannot possibly be speaking through the Holy Spirit,

for he is supporting the synagogue, which rejects Christ. On the other hand, no unholy spirit can ever lead someone to confess that Jesus is Lord (12:1-3).

The Spirit works in a variety of ways. The church is like a body: the members differ from each other, but together they form a harmonious whole. Not every member of the body can be an eye or an ear. It's the same with the church: not everyone can be an apostle or a prophet. Yet, there must be no jealousy about these offices (12:12-31). Unfortunately, jealousy and envy are not unknown in the church.

*The place of love.* This is the framework and context within which the famous thirteenth chapter of I Corinthians must be read. This chapter shows us how Christian love can combine all the variations within the church to form a beautiful, harmonious whole.

The Christians in Corinth had become far too attached to particular forms. They did not seem to be aware that the forms then current would have to make way someday for other forms. "As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease" (13:8). And this is indeed what happened in the history of the church.

In this same passage, Paul makes it clear that love is and remains the way for Christians to deal with each other. Faith and hope are certainly beautiful, and are not destined to pass away. But love is *indispensable*. It is in love that faith and hope are worked out (13:13).

*Edification.* To put this into practice, one must remember that love serves to *build up* the church. We could well follow the lead of the King James Bible and speak here of "edification."

Now, many of us have a mistaken idea of "edification": we think of a preacher who waffles on the issues in order to keep the peace at all costs. What the term *edification* really

means in this context is that the members of the church are to build *each other* up.

Once this becomes the prime concern, there comes an end to conceit, to speaking in tongues without any interpretation, to prophesying contrary to the church's confession, to shameless behavior on the part of emancipated women. Heathendom is characterized by frenzy and fanaticism, but the mark of the Spirit's presence is *order*. In an orderly situation, the individual serves the community. Thus speaking in tongues is not the issue in and of itself.

*Specific guidelines.* When we survey Paul's entire appeal to the Corinthians, we can read this passage as containing a church order of sorts. The various rules and articles in I Corinthians 14 are easy to pick out.

Article 1: Everything must promote the edification and upbuilding of the church.

Article 2: There are to be no more than three people speaking in tongues. They must not speak simultaneously, and there must be an interpreter to explain to the assembled congregation what is being said.

Article 3: There must be no more than three people prophesying in a worship service. They are not to speak simultaneously. A new revelation must take precedence and be heard immediately, but the people at the service are to judge the prophecy by the yardstick of God's prophetic Word and not simply accept everything uncritically.

Article 4: Women are not to play a leadership role in the official worship service and are certainly not allowed to preach.

The term *church order* tends to conjure up images of dry documents and decisions made long ago. But the rules Paul gives us here are commandments of the Lord for the

life of the church. The Lord is not a God of disorder. Church order, too, is a purely Spiritual matter that calls for love.

*Glossolalia.* The question could perhaps be raised whether a church order for our time ought to spell out just *when* speaking in tongues is and is not proper during our worship services. But this question presupposes another: What place or function, if any, is there for speaking in tongues in our worship services today?

Paul quotes from Isaiah 28:11 as follows:

By men of strange tongues  
and by the lips of foreigners  
will I speak *to this people*,  
and even then they will not listen to me,  
says the Lord (14:21).

In the very next verse he goes on to provide some commentary on this quotation: "Thus, tongues are a *sign* not for believers but for *unbelievers*."

This enables us to draw some conclusions about "tongues." (1) They were meant for "this people," that is, the Jewish covenant people of Paul's time. (2) Their function within the framework of special "signs and wonders." (3) They were generally not accepted by Israel as signs that the Messianic age had indeed come.

When we bear these points in mind, there is no longer any point in asking how much room we should leave for glossolalia (speaking in tongues) in our worship services. In the decisive period between the years 30 and 70, the phenomenon of glossolalia, occurring within the framework of the testimony to Israel, was a clear indication that Jesus the Messiah had poured out the Spirit in accordance with the Old Testament prophecies (Is. 59:21; Jer. 31:33-4; Joel 2:28-9). But the apostolic era

ended long ago. In our worship services today, we are to concentrate on the reading, singing and proclamation of the Word.

The point Paul drives home to the Corinthians is that glossolalia was a way of alerting Israel that the Messiah's *day of judgment* on the unbelieving covenant people was drawing near. After that day of judgment, "tongues" could cease (13:8).

Paul took a first step in the direction of eliminating tongues by limiting this practice. When the congregation came together, the *service of the Word* was to be central. Any proposal to introduce speaking in tongues into our worship services today overlooks the forward march of redemptive history and serves only to promote self-glorification and individualism.

## **8. Upholding the Confession of the Resurrection of the Body (15:1-58)**

*The soul as a beautiful bird.* There are people today who want to demythologize the confession of the Christian church. Human thinking rules out Christ's resurrection, as well as the resurrection of the body.

The Christians in Corinth were also moving in this dangerous direction. This was another manifestation of an old problem, namely, too much emphasis on "spiritual" matters, coupled with a neglect—or even contempt—of the "body." The soul was regarded as a beautiful bird imprisoned in an ugly cage (i.e. the body). What made matters worse was that the Corinthians believed they had "arrived." They began to cut the ties between the present and the day of judgment.

As far as the resurrection was concerned, the

Corinthians had not yet gone so far as to deny that Christ rose from the dead. After all, Christ's resurrection was a regular theme in preaching. But there were some who believed that the resurrection of the *body* was unnecessary. The Christians had undergone a "Spiritual" rebirth and regeneration. As living heroes of the "Spirit," they had already attained the climax.

*A guarantee of our resurrection.* In opposition to the "spiritualizing" of the resurrection, Paul begins by testifying about Christ's resurrection. Here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, what is reported is not just the feeling that welled up in someone's heart but the *fact*—the actual event as seen and heard by witnesses. Paul mentions the appearances Christ made after the resurrection. On these points the Corinthians could check for themselves by consulting the eyewitnesses, many of whom were still living.

Paul himself was a genuine witness of the risen Lord. Even though he was the least of the apostles, Jesus had appeared to him. Paul had preached the gospel of the resurrection at Corinth, and the people had believed (15:1-11).

But this gospel was not to be left out of the church's life of faith. After all, Christ's resurrection is a sure guarantee of our resurrection to salvation. The church is included in Christ, who has done away with all the consequences of sin.

Paul confronts the Corinthians with an alternative. What if there is indeed no resurrection of the dead? Then Christ did not rise from the dead either, which would make Paul a false witness. Faith in the risen Lord would then be completely futile. But what if Christ really did rise from the dead? In that case we must accept Him as "the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20).



*Glorified bodies.* Christ did in fact rise from the dead. In Adam all died, but through the last Adam all will be made alive again—not just in “spiritual” form, but as genuine people. The *body* will be renewed. In His great future, Christ the King will depose King Death from his throne.

What awaits us is not a disembodied, ethereal, purely “spiritual” life in “heaven” but a purified creation and a glorified body. Doesn’t Psalm 8 sing of the One to whom all things are subjected? Otherwise what point would there be in baptism (15:29), which looks ahead to a full life? Why would Paul risk his life in Ephesus, where he was living at the time? If we did not believe in the eventual resurrection of the body, we would be better off living as hedonists. But do we really want to be guilty of such sins?

*How* will all this come about? Paul tells us that the body will be *glorified*. The body falls into the ground like a grain of wheat. In other words, it is planted like a seed that will someday bring forth beautiful fruit. One day we will bear the image of the last Adam, i.e. Christ. Those who are alive when Christ returns will be changed in “the twinkling of an eye” (literally: in an indivisible atomic moment). Death, where is your victory when the last trumpet blows?

This awareness should activate the church. The doctrine of the resurrection is not a mere formality in our confession. No, it should stimulate us to work unstintingly in the Lord’s service, knowing that the work we do in the church is not in vain in the Lord (15:58; see also Eccl. 1:2ff; Rev. 14:13).

## **9. Concluding Remarks (16:1-24)**

*Relief for Jerusalem.* Paul draws Corinth into his program of providing economic relief for the congregation

in Jerusalem. He encourages this self-satisfied congregation to participate in ecclesiastical life. This is the best way to combat rigidity.

At the same time, he gives the Corinthian Christians a command about the sabbath. Offerings must be given regularly so that the church will be able to assist the needy.

*Love and church order.* The letter concludes with some personal remarks. Paul asks the Corinthians to put Timothy at ease, for Timothy has been sent to do the Lord's work among them. Various other names are mentioned. Paul includes a greeting written in his own handwriting. (The rest of the letter was dictated to a secretary or scribe.)

In the light of chapter 13, it shouldn't surprise us that the apostle concludes with the words: "My *love* be with you all in Christ Jesus." As you read this ending, remember that love is not some sort of vague benevolence and cheerfulness, as many people seem to think. When Paul speaks of love, he means *maintaining order in the church*. Corinth must follow in Paul's footsteps—and can do so thanks to the risen Lord.

# II Corinthians

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*But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere (2:14).*

## 1. Background Issues

*New developments in Corinth.* Erasmus, who was a well-traveled man, compared Paul's second letter to the Corinthians to a river that sometimes flows quietly, sometimes sweeps everything along with it, and sometimes disappears into the sand, only to emerge again unexpectedly. This letter has also been compared to an inexhaustible sea too wide and deep to be surveyed and understood.

Indeed, all sorts of things come through in this letter. It acquaints us with Paul as a man of passionate activity, a courageous man struggling for the church in all sorts of areas.

In the time that elapsed between the first and second letters to the Corinthians, Paul had visited Corinth again. At a congregational meeting he was insulted, without the

congregation coming to his defense. Paul did not let the matter rest: he sent Titus and one other brother (12:18) to Corinth with a letter, which has subsequently been lost. Paul himself says of this letter that it was written “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4). The appearance of Titus was intended to prepare the way for Paul’s third visit to Corinth.

*Good news.* Paul and Titus had agreed that when Paul was on his way to Corinth, they would meet in Troas. But when he arrived in Troas, Paul, with his fatherly—or perhaps motherly—heart, could not bear to wait for news, so he traveled farther and met Titus in Macedonia (perhaps Philippi or Thessalonica).

Titus had good news for him! Things had been straightened out in the congregation in Corinth, and the guilty party had been punished (2:6, 12ff; 7:5ff). “God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (7:6). Thus Paul could sing a victorious song despite all he had endured.

*Paul’s authority questioned.* Imagine Paul’s situation. He was the founder of the Corinthian congregation, and he had made great personal sacrifices for it. From the previous letter it was already apparent how much conceit and confusion there was at Corinth. What it really boiled down to was that the Corinthians didn’t think much of Paul. They didn’t deny that he knew how to write a good letter, but he wasn’t much of a speaker. Many of his enemies argued that he was a master in twisting words, changing his plans at the drop of a hat. Paul was really playing games with the Corinthian church, they argued.

Now, we all know that slanderous lies are never erased completely. Something of the bad odor always lingers. When people talked about Paul behind his back, his apostolic authority was affected. That’s why he was forced

to write an *apologia*. The issue was not Paul as a person but the Word he preached. “As God is true, the language in which we address you is not an ambiguous blend of Yes and No” (1:18 NEB).

*Attacks on God’s Word.* Those who reproached Paul for unfaithfulness when he altered his plans for the sake of God’s Word were really attacking God and His Word. And those who looked down on Paul’s manner of preaching were really denying the glory of the New Testament message. The issue for Paul was not his own personal difficulties; if need be, he could easily suffer in silence. But when the work of Christ was hindered, he could not be still. For Zion’s sake, he had to say something.

For the same reason, he also took up a financial question in chapters 8 and 9—a sensitive issue! Paul was still concerned with the planned collection on behalf of the needy saints in Jerusalem. In the last four chapters (which some identify with the lost “letter of tears” referred to in 2:4), he defended the legitimacy of his office over against certain “super-apostles” who had apparently invaded Corinth, trying all sorts of tricks to make the people despise Paul. Those false apostles were browbeating the Corinthian Christians and attacking Paul’s authority and the Word he brought.

*A positive response.* Do you see the beauty in this passage? Paul does not fall prey to bickering, self-righteousness and negative language. He overcomes evil with good and uses the accusations in a positive way to preach Christ and tell of the glory of God’s grace and redemptive history. Over against all the dark clouds and suspicious questions, he points to God’s emphatic Yes in Christ, the splendor of the New Testament Word, the power of apostolic preaching, and the sufficiency of God’s grace. Through this approach, Paul emerges the *victor* in the Lord’s power.

We should never complain that the letters of Paul are too difficult. Instead we should let ourselves be gripped by the struggle and the victory apparent in them. Then these letters will take hold of us. Thanks be to God, who always gives us the victory!

*An overview.* II Corinthians can be divided as follows. (1) Salutation and thanksgiving, 1:1-11. (2) Apologia for apostolic service, 1:12—7:16. (3) Exhortation to complete the collection for the saints in Jerusalem, chapters 8-9. (4) Unmasking of the pseudo-apostles, chapters 10-12. (5) Admonition and conclusion, chapter 13.

As far as we know, Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthians. The first, which is referred to in I Corinthians 5:9, has been lost. I Corinthians itself is the second. The third is the “letter of tears” mentioned in II Corinthians 2:4, which has also been lost, while II Corinthians is the fourth.

*Words of praise and comfort.* II Corinthians opens with the words: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” In carefully chosen words filled with meaning, Paul places his apostolic authority in the foreground. Throughout the letter, his apostolic office is referred to repeatedly.

He also writes on behalf of Timothy, who was well known in Corinth, and sends greetings to the saints of Achaia. The intention, of course, was for them to read his letter as well.

Whatever the dark clouds overhead and whatever the painful points to be made in the letter, Paul begins by praising God. We hear him use the word *comfort* repeatedly. In the province of Asia (at Ephesus), the Lord had saved him from much suffering and danger. Therefore he was not afraid to face the future. The “God of all comfort” would deliver him.

*Edification and reconciliation.* Paul takes up the issues at hand in a spirited way, for the Lord is with him. He begins by dealing with the reproaches arising from his change in travel plans. The Corinthians themselves were responsible for his not coming to Corinth as originally planned. The last time he was there it had been a painful visit, and he did not want to run the risk of a repetition.

In the middle of this explanation Paul exclaims: “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus Christ]. That is why we [the church] utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God” (1:20). Thus Paul never concerns himself exclusively with disputes and misunderstandings: he always takes pains to edify and build up the congregation. Now that the guilty party in Corinth has been punished, Paul pleads with the church to forgive him and comfort him—“or he may be overwhelmed with excessive sorrow” (2:7).

## **2. The Messenger and the Message**

*Treasure in earthen vessels.* Using the image of a triumphal procession, Paul describes his apostolic proclamation. “We are indeed the incense offered by Christ to God, both for those who are on the way to salvation, and for those who are on the way to perdition: to the latter it is a deadly fume that kills, to the former a vital fragrance that brings life” (2:15-16 NEB).

Given the criticisms that had been made of Paul, you can well understand why he would now speak at length about the proclamation of the gospel. His rivals pointed to his setbacks. Like the friends of Job, they argued: “Could a man like Paul, for whom nothing seems to go right, really be a preacher of the gospel?”

It is not easy to preach the gospel. Paul explains what he and his co-workers had to go through as servants of God:

We do nothing that people might object to, so as not to bring discredit on our function as God's servants. Instead, we prove we are servants of God by great fortitude in times of suffering; in times of hardship and distress; when we are flogged, or sent to prison, or mobbed; laboring, sleepless, starving. We prove we are God's servants by our purity, knowledge, patience and kindness; by a spirit of holiness, by a love free from affectation; by the word of truth and by the power of God; by being armed with the weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left, prepared for honor or disgrace, for blame or praise; taken for imposters while we are genuine; obscure yet famous; said to be dying and here we are alive; rumored to be executed before we are sentenced; thought most miserable and yet we are always rejoicing; taken for paupers though we make others rich, for people having nothing though we have everything (6:3-10 JB).

To make matters even worse, much of the opposition and trouble and suspicion came from *brothers*. Paul was well aware that preachers of the gospel are only earthen vessels continually exposed to death and destruction. Yet he also knew that there was treasure in those earthen vessels (4:7ff). That treasure is the New Testament gospel of atonement.

Didn't the people of Corinth see the *glory*? Even the Old Testament "dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone" tablets, made the face of Moses shine with a glory that the people could not bear to look at. "Will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendor?" (3:8).

*Obstacles to the gospel.* New Testament preaching is full of God's shining glory, despite all the affliction, suffering



and death. The Corinthians did not cover their faces as though they still lived in the time of the old covenant (3:12ff). Therefore, even if our earthly habitation collapses, the persecuted and battered Christian does not measure his lot in terms of outward success and glory and propaganda, for he knows that the Spirit is a guarantee (down payment) of the coming resurrection (4:16ff).

We should never be discouraged but should continue to preach (5:11—6:10). This also means that we should not allow ourselves to be subjected to any different yoke together with unbelievers. To grasp what Paul is getting at here, we should think not so much of Deuteronomy 22:10 as of Matthew 11:29-30 and Galatians 5:1 (the easy yoke of Christ and the yoke of slavery to extra Judaistic rules). Paul asks: “What partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (6:14-16).

When we ask what Paul was telling the Corinthian Christians to stay away from, the usual answer is that he wants to see no intimate relationships with *pagans*—in particular, no marriages. But since the context is a warning against the *Jewish* yoke of slavery, I would want to leave open the possibility that Paul is advising against close contacts with the *synagogue* and the apostate Jews, for such contacts could tarnish the glory of the preaching of the *new* covenant and block the way for Paul and the gospel he preaches. “Open your hearts to us,” Paul pleads. Fortunately, the old “issue” has been shelved. “I have great confidence in you; I have great pride in you; I am filled with comfort” (7:2-4).

*When I am weak, then I am strong (12:10).*

### **3. Jewish Christians and False Prophets**

*Aid for Jerusalem.* Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the collection for Jerusalem. Just as contemporary Jerusalem gets a great deal of help from foreign (mainly American) capital, so the holy city was in need of aid in Paul's time. Needy Jews in Jerusalem who had become Christians no longer received any financial help from the synagogue's "deacons."

Earlier Paul had brought to Judea a collection taken in Antioch (Acts 11:30). Now he was promoting the idea of taking a collection among Christians in heathen areas for the relief of the saints in the holy city. A fair amount of money had already been raised in Macedonia. Would Corinth let itself be outdone in generosity?

In order to preclude any distrust or suspicion—a sober man must always reckon with the possibility of corruption—Paul sent two reliable brothers along with Titus (perhaps Aristarchus and Luke). The relief project on Jerusalem's behalf had as its motto: "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly." Through this collection, Paul wanted to bring the unity of the church to expression. In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek.

*A drumfire of criticism.* It may be that the next part of this (ch. 10-13) letter was not written immediately after the first part. All the same, the two parts are closely bound together.

Paul was struggling for recognition as an apostle. His activities and preaching in Corinth were subjected to a steady drumfire of criticism, as the Christians there no longer saw the glory of the covenant (ch. 1-7). But however much people were inclined to yield to *Jewish* arguments, there was not much enthusiasm for the collection for the

church in Jerusalem. Here the Corinthians showed their true colors. Consequently they were in need of special exhortation (ch. 8-9).

*Jewish false prophets.* It seems that false prophets teaching untruths descended on Corinth, which they apparently regarded as a fruitful field for their labors. Those false prophets were Jews and prided themselves on their talents and their success. The song the Corinthians sometimes hummed to themselves they turned into an oratorio: Paul is really a worthless man with the smell of death about him, a man with little success and spiritual experience to his credit.

These new apostles had a great deal to glory in and brag about—both hidden talents and publicly demonstrated abilities (10:7ff; 11:5ff). In truth, the false prophets in Corinth were hardly distinguishable from the swaggering false prophets under the old covenant.

*Setting the record straight.* Paul knows the people he is dealing with. Earlier he appealed to the Corinthians' sense of honor, and now he turns to satire to bring them to their senses. The message he drives home again is indescribably beautiful: in this dispute, too, the real issue is not a man called Paul but *Jesus Christ*, who chooses to reveal the glory of His grace through a weak instrument like the apostle.

Paul does not like to talk about himself. But if these “superlative apostles” (11:5) who are really out for money, who devour God’s people just as though they were eating bread (vs. 20; Ps. 14:4; Ezek. 34:3ff), start glorying in themselves, Paul (whose name means *small*) can also find a few things to brag about. He will boast about his afflictions and his weakness. He can present a virtual catalogue of misfortunes (11:23ff). Moreover, he is of Jewish descent and has also received revelations (vs. 22;

12:1ff). Although he suffers a thorn in the flesh, he enjoys comfort. Like Christ in Gethsemane, he prayed three times for relief, but he was given an oracular answer that made him just as strong as Jeremiah or Ezekiel: “My grace is *all you need*; power comes to its full strength in weakness” (12:9 NEB).

Paul recognizes these false prophets who appeal to base desires and seek to win followers by boasting and by dazzling displays for what they are—apostles of untruth, servants of satan, false, anti-Christian prophets. After all, it is the last hour. Satan is exceptionally busy on the day of salvation (6:2).

*Another visit.* Paul was about to go to Corinth for the third time (12:14; 13:1). In the name of Christ, who became poor for our sakes (8:9) and was crucified in weakness (13:4), Paul would become weak in Him. At the same time he would live for the Corinthians out of the power of God (13:4).

On his third visit Paul would spare no one and nothing from criticism. The congregation would have a final opportunity to equip itself for what might lie ahead and to subject itself to the office of apostle. “Mend your ways and heed my appeal,” wrote Paul (13:11). He concluded with some beautiful and familiar words: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Don’t forget that this benediction comes *after* numerous admonitions. This should encourage us to go further with that seemingly weak apostolic Word. Stay away from the false boasting of the false prophets. Christ’s grace is sufficient for us.

# Galatians

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## 1. Paul's Purpose in Writing

*Galatia*. The letter to the Galatians was an encyclical, a letter intended for all the churches of Galatia. But what did Paul mean by *Galatia*? There was indeed an area that bore this name. The people who lived there could properly be called “Galatians”; they were originally Gauls or Celts who had come to Asia Minor in the third century B.C. as mercenaries. Galatia was the area around the ancient city of Ancyra (now Ankara).

Just as *Holland* was originally the name of part of a country but is now used to refer to the entire Netherlands, so the name *Galatians* came to have a broader meaning. The Roman province of Galatia also took in some territory to the *south*, including such cities as Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, Lycaonia, and Antioch in Pisidia. Paul had visited these cities during his “first” missionary journey. Was the Letter to the Galatians intended for these churches too?

It is striking that in I Corinthians 16:1, Paul speaks of a collection taken in the churches of *Galatia*, while in Acts

20:4 we learn that the delegation bringing the money to Jerusalem included Gaius from *Derbe* and Timothy from *Lystra*, two cities in the area south of Galatia itself.

*“God-fearing” Gentiles.* Most of the members of the Galatian churches were Gentiles, but we must bear in mind that many of them were originally among the “God-fearing” Gentiles who attended the services in the synagogues (see Acts 13:43). This explains why Paul could go into the Old Testament so much when addressing the Galatians.

In this letter there is mention of *Jewish* persecution of the churches. From Acts we learn just how active the Jews in southern Galatia were in opposing the doctrine of Christ (13:45, 50; 14:4ff, 19; see also II Tim. 3:11). This fits in well with the situation sketched in 5:11 and 6:12. For these and other reasons, we must assume that this letter was addressed first and foremost to the churches in *southern Galatia*,\* the region from which the gospel had doubtless spread north into the area formally known as Galatia.

*Time of writing.* Calvin, who chooses for the “northern” hypothesis with regard to Galatia, observes

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\*The similarities between the Letter to the Galatians and the speech Paul made in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia (which was part of the province of Galatia) are striking. Compare:

Acts 13:23, 32	with Galatians 3:16-17; 4:4
13:29	3:13
13:20	1:1
13:27	4:25
13:39	2:16; 3:11, 21

Moreover, the route from the south to the area properly called Galatia (Ancyra) passes through a tortuous area full of salt lakes. It is highly unlikely that Paul took this route.

that the letter to the Galatians must have been written *before* the meeting described in Acts 15. Otherwise Paul could have put a quick stop to the argument by pointing to the decision already made that Gentiles were not required to undergo circumcision. Calvin's argument is correct. Galatians must have been written after the "first" missionary journey and just before the so-called "Council of Jerusalem" in the year 48, where the other apostles upheld Paul's policy in these matters.\*

*Laws and rites.* False teaching was on the rise within the Galatian churches. A gospel suited to Jewish ritualism was being proclaimed. It was argued that becoming a Christian meant being incorporated into Israel. Because Israel accepted *circumcision* as a sign of the covenant, it was a foregone conclusion that a Gentile who became a Christian would be circumcised (5:2) and would also observe other provisions of the law when certain days, months, seasons, and years came (4:10). The agitators argued that Paul's gospel was only a secondhand gospel, whereas they were presenting the unfalsified *Jerusalem* gospel, which bore the stamp of the "real" apostles.

The Galatian Christians of heathen background had an ear for such arguments. A heathen is accustomed to making his salvation dependent on the keeping of a set of

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\*According to the Tübingen school, Acts 15 and the story related in Galatians 2:1-10 are really the same event. These scholars made much of the differences between the two accounts and argued that Luke was a later, unreliable author who altered the story considerably for his own purposes. It seems to me that we should take Acts 11:30; 12:25; and Galatians 2:1ff as dealing with the same visit of Paul to Jerusalem after his conversion and calling, which would be his *second* visit. (Hence the use of the word *again* in 2:1.) What is described in Acts 9:26-9 would then be his first visit to Jerusalem, while what is described in Acts 15 would be his *third* visit.

laws or regulations. When he becomes a Christian, he is suddenly confronted with a freedom he has not known before. Because he experiences this freedom as emptiness, he wants to fill the void by turning the gospel into a new law and again tying himself down to all sorts of rituals and regulations. Think of the elaborate ceremonies in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Think also of the yearning in newly established mission churches in heathen territories to introduce all sorts of rites into the worship services.

To yield to such pressures is to build a bridge *back to heathendom*. Paul was keenly aware of this. The Galatians were turning back the clock of redemptive history and were in fact returning to the “first principles,” the ABCs of heathendom, even though this heathendom was now given a Jewish flavor so that it would seem innocent and in tune with the Bible.

*Circumcision.* The teachers of false doctrines had another weapon in their arsenal: the authorities regarded anyone who was circumcised as a Jew, a member of an officially tolerated religious group. The Jews, who could make things difficult for the Christians in the various regions, would not create problems for a circumcised Christian who celebrated the Passover. From this point of view, at least, it appeared that there was something to be said for circumcision. Circumcision would make things easier for the Christians.

In fact, these false teachers, who may have been Gentiles who had submitted to circumcision themselves (see 6:13), were trying to escape persecution by *taking the side of the persecutors*. That’s why Paul opposed their half-heartedness so strongly (see Rev. 21:8). The Galatians had been bewitched, and therefore some strong language would be necessary to break the spell. It was a matter of life or death for the church, for the gospel was at issue.



## 2. Paul's Gospel Is the Gospel of Christ Jesus

*Commissioned by Christ.* Paul throws the full weight of his divine calling into the argument when he opens his letter by declaring: "From Paul, an apostle, not by human appointment or human commission, but by commission from Jesus Christ and from God the Father" (1:1 NEB). He wanted it to be clear from the very outset that he was not passing on any prophecies of his own; he was speaking as a fully authorized representative of Christ.

As a herald, Paul brings the one true gospel. He does not approach the Galatians as a diplomat, nor does he beg for their attention. There is no gospel other than the gospel he *commands* them to believe. Cursed be anyone who brings some other gospel! Why do the Galatians listen to a false gospel? Why do they let themselves be convinced that Paul brought a gospel of his own devising rather than the real gospel of the mother church in Jerusalem?

Paul himself had been sharply opposed to the gospel at first. Yet Christ Jesus had confronted him in person with the gospel. Thus Paul's tradition was *Christ's tradition*. Paul, the persecutor of the Christians, received a special revelation from Jesus Christ in which he was not only confronted with the gospel but also commissioned to proclaim it to the Gentiles. The gospel Paul preached was not a human gospel, then. That's why he immediately started preaching the gospel on his own in Damascus and the surrounding area.

*Paul's acceptance in Jerusalem.* Not until three years had passed did Paul come to Jerusalem to confer with Peter (Cephas). This pilgrimage to the holy city was in a certain sense a *test*. Paul also met James, the brother of Jesus, who was regarded by many as *the* Christian. During this visit Paul was *not* criticized. When he went to work in

Syria and Cilicia, the congregation in Judea praised the Lord on account of his work!

Later he visited Jerusalem again, this time with Earnabas and Titus, a Gentile who had never been circumcised. Was Paul criticized for this, and was Titus told that he should be circumcised? Not at all. The “pillars” of the church in Jerusalem received Paul and Titus as brothers. They were not told to live by any ceremonial regulations. The only request made of them was that they continue to think of the poor in Jerusalem (1:11—2:10).

Paul’s freedom and independence were also clear on an occasion in Antioch in Syria when he sat down at the same table as Peter and some former pagans. When certain brothers from James’ circle in Jerusalem appeared, Peter withdrew and chose to eat in a kosher Jewish setting instead so that the Jews from Jerusalem would not criticize him. When the other Jews (including Barnabas) followed his example, Paul spoke out and told Peter a thing or two. Hadn’t Peter himself eaten with Gentiles in the home of Cornelius? (Acts 10-11). Did he now propose to force the Gentiles to live by regulations that he himself did not follow consistently?

### **3. Justification Not by Works But by Faith**

*The law as a schoolmaster.* Didn’t the bewitched Galatians remember what gospel had been presented to them? It was a gospel proclaiming that Jews and Gentiles alike are justified by faith. Had the Galatians been granted the Spirit because they were faithful in doing the ritual works of the law? Of course not! They received the Spirit because they accepted the message of justification by faith (3:2).

The Galatians should not allow themselves to be misled by the fact that Israel was a privileged people. Abraham was justified by *faith* (3:6; Gen. 15:6). All who believe are *his* children.

There was a time when the law played a central role in God's dealings with His people, but it never had the function of bringing about a saving righteousness. The law is a schoolmaster, a pedagogue leading us to Christ. It convinces Jews of the necessity of believing in the One who bore the entire curse of the law when He was on the cross.

*Heirs through faith.* All who believe are children of God in Christ Jesus (3:26). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (vs. 28-9).

It is not correct to declare simply that we are all children of one Father. Neither is it correct to say that one becomes a child of God through circumcision. The heirs of the promise to Abraham are those who believe—regardless of their race, sex, or social standing.

*Characteristic differences.* In our time Galatians 3:28 is often quoted by people who otherwise show little interest in the Bible. They use this text to "prove" that Christ does away with all distinctions between races and nations. This text is also read as a defense of the goals of the women's liberation movement and a condemnation of all differences between social and economic "classes."

But what Paul actually says here is not that the characteristic differences between races and ethnic groups have been or should be done away with. He always respected such differences: the Jew is a Jew and the Greek a Greek. Neither did he advocate doing away with all "social" differences (see I Cor. 7:20-1). He also opposed

any effort to downplay the differences between the sexes: women are women and should not try to act like men (I Cor. 11:2ff; 14:34ff; Eph. 5:24, 33; I Tim. 2:9ff).

Paul did favor nations, individuals, servants, and women developing in their own unique ways: the Greek remains a Greek, and the woman remains a woman. Yet, all share equally in the one promise and inheritance. This will make the Greek a good Greek, the woman a genuine woman, and the servant a faithful servant. The gospel does not preach revolution. It is unfair and misleading of certain people today to appropriate Galatians 3:28 as their motto without taking the context and Paul's other statements into account.

*Freedom and slavery.* Through Christ and the Spirit, we can all address God as our Father. The children and heirs of the promise made to Abraham have come of age. God had His Son born under the law in order to free us of its oppressive yoke.

Paul tells us that Christ bore the curse of the law—he does not call it the “accursed” law—and thereby bought our freedom (3:13). Why should pagans whose conversion has freed them of the “first principles” of the world or the ABCs of natural religion, now be brought back to the *Jewish* “first principles”? (4:9, 3). That would amount to exchanging the freedom they had gained for a *new slavery*!

As we read this appeal, we sense that Paul's work is at stake here. “I am afraid that I have labored over you in vain” (4:11). What a reception he had received from the Galatians on his first visit! He was recognized as a messenger of God, a representative of Christ Jesus. What was left of that reception now? (4:15). The Galatians were accepting all sorts of untruths propagated by false teachers. They had turned away from Paul, their “mother”—and thereby Christ and His gospel.

#### 4. Slavery or Freedom

*Children of Hagar.* Because the false teachers appealed to the law (the Torah), Paul proves from the Torah that only the gospel makes us free. Is it so strange to argue that the children of Abraham (i.e. Jerusalem's Jews and their followers) are enmeshed in slavery?

Just look inside Abraham's tents, and you'll find a child born of Abraham and the slave Hagar—Ishmael. He was born as a result of Abraham's fleshly planning and calculation. Moreover, this slave's son made fun of *Isaac* and even persecuted him. Isaac, of course, is the child born of a free mother; he was begotten according to the Spirit and through the promise. This situation in Abraham's tents should suggest something to the Galatians: there are *two* kinds of children of Abraham!

Paul drew the attention of the Galatians to "Jerusalem" with its salvation by ritual works of the law, the Jerusalem that persecuted the church of Christ. Doesn't that Jerusalem look just like Hagar, and doesn't it bring forth children enslaved to the ABCs of the old covenant's shadow service, which the Galatians gave up when they were converted? They should remember the Jerusalem above, the Jerusalem that resembles *Sarah*. Of this Jerusalem Isaiah sang: "Sing, O barren woman, you who [like Sarah] never bore a child" (Is. 54:1 NIV).

*Robbing the cross of its power.* The Galatians must also bear in mind that God ordered Abraham to send the slave Hagar and her son away, for Ishmael was not to be an heir (Gen. 21:10). Therefore they were to break with the Jewish spirit of the synagogue, which would subject them to slavery again and rob them of their inheritance, with a new heathendom as the result. Pointing to the practices of the Phrygian and Galatian pagans, Paul joked: "As for those

agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!” (5:12 NIV).

You are called to be free, brothers! Anyone who agrees to circumcision under these circumstances may escape persecution by the Jews, but he will pay a heavy price. He will rob that offensive cross of its power. Christ will be of no advantage to him since he chooses for slavery (5:11, 1-2). God wants us to be free, and freedom cannot be bought at any price; it is ours through faith.

*Undisciplined conduct.* Paul knew the Galatian churches too well to end his letter without issuing a warning against false freedom. There were many who wanted to be liberated but quickly turned their newly won freedom into undisciplined conduct. They thought that as free people they could safely let the sinful “flesh” have free reign.

That was not the freedom Paul was preaching. He spoke of a freedom that lets itself be led by the Spirit. Such freedom knows what *service* is. True freedom willingly gives itself to others in love. The fruit of the Spirit consists in avoiding the works of the flesh and manifesting joy, patience, friendliness, and self-control. “If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit” (5:25).

*Freedom to serve.* Like good soldiers, we must march in our assigned place in the formation. We must not get in the way of others; instead we must help our brothers gently and restore them to their place when they go astray.

The Spirit’s marching orders require us to fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another’s burdens. And let no one imagine that he is stronger than the others. We may look strong when we compare ourselves to the weakest among us, but each of us is far from what he should be. Each of us must shoulder his own load.

We will reap what we sow. “Sowing” in the good sense involves the obligation to do acts of mercy (vs. 10) and to

help support those who teach (6:6). Our freedom is a freedom to serve.

## 5. Summary and Closing in Paul's Own Hand

*A personal note.* Although Paul usually dictated his letters, at the end he added a few comments in his own handwriting. "You see these big letters?" he asked. "I am now writing to you in my own hand" (6:11 NEB). Paul's apparent inability to write in small, neat letters has sometimes been attributed to the manual labor he did or to some injury he may have received when he was stoned and left for dead.

Some interpreters assume that Paul used his own "chicken scratch" to give the Galatians some comic relief. But a better explanation is that the apostle wanted to emphasize his *office* once more (see 1:1ff) and thereby underscore his chief message in this letter. Pay attention, you Galatians! This is the real issue!

*Glorying in the cross.* The agitators who pretend to be so concerned with what Scripture says are showing off, Paul declares. The real motive behind their argument is fear: they are afraid of persecution and hope to escape it by bearing the Jewish sign of circumcision. Moreover, they are not consistent, for it doesn't occur to them to keep the entire law. These halfhearted, inconsistent people simply want to boast about all the converts they have made; they want to boast about introducing circumcision. "As for me, the only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (6:14 JB).

I will always glory in that cross, declares Paul. The cross has cut the ties between the sinful "world" and the

believer. Through the cross a new creation has become possible, for Christ now lives in those in whom the old nature has died (6:15; 2:20). It is there that we find life according to the Spirit, which is a life in *freedom*.

The Galatians now know what is at stake. If they wish to become part of Israel (the church of the Messiah), they must not be talked into accepting the Jewish sign of circumcision. That would amount to sinking back into a heathen religion in which man glories in his own works.

*A beacon for the church.* The ancient synagogue prayed that God would give peace, salvation, blessing, favor, grace, and mercy to “all Israel” as His people. This prayer will be heard if it is prayed *in Christ*, declares Paul, who bore on his body the marks of his suffering (*stigmata*) for the gospel. Those who “stay in line” and “march in formation” according to the canon or rule of glorying only in Christ will share in the Messianic blessing over the new Israel, the Israel made up of people of all nations.

This rule is a clear beacon for the entire church, which is constantly in danger of binding itself to “marks” and laws that go beyond the Word, such as those based on tradition, race, speculation, or experience. “It does not matter if a person is circumcised or not; what matters is for him to become an altogether *new* creature. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, who form the *Israel* of God” (6:15-16 JB).



# Ephesians

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## 1. Paul's Intended Audience

*An encyclical.* In many of the manuscripts of the Letter to the Ephesians, the name *Ephesus* does not occur in the first verse. That's why the Revised Standard Version has left it out, although the King James Bible includes it.

This has led some scholars to regard the Letter to the Ephesians as a circular letter meant for the churches in Ephesus and the surrounding area. They point out that Paul does mention Tychicus as the one who delivered the letter but does not single out members of a particular congregation for greetings. The letter has a general character and does not address any special situation in a particular church. Thus there is a great deal to be said for the view that Ephesians, like Galatians, is actually an *encyclical*, a circular letter intended for a number of churches.

Paul indicates in this letter that he was imprisoned at the time of writing (6:20). Just where he was in prison he does not tell us. Perhaps it was in Caesarea (Acts 23:23ff). It appears that this letter was written at about the same time

as Colossians and Philemon, for Tychicus is also mentioned as the one who delivered the letter to the Colossians, and Onesimus is mentioned as his companion (Col. 4:7ff).

*Ephesians and Colossians.* As far as content goes, there are striking similarities between Ephesians and Colossians. Scholars have even spoken of a “synoptic problem” in this context. Consider the following parallel passages:

**Ephesians**

He has put *all things* under his feet and has made him the *head* over all things for the *church*, which is his *body* (1:22-3).

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the *blood* of Christ. For he is our *peace* (2:13-14).

**Colossians**

In him *all things* hold together. He is the *head* of the *body*, the *church* (1:17-18).

. . . and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making *peace* by the *blood* of his cross (1:20).

Moreover, both these epistles contain a section of admonition addressed to wives, husbands, children, fathers, slaves, and masters (Eph. 5:22—6:9 and Col. 3:18—4:1).

Despite the similarities, each letter has its own distinctive nature. The relation between them is much like the relation between the first three “gospels,” which do indeed have a lot in common even though each one manifests a unique emphasis and goal.

When we read Colossians, we are not to assume beforehand that we know what it says from reading Ephesians. However familiar the various expressions in Colossians might seem, the letter is intended first and foremost to combat a certain false teaching, whereas that’s not the purpose at all in Ephesians.

## 2. A Song of Praise to the Electing Grace of the Triune God (1:1—3:21)

*Paul's psalm.* After a few words of greeting and blessing, Paul sings the praises of the triune God through the words of the longest sentence in the Bible. (Although 1:3-14 is normally broken up into various sentences in translations, it is all one sentence in Greek.) The Father (vs. 3ff), the Son (vs. 3, 5ff), and the Spirit (vs. 13) are all mentioned in connection with *election*, that is, God's sovereign, free choice.

Paul's words are a mighty psalm in honor of the sovereign grace of the Lord, which is the foundation of the calling of the church. Calvin comments on this passage as follows:

The foundation and first cause, both of our calling and of all the benefits which we receive from God, is here declared to be his eternal election. If the reason is asked, why God has called us to enjoy the gospel, why he daily bestows upon us so many blessings, why he opens to us the gate of heaven,—the answer will be constantly found in this principle, that *he hath chosen us before the foundation of the world*. The very time when the election took place proves it to be free; for what could we have deserved, or what merit did we possess, before the world was made?\*

The sanctification of the church, the forgiveness of its sins through Christ, the seal of the Holy Spirit as a guarantee of the coming inheritance—all this is possible only through God's election in Christ. There is no room for boasting about human achievements. In his song of praise, Paul honors God's sovereign free choice.

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\**Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh, 1854), pp. 197-8.

*A reason for rejoicing.* Why a song of praise? There are many who regard the doctrine of election as a reason for lamentation instead. But that attitude is directly contrary to Scripture. Dr. C. Trimp writes:

Election, about which people argue and brood so much, does not exist. God exists—the God of election. Haven't you been able to see Him coming through the jungle of your sins as He cuts a path toward your life? You have in fact seen Him coming toward you—when He determined the time of your birth and the place of your baptism and decided to provide you with a Christian upbringing and the desire to make public profession of your faith. Doesn't it go without saying that you received all of this? Yet, aren't there many people to whom God did not come in this way? Then know your God on the basis of these revealed things in the light of His Word, and you will catch sight of your election.\*

The beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians should dry many of our tears about election. Paul presents election as a reason for rejoicing.

*A prayer for more knowledge.* Paul is certain that his readers share the sentiments expressed in his song. For this he gives thanks to God. At the same time, he prays that the triune God will give them even greater knowledge of the glory of Christ (1:15-23). Christ is seated on His throne in heaven above all the angelic powers, that is, “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (vs. 21).

A believer never claims to have enough knowledge of faith; he always presses on to know his Redeemer better

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\**De Schat van Christus' Bruid*, by H. J. Meyerink, C. Trimp, and G. Zomer (Goes, 1958), p. 85.

(see Phil. 3:10-14). The *body* (the church) is intimately related to the *Head* (Christ).

What a world of sin and corruption Christ has redeemed the church from! “By *grace* you have been saved through faith; and this is *not your own doing*, it is the gift of God” (2:8). This text could well be carved in gold letters in every worship sanctuary. The church’s salvation is not a “matter of course.”

*Gentiles as fellow heirs.* Think of the pagans, who were originally “separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:12). Christ, by fulfilling the law of Moses, has removed this last obstacle, opening the way for pagans to receive full membership in the church too.

Christ breaks down the “wall of separation”; through the Prince of peace, Jews and Greeks are united in one church. There is no place for anti-Semitism or nationalistic pride, for there are no second-class Christians. All Christians together form one temple, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone (2:11-22).

The apostle was well aware that the abolition of any separation between Jew and Gentile was something *new* (3:4-5). Precisely because he preached the gospel to the *Gentiles*, he became a prisoner. Yet Paul accepted his imprisonment willingly, for he was not acting on his own authority; it was the Spirit that revealed to him the mystery that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and share in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. To Paul, once a persecutor of Christians, fell a great honor through God’s eternal election—the honor of preaching to the Gentiles and making known to the angelic powers God’s wonderful wisdom in gathering His church even among the Gentiles (3:8ff).

### **3. One Body, One Spirit, One Lord, One God and Father (4:1—6:9)**

*Preserving unity.* The church is made up of people—sinful people and even some exasperating, annoying people. Quarrels occur all too often, and even minor differences can be blown up into major issues—to say nothing of the trouble that can result from differences in race or national origin. When converted Gentiles and converted Jews are members of the same congregation, they can easily wind up fighting like cats and dogs.

Paul, who suffered imprisonment for preaching to the Gentiles, now addresses an appeal to his readers to preserve what God has given, i.e. redemption and unity. Like election, unity is grounded in the triune God. Notice how the doctrine of the Trinity comes out in his appeal:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, eager to *maintain the unity of the Spirit* in the bond of peace. There is one body and one *Spirit*, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one *Lord*, one faith, one baptism, one *God and Father* of us all (4:1, 3-6).

*A life of daily conversion.* According to Psalm 68:19, Christ gave Pentecost gifts to the church when He ascended to heaven. The congregation must draw support from those gifts. Through the Word officially proclaimed, the church must attain *maturity* so that it is no longer misled but shows its *readiness to serve*. Instructed by Christ's Word (4:20), the church also learns how to kill the old nature and put on the new nature as we put on clothes. This means living a life of daily conversion, a life aimed at sanctification. We must walk as children of light (5:8).

Paul works this out in a practical way in connection with person-to-person relationships (4:25ff). Every member of the body must strive for the edification or upbuilding of the other members. A life sanctified by the Spirit must take the place of the hedonist, heathen outlook that leaves room for lying, bearing grudges, stealing (4:25ff), unrestrained drinking leading to ecstasy (5:18), and other such evils. The antithesis between the life of a Christian and the life of a heathen must come to clear expression. The unfruitful works of darkness must be unmasked and exposed for what they are. “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead,” declares Paul, “and *Christ* shall give you light” (5:14). This may be a quotation from a Christian adaptation of Isaiah’s thanksgiving song of the redeemed (Is. 26:19), an adaptation that includes elements of the priestly blessing (Num. 6:25).

*Family relationships.* Pointing to various areas of life, Paul shows *how* conversion must be made apparent. No yearning for emancipation may be allowed to distort the relationship between a wife and her husband. The husband, likewise, must not forget that his wife is his own flesh and blood. The relationship between a husband and his wife should reflect the relationship between Christ and His church. Christ is the loving husband, the *Head* of the bride and church that respects and honors Him (5:22-3).

Children are not to be stirred up by any spirit of revolution. Moreover, fathers are not to embitter their children by exercising their authority in a foolish or arbitrary way; instead they must “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (6:4).

*Masters and slaves.* Slaves are not to whittle away at the authority of their masters by rejecting the role of servant:

Slaves, be obedient to the men who are called your masters in this world, with deep respect and sincere loyalty, as you are obedient to Christ: not only when you are under their eye, as if you had only to please men, but because you are slaves of Christ and wholeheartedly do the will of God. Work hard and willingly, but do it for the sake of the Lord and not for the sake of men (6:5-7 JB).

Masters must reciprocate by not threatening their slaves or abusing them; after all, they, too, have a Lord (*Kurios*) or Master in heaven, one who is no respecter of persons.

These are golden words for our age with its crisis of authority. *Only in Jesus Christ* can we expect a genuine restoration of human relationships in the family and throughout society in general.

#### **4. The Whole Armor of God (6:10-24)**

*Equipped for the struggle.* The process of reformation never proceeds automatically. God calls us to a struggle. That's why Paul gives us his well-known description of the whole armor of God and tells us to put it on (6:10ff).

We hear a lot about "spiritual armor" in connection with this passage. The various items needed by the Christian soldier are equated with *human* qualities: the girdle of truth means speaking the truth about our neighbor, the breastplate of righteousness means giving everyone his due, and the shield of faith represents our own deeds of faith.

But we should note that Paul also speaks of the helmet of salvation, which is the salvation brought about by *God*



(Is. 59:17), and the sword of the Spirit,\* which is the Word of *God* (Is. 49:2; 11:4). If these last two pieces of equipment really point to God, what about the other three? Do they perhaps symbolize deeds and qualities of God rather than virtues of men?

*Old Testament echoes.* Some of these famous phrases associated with Paul are already to be found in Isaiah. This prophet says of the Messiah: “Righteousness shall be the girdle of his waist, and faithfulness the girdle of his loins” (Is. 11:5). Thus the “girdle” is one of the Messiah’s virtues. We also read: “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head” (Is. 59:17). This righteousness is the Lord’s *redeeming* righteousness.

The language Paul uses in this famous passage in Ephesians echoes the Old Testament. Paul wants to show the weak, wavering church living in the midst of all the entanglements of a heathen world (and later in a secularized world) that it may enter the struggle equipped with the whole armor of *God*. *His* covenant faithfulness (*truth*) will serve as a girdle or belt. *His* redeeming justification (*righteousness*) can be its breastplate. *His* gospel of peace (see Is. 52:7) prepares its feet. (Note how often Paul draws on Isaiah.)

The content of our confession about *Him* is a shield that protects us. He gives the church *His* helmet and sword for both offensive and defensive purposes. Above all, the struggling church is allowed to turn to its God in prayer in the midst of the battle.

*Worthiness.* The apostle ends by appealing to those who

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\*Because of the expression *the sword of the Spirit*, Christian artists have sometimes depicted Paul with a sword in his hand. Think of Dürer’s painting “The Four Apostles.”

read the letter or hear it read not to forget him in his imprisonment, so that the Lord will give him strength to proclaim the gospel. Paul was a prisoner because he preached the gospel of Jesus as Messiah to the *Gentiles*.

He was not ashamed to be in prison. His suffering for his “principles” was also an honor for the Gentiles, for it showed that someone was standing up for their rights as fellow heirs of the promise and citizens of the Kingdom of God (3:1-3, 13; 2:11ff).

Yet, those once excluded from citizenship in Israel who are now reckoned as members of God’s household must show themselves *worthy* of their noble standing. Paul *begins* the second part of his letter with a reminder that he is a “prisoner for the Lord” (4:1). That’s also how he *concludes* his exhortation, describing himself as an “ambassador in chains” (6:20).

Will it turn out that he sowed in vain, that his suffering and struggles to win over the Gentiles were of no lasting effect? “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called,” he writes (4:1). “Therefore, take up God’s armour; and pray for me, that I may be granted the right words when I open my mouth, and may boldly and freely make known his hidden purpose, for which I am an ambassador—in chains” (6:13, 19-20 NEB).

# Philippians

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*I miss you very much, dear friends; you are my joy and my crown (4:1 JB).*

## **1. Paul's Ties with the Philippians**

*A short ministry.* Philippi was the first city on the European continent where Paul established a church. In Acts 16 we read the story of his ministry in Philippi, which includes Lydia's conversion as well as the episode involving the demon-possessed slave girl who was used by her masters as a fortune-teller. Because Paul got into trouble for driving the demon out of the girl, he could not stay in Philippi long.

Luke had been traveling with Paul, but he apparently stayed behind when Paul left. Not until many years had passed did he join Paul again as a travel companion, this time to deliver to Jerusalem the collection taken by the young Gentile churches.

*Close ties.* The Biblical givens about Philippi give us a very good impression of this young congregation. Paul

maintained close ties with this church and called it “my joy and crown” (4:1).

It is striking how often the words *joy* and *rejoice* occur in this letter (1:4, 18, 25; 2:18, 28-9; 3:1; 4:1, 4). There was also joy during Paul’s initial visit to Philippi, when he and Silas sang hymns in jail (Acts 16:25). Their joy, which was rooted in their faith, had apparently carried over to the congregation. For Luke, who seems to have settled down in Philippi as a physician, joy is also a recurring motif (see, for example, Luke 2:10; 15:5ff).

From the very beginning, the relation between Paul and the congregation in Philippi was warm and pure. Things got off to a good start when Lydia invited Paul and his companions to stay at her home. (Normally Paul preferred to provide for his own lodgings.) The good relation continued in the contributions the church later made to the apostle to support him in his work.

While Paul did not want to be a burden to other congregations (e.g. Corinth) and was especially careful to avoid any appearance of greed, he accepted the gifts of the Macedonian brethren gratefully (II Cor. 11:8-9; Phil. 4: 4ff). One of his reasons for writing this letter to the Macedonians was that he had just received a charitable gift sent to him by the congregation in Philippi by way of Epaphroditus.

*A letter from prison.* At that moment Paul was a prisoner for the sake of the gospel that Jesus is also the Messiah of the Gentiles. We know from II Corinthians 11:23 that he was arrested often. Some scholars take it that he was imprisoned in Ephesus at the time of writing, but it seems more likely that it was in Caesarea, or perhaps Rome.

While Epaphroditus was helping Paul in all sorts of ways during his imprisonment, he fell deathly ill. The congregation in Philippi became very concerned about the

illness of the messenger and servant sent to minister to Paul (2:25). But God was merciful to Epaphroditus, and therefore Paul could send him back to the anxious Philippians. Thus the Letter to the Philippians was intended in part as a statement of good conduct for the returning Epaphroditus. The apostle praised this “minister” in carefully chosen words and thanked the Philippians for the “offering” he had received (2:25ff; 4:14-20).

It should not surprise us that Paul’s letter goes into all sorts of situations in the congregation. The traffic between the various churches made it possible for news to get around. Hence Paul was not entirely ignorant of what was happening in Philippi. Furthermore, he could draw on Epaphroditus’s knowledge of events. Because Paul enjoyed the standing of a “father” in the church at Philippi, he could be sure that his admonitions would be received in the proper spirit and that Epaphroditus would not be condemned for “telling tales.”

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## **2. Progress and Joy in the Faith (1:1-26)**

*Paul’s delight.* People today are eager for progress; they want to see advancement in their own lives and in society generally. The Bible rejects any false progressive attitude in which we claim to know better than the Word (I Cor. 4:6; II John, vs. 9). Yet this does not yet mean that the Bible is against progress as such, as we see from what Paul (and Timothy) wrote to the saints at Philippi (i.e. the members of the congregation there) together with their overseers and deacons. (The Greek word for *overseer* is *episkopos*, from which our word *bishop* is derived via a circuitous route.)

Paul is delighted that the Philippians share in the gospel,

and he is convinced that the one who has begun a good work in them will “bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (1:6). Paul also prays that the love of the Philippians will come out more and more in clear insight and discernment, so that they will develop a keen sense of right and wrong (vs. 9-10). The apostle wants to see them make progress in equipping themselves with knowledge!

*Impure motives.* To comfort the Philippians, Paul tells them that what he has undergone has served to advance the gospel. It became clear to the praetorian guard that Paul was in chains not because of any political extremism but because he proclaimed the gospel of Jesus as the Christ. This encouraged other preachers of the gospel, although some regarded it as a reason to preach with impure motives, i.e. “pretense” (1:18). Nevertheless, Paul rejoiced in his situation, for the gospel was *advancing*!

Now, some people take 1:18 to mean that it really doesn’t matter what doctrine is taught. They claim we have reason to rejoice whenever the gospel is brought in a veiled way. But Paul is not talking about bringing an *impure* gospel; he is talking about bringing the pure gospel of Christ with impure *motives*, which is something quite different. The sinful eagerness of some preachers to gain prestige, he points out, will not block the advance of the gospel.

*Back in harness.* Paul expects to be in harness again before long. For him to die is gain. If he were to think of himself alone, he would choose to be freed of his task in order to be with Christ. Yet, Paul is not animated by an egoistic desire for heaven. For him to live is Christ—and also to do *fruitful work*!

Isn’t it wonderful that Paul thinks not just of his own advancement but also of the progress of the church? While there may be peace elsewhere, the issue is the advancement

of the Philippians (1:25). The church that builds itself a quiet retreat in the countryside where it can enjoy “peace” is on the verge of dying. To live is Christ, that is, to do *fruitful work*.

### **3. Christian Citizenship and Lifestyle (1:27—2:18)**

*A community centered in heaven.* As the struggle continues, the Philippians must *stand firm* in the Spirit (1:27). In 3:20 Paul speaks of the “*politeuma*” in heaven. The Revised Standard Version reads: “But our commonwealth is in heaven,” while the New English Bible renders this text as: “We, by contrast, are citizens of heaven.” In the word *politeuma* we hear the word *polis*, which means *city* or *city-state* and is also the root of our word *politics*. The church, then, is a community of citizens with its center in heaven, where the Messiah is, the One who will one day return to glorify the church in soul and body.

Paul’s use of the word *politeuma* here has been read by some scholars as a reference to the fact that Philippi was an ancient Roman military colony. What Paul meant to say, according to this view, is: “Philippians, you are citizens of *two* realms, that is, citizens of Rome and citizens of Christ.” But the New Testament does not recognize or presuppose any such division. The authorities are servants of God or “*leitourgoi*” (Rom. 13:1ff). In Philippi the authorities had to apologize to Paul for mistreating him (Acts 16:35ff). Therefore he must have had some other contrast in mind.

*Opposition from the synagogue.* The synagogue’s community of Jews in a certain place was sometimes called a “*politeuma*,” for the members of such a community

formed a closely connected unity oriented toward Jerusalem. The word that Paul uses in 1:27 when he speaks of “your manner of life” (*politeuesthai*) is also used to refer to the *Jewish* “manner of life.”

This gives depth to Paul’s admonitions. In Philippi, too, the synagogue must have made things difficult for the church. Just as Moses in his song called apostate Israel a “perverse generation” (Deut. 32:5, 20), so Paul speaks of a “crooked and perverse generation” in the midst of which God’s chosen people must live (2:15). What he meant, no doubt, was the Israel that had broken the covenant, including the Judaizing false teachers.

*Conduct befitting the gospel.* The “earthly” Jewish *politeuma* stands over against the *politeuma* anchored in the heavens. We, by contrast, are a *politeuma* of heaven; we are not bound to the present Jerusalem (see Gal. 4:25-6). For this reason, the church must manifest its own style. Its members, as citizens of God’s Kingdom, should conduct themselves in a worthy manner, in accordance with the gospel. There must be inward unity. The Christians must bear the mark of the One who emptied Himself and assumed the form of a servant in order to achieve glory by that route.

The same attitude must govern the *politeuma* of the Christians at Philippi; they must learn to bear the stamp of their heavenly Lord. Those who humble themselves will be exalted. People who once stood shoulder to shoulder in the battle can so easily have a falling out. (Think of the admonition addressed to two women, Euodia and Syntyche, in 4:2-3.)

Pressure and stress lead to grumbling. But joy and a willingness to sacrifice should come first (2:17-18). Then the race Paul has run—notice all the terms from sports and the military—will not be in vain (2:16).



*Watch out for those dogs (3:2 NIV).*

#### **4. The Path to Righteousness and Perfection (2:19—4:23)**

*False teachers.* Epaphroditus, who had risked his life for Paul, was not the only one sent to Philippi. To prepare for his own coming (2:19-24), Paul sent Timothy, who knew the Philippians personally (Acts 16:1ff).

It is clear from Paul's words that he and Timothy were badly needed. False teachers who wanted to introduce circumcision and the Jewish dietary laws were at work in the congregation. Since the Jews sometimes referred to the Gentiles as "dogs," Paul uses this uncomplimentary title to refer to *Jewish* agitators, those enemies of the cross of Christ. Their god is their belly. For them, keeping the dietary regulations paves the way to salvation. Their shame is their glory; circumcision is their ticket to Messianic glory.

*Righteousness through faith.* By pointing to his own life, Paul once more sketches the true gospel. Earlier he, too, had trusted in physical descent and ceremonial works. But now he regards all that as rubbish and counts it as loss, for he has come to know Christ and now seeks righteousness through Him. For Christ's sake, therefore, he wishes to bear a cross, for he knows that he, with Christ, will one day rise from among the dead.

Isn't our own "politeuma" in heaven, from where the Lord Jesus will come to deliver us? We achieve righteousness through faith alone, and we must be careful not to listen to any false gospel—even if clinging to the true gospel means suffering and affliction in the present.

*Striving for perfection.* Paul declares: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I *press on*

to make it my own . . .” (3:12). This text is sometimes interpreted to mean that we can never be sure of our salvation. But as we ponder the meaning of the text, we should note what Paul says at the end: “. . . because Christ Jesus has *made* me his own.”

What Paul presses on to make his own is not an assurance of salvation, faith and forgiveness. In this verse he is not declaring that he will *never* be perfect. Yet he does enjoy certainty of faith, for Christ has taken hold of him. That’s why he presses on to win the prize, which is resurrection from the dead. What he tells us in this verse is that he is *not yet* perfect. In principle, perfection is attainable (3:15-16).

*Guarded by God’s peace.* Paul concludes his letter with various admonitions. The motifs we saw earlier come to the fore again. The Philippians must stand firm in the Lord (4:1) and rejoice (vs. 4). Paul asks them to be of one mind and to trust in God, who cares for them and gives them His peace (vs. 2-7). He thanks them once more for the gesture of repeatedly sending him support (vs. 10ff) and sends greetings from the saints, “especially those of Caesar’s household,” who would no doubt have some acquaintances in the Roman colony of Philippi (vs. 22).

Paul also tells the Philippians: “The Lord is at hand” (4:5). The Lord Jesus is coming to judge the enemies of the church. He will protect His “politeuma.” Thus the believers have reason to rejoice and to be friendly and generous to their neighbors. In the Messiah they are guarded by God’s peace, which is beyond all human understanding.

# Colossians

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## 1. Christ's All-embracing Redemptive Work

*The church at Colossae.* Colossae was in inland Asia Minor on the banks of the Lycus River, about 200 kilometers from Ephesus. It was not far from Laodicea (one of the “seven churches” in the book of Revelation) and Hierapolis, with its warm springs.

The congregation at Colossae had been founded not by Paul but by his helper Epaphras (1:7). At the time the Letter to the Colossians was written, Epaphras was with Paul in prison (4:12). No doubt he gave Paul some precise information about the congregation in the Lycus Valley, enabling him to write in a concrete, specific way.

*A heresy with a Jewish flavor.* The Letter to the Colossians looks a great deal like the Letter to the Ephesians. In fact, Colossians, Ephesians, and the Letter to Philemon (who lived in Colossae) were all written at about the same time. Still, Colossians has a message of its own, for Paul was responding to a false teaching that was gaining ground in Colossae.

The false gospel that made the rounds there reminds us of the teachings of the Jewish agitators in Galatia. There were many Jews living in Colossae and the surrounding area, which probably explains why the heresy penetrating the church had a certain Jewish flavor.

*Secret wisdom.* Then, as now, the Jews were not all united. There were liberal, broad-minded Sadducees and narrow-minded Pharisees. There were fiery nationalists as well as teachers adept at mixing bits of heathen Gnosticism and mysterious wisdom with Jewish teachings and customs.

The false teachers at Colossae were of the latter variety. They pretended to possess some sort of secret, mysterious wisdom that would bring complete redemption for those who were in on the secret. To attain a higher level of wisdom, one had to abide by *ascetic rules*: abstain from eating this and that, and fast on certain special days (2:16ff). Circumcision was also a valuable practice (2:1ff). Furthermore, angels were assigned a major role in the work of redemption as *mediators*, perhaps because they were regarded as a source of assistance in the face of hostile angelic powers (vs. 18). The Christians were urged to follow a custom already prevalent among the Jews by worshipping certain angels.

*Freedom from evil powers.* This mishmash of “wisdom” dressed up in Christian garments seems to have been warmly received in the Lycus Valley. We see here the same danger that always threatens the church, namely, adaptation and accommodation. Living by ascetic rules, being afraid of hostile angelic powers and taking all sorts of measures against them—these things are far too common among people enchanted by the “powers” outside Christ.

The Letter to the Colossians deals with this point in

different ways and from various angles, emphasizing that Christ has *completely conquered* all the powers. We need no “good” angelic powers to supplement His redemptive work. No regulations drawn from a manmade religion can contribute to our salvation. Jesus Christ has fulfilled the service of shadows (including circumcision). *He* is the center of the system in which all things have their place. Under His rule we are safe and we are free—also from evil powers!

## **2. Everything Must Bow before Him**

*The powers disarmed by Christ.* After the salutation, which Paul issues in Timothy’s name as well as his own, he gives thanks. In the congregation at Colossae, there is faith and love for others. Moreover, the Colossians cling to the hope laid up for them in heaven. Just as elsewhere in the world, the preaching of the gospel in Colossae (by Epaphras) has borne fruit. Paul prays that it may remain so and that the Colossians may continue to see that it is *the Father* who delivers them from the power of darkness and transfers them to the Kingdom of His beloved Son (1:13). Paul’s prayer is that the Colossians “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all *spiritual wisdom and understanding*” (vs. 9).

To help the Colossians toward this goal, he tells them of the perfect redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Paul stresses this point because of the heretical teaching circulating in Colossae to the effect that Christ’s work is in need of some sort of “supplement.” In Christ *all things* were created, including those unseen powers against which the Colossians wished to arm themselves and the angelic powers they sometimes called on for assistance. “In him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and

invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities” (1:16). Paul explains further: “He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (vs. 17). Through His death on the cross, He disarmed all the powers. It is through Him that all things have been reconciled to God (1:19-20).

*Following the Savior.* This bearer of authority is the Head of the church (1:18). Through Him the church has been restored to a reconciled relationship to God—through Him alone! This is the gospel, the mystery, the hidden truth that is revealed to the pagans. It is for this gospel that Paul, too, must suffer. If there is any supplementing or complementing to be done, it is of a different kind: “I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (1:24).

Of course this does not mean that Paul is supplementing the work of Christ by earning something extra for the church through his good works. The entire letter to the Colossians is a protest against any such theory! No, Paul declares that he is a *servant* of the church. He wants to follow His Savior in kingdom service by passing on the one gospel to the Gentiles, without any supplements from Jews or anyone else.

*Freedom from ritual laws.* This is the gospel the Colossians received from Epaphras. They must cling to that gospel and not trade it in for any pseudo-wisdom or “human tradition” (2:8, 22; Is. 29:13; Matt. 15:9).\*

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\*It is striking that not only the quotation from Isaiah 29:13 but also some other expressions show that 2:8-23 is very closely connected with Matthew 15:1-20 and Mark 7:1-23. Perhaps the best way to explain this is to assume that Paul was familiar with the content of these two “gospels” and was passing that content along in his own words.

Will the Colossians slip back into a reliance on the “first principles of this world” (2:20), the ABCs of the law of shadows, which has been replaced by the “body of the Christ”? (In this text, as well as in Galatians 4:3 and 9, the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible both translate Paul’s reference to the “first principles” of this world as “elemental spirits.”)

When the Colossians died with Christ, were they not freed from keeping a whole series of ritual laws? To cling to something else is to devise a manmade religion; it is to seek to please *ourselves* (2:23).

### **3. Dying with the Messiah and Living with Him**

*No disdain for earthly things.* Dying with the Christ\* does not mean seeking a mysterious knowledge beyond the gospel. What it means is that we, as baptized believers, are to take the Christ into account in all sorts of situations in our varied and colorful lives.

The false teachers wanted to start down below and ascend to the heights, but the church knows that its life is hid with Jesus Christ in the heavens, with the Messiah who has disarmed all the powers. Christians are to go about their day-to-day affairs in that awareness.

“Seeking the things that are above” and “setting our minds” on them (3:1-2) does not mean that we are to despise earthly things and live a life of illusion, fixing our hopes on “pie in the sky.” What it means instead is that Christ is our point of departure and orientation, the one who gives us our mandate and directives in life.

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\*Again the article is necessary: the Greek text speaks four times of “*the* Christ” in 3:1-4.

*Putting on the new nature.* Paul works this out with regard to all sorts of commands of the Lord. We must put on the new nature and be patient with each other. We must praise God in song. In marriage, in relationships between parents and children and between masters and slaves, in relationships with those who do not believe, in prayer for Paul's ministry—in short, in all we do we must “seek the things that are above.”

Even in ordinary daily conversation, the church must be a salt of salt (4:6). Keep your eyes on the things below and your mind on the things above.

#### **4. Contact between the Churches**

*Warm words about Epaphras.* Tychicus was to deliver the letter. He would be accompanied by Onesimus, the runaway slave. Epaphras, the founder of the congregation at Colossae, would apparently be staying with Paul, who had some very warm things to say about him. Paul did not want the Christians in Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis to think that Epaphras wished to be “free” of his responsibility in the churches so that he could waste his time.

Other names are mentioned at the end of the letter, including *Mark*, the cousin of Barnabas, and *Luke*, the physician. *Archippus*, who is also mentioned in the Letter to Philemon, is commissioned to complete the ministry he has undertaken. It has been suggested that he was a son of Philemon (the owner and master of Onesimus), and that he was the pastor of the church in Laodicea.

*Apostolic writings in circulation.* Paul commands that his letter be read to the brethren in Laodicea. Moreover,



the letter Paul sent to the Laodiceans was to be read to the Colossians. Some scholars take it that this letter to the Laodiceans is really the Letter to the Ephesians, which was an encyclical, as you will recall. There is also an apocryphal letter to the Laodiceans, but it is a later falsification; that is to say, it was pieced together from various writings by Paul.

The Letter to the Colossians, on the other hand, is genuine. The imprisoned apostle made sure it would be accepted as genuine by concluding with a greeting in his own handwriting. That way the churches in the area where the letter circulated could testify confidently that it was not a hoax. Thus we see that the number of churches and apostolic writings in circulation was growing.

# Thessalonians

## **1. Follow-up Care for a New Congregation**

*First the Jew.* Thessalonica (now called Salonika) was the second place on the European continent where Paul established a church during his “second” missionary journey. He had just come from Philippi, where he had been beaten and jailed for the sake of the gospel. Now that a “bridgehead” had been established in Europe, Paul carried the gospel farther as quickly as he could.

In the port city of Thessalonica, Paul and his companion Silas (Silvanus) began their work by seeking contact with the Jews in the synagogue. Naturally this would lead to a struggle, but Paul wanted to cling to his principle to the bitter end—first to the Jew, and then to the Greek. For three sabbaths he was allowed to preach in the synagogue about Jesus’ suffering and resurrection as *Messianic* deeds of redemption. Although most of the Jews rejected his message, he did manage to win over a number of “God-fearing” Greeks as well as many prominent women. With this the church at Thessalonica was founded.

*Harassment.* These “God-fearing” Greeks were Gentile sympathizers who attended services in the synagogues. When they became Christians, the synagogue in Thessalonica was suddenly bereft of a significant part of its evangelistic success. Jealousy aroused by the growth of the church led the Jews to stir up the riffraff of the town against the Christians. The house of a man named Jason, where Paul was staying and perhaps also doing manual labor to provide for his own support, was stormed. At a protest meeting before the city authorities, the Christians were accused of stirring up the entire civilized world (*oikoumené*) contrary to the emperor’s teaching by proclaiming Jesus as emperor.

After Jason and some others posted a bond, the trouble blew over. All the same, Paul was forced to break off his work. No doubt this conflicted with his plans and did not fit in with his “mission strategy.” Even at Beroea, where he sought refuge, he was bothered by the Jews of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-14).

*Thanksgiving and correction.* Because Paul was concerned about the Spiritual welfare of the believers in Thessalonica, he instructed Timothy to go there from Athens so that no one would be shaken as a result of all the affliction (3:3). Paul also wanted to know how things were going with their faith, hope and love, “fearing that the tempter might have tempted you and my labour might be lost” (3:5 NEB). When Timothy returned from Macedonia with a report for Paul, the apostle decided to write a letter to the church in Thessalonica.

Timothy had many good things to say about the Thessalonians. Thus Paul had ample reason to give thanks, which he proceeded to do in a sensitive, tactful way. On the other hand, there were also a few points calling for correction and clarification. Paul immediately

seized on correspondence as a means of giving the Thessalonians some “follow-up” pastoral care.

*Doubts about Paul.* It was apparent that the enemies of the church had been active. Moreover, satan, the “tempter,” was working through them, eager to put the work of Paul in a bad light in order to cast doubt on the gospel he preached.

Paul was being accused of getting rich at the congregation’s expense. He was also accused of being a coward who went into hiding or took to his heels as soon as there was any danger. It happened that Thessalonica was on a major highway known as the “Via Egnatia.” Thus it was visited regularly by miracle workers, traveling philosophers, and preachers of new divinities—all of them interested mainly in recognition and profit. Paul’s opponents declared that he was nothing but a wandering showman. Such slander could even give rise to questions in the minds of Paul’s friends if they heard it often enough.

*Future expectations.* There was more. The people expected Christ to return soon. In the meantime, however, some members of the congregation had died. What would their future be? Would death rob them of the privilege of witnessing Christ’s return?

The thought of Christ’s advent or return apparently dominated the lives of some of the Thessalonian Christians so much that they became loafers. Why should they throw themselves into earthly tasks if Christ was about to return? Future expectations arising from a mistaken interpretation and understanding of the second coming led to irregular living and “sponging.” Hence Paul had to point out the proper way. We must bear this background in mind when we read Paul’s defense of himself, his words of comfort, and his admonitions.

## 2. Words of Comfort and Admonition (1:1—4:12)

*Thanksgiving.* Paul addresses his letter to “the church of the Thessalonians, in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” We must view this choice of words against a background of Jewish persecution. The Jews pretended to be the true church, but Paul awards this title to those who know God the Father through Jesus the Lord and Messiah. *They* are the ones permitted the honor of calling themselves the “church,” the congregation of the redeemed.

As usual, the apostle begins by giving thanks. He speaks of the Thessalonians’ “work of *faith* and labor of *love* and steadfastness of *hope* in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3; see also II Thess. 1:3ff; I Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4-5).

*Waiting for Christ’s return.* The Jews did not make it easy for the Thessalonian Christians. The whole Jewish community was stirred up against them. Yet, despite the severe oppression, the congregation received the Word in the joy of the Holy Spirit. Reports of this had gone throughout all of Greece. Paul did not even have to inform people elsewhere in Greece about it, for they were all familiar with the story of how the church in Thessalonica had been established. They knew how the people there had undergone a radical conversion and how they lived in expectation of the coming of Christ, “who delivers us from *the wrath to come*” (1:10).

We should pay careful attention to Paul’s formulation and choice of words. The expectation of Christ’s return was strong in Thessalonica, and also gave rise to some mistaken ideas. Paul was to come back to these matters in his second letter.

*Paul’s apologia.* The first topic he took up was his

relationship to the congregation. His enemies in Thessalonica had raised all sorts of suspicions about him. He found it necessary, therefore, to write an *apologia*, a defense of himself.

Paul was accused of impure motives, of operating on the basis of cunning and flattery. It was even whispered that he profited financially from his work as an apostle.

The accusations were easy to refute. The congregation could well remember the tense days when Paul first worked in Thessalonica. Although he had just come from Philippi, where he had been treated very badly, he was just as bold in Thessalonica, where he ran the risk of receiving the same treatment.

Paul could have made certain demands in virtue of his standing as one of Christ's apostles. Yet he did not seek his own advantage but worked night and day (with his hands) so that he would not be a financial burden to anyone (2:9). He did not play the part of a celebrated teacher who demands a great deal of his hearers. Instead he was a father and a mother to the believers (2:7, 11).

*A common struggle.* This approach bore fruit, for the Thessalonians came to believe not on Paul's authority but on the authority of *the gospel* (2:13). Yet, Thessalonica suffered the same oppression as the churches in Judea, an oppression that came from Jews who did not accept the gospel.

"The Jews" were making the measure of their sin full not only by rejecting Christ, the prophets and the apostles but also by opposing the expansion of the church in the world. (When Paul spoke of "the Jews," he was distancing himself from his own countrymen.)

Paul showed the church in Thessalonica that its struggle was one that went back all the way to the time of the prophets. There is *one* struggle of the church throughout the entire earth.

*Held back by satan.* Before Paul left Thessalonica, he had made it clear that the church's lot involves suffering (3:3-4). Now the time of oppression had arrived. Paul was so concerned about the congregation that he chose to remain alone in Athens and send Timothy to Thessalonica to find out how things were going. That way Paul would no longer be unsure (3:2).

Paul's enemies had apparently been saying that he did not dare return. The apostle pointed out in reply that on two occasions he had been planning to come to Thessalonica again, but "Satan hindered us" (2:18). Fortunately, Timothy brought back a favorable report. Paul was comforted by the church's firm stand in its faith (3:6-13).

*Room for improvement.* This did not alter the fact that Paul saw various reasons to admonish the Thessalonians. There is always room for improvement. The church must press on toward perfection. In the time of the new covenant, the principle of obedience is never fully realized.

That's why Paul pointed back to the things he had said in the name of Christ when the church was being established. He dealt with sexual life, trade, and daily work.

The morality and customs of the pagans were a constant danger to the Christians in Thessalonica. The Thessalonians made a mockery of marriage. Paul therefore told the Christians there that it is God's will that "each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor" (4:4).

Moreover, the brethren in the church were not to cheat and deceive each other. And as for work, the world was not to get the impression that the Christian church is full of loafers (4:1-12). The Christians were not to be parasites living off the generosity of the deacons.

### 3. The Coming of the Christ (4:13—5:11)

*No grieving without hope.* In the community there was some uncertainty about those who had “fallen asleep.” What would happen to them when Jesus returned?

Paul hastens to reassure the congregation by way of a word from the Lord. There is no reason for us to grieve without hope, as those who do not expect the Messiah grieve. Christ’s death and resurrection guarantees the resurrection of the dead. Isn’t the church one with Him?

Of course there will be some who will not die but will experience the mighty coming of King Jesus while they are still alive. Here Paul speaks of Jesus’ coming as a ‘parousia,’ a term the Greeks used when speaking of a highly placed person’s arrival in the city.

*Meeting the Lord in the air.* When Christ descends from heaven, the believers will be the first to arise from among the dead and will join the believers who are still alive as they go to “meet” the Lord. Thus the church will take a *journey through space!*

This is not to say that the church will always be suspended in the air. She will meet her Lord as He comes to take possession of the world, just as the wise virgins met the bridegroom. (In Matthew 25:1ff, where we read about the wise virgins and the foolish virgins, many of the same words are used as in I Thessalonians 4:13ff.)

Once the Lord has returned, we will always be with Him. These are truly words of comfort for those who stand before an open grave, which is why they are so often read at Christian funerals and gravesides. Yet, how little expectation there is among us of the church’s “space journey”!

*Not a matter of speculation.* It has been said of Paul that



he first expected Christ to return before long (as in I Thessalonians 4) but later in life, when he began to see his own death nearing, started to think otherwise (as in II Corinthians 5). The truth of the matter is that Paul lived in the knowledge that the coming of the Lord Jesus was *near*, but he did not say just when He would return. Like his Lord, he did not say anything about “the times and the seasons” (5:1; Acts 1:7).

For the apostolic church, the doctrine of the “parousia” should be a matter not of speculation but of comfort (4:13ff) and admonition (5:2ff). Christ comes as a thief in the night (5:2; Matt. 24:43; II Pet. 3:10; Rev. 3:3; 16:15; Jer. 49:9; Joel 2:9). Therefore the church must be on guard. Its members must be sober; they must be children of light rather than children of darkness (see Luke 16:8; John 8:12; 12:36; Eph. 5:8). Awaiting Christ’s return means arming ourselves, so that whether we are awake or asleep—here Paul reckons with the possibility of death before Christ’s return—we will live together with Christ (5:8ff).

#### **4. Living in Expectation of the Christ (5:12-28)**

*Testing the spirits.* The Thessalonian church had some “idle” members who used the expectation of Christ’s return as an excuse not to do any work. Those members needed to be admonished. Moreover, the office-bearers were to be respected. “Test everything; hold fast what is good,” wrote Paul (5:21).

This text is often taken as a license to “try” anything and everything. “Don’t condemn it if you haven’t tried it.” But when we read these words in their context, we see that they mean no such thing: “Do not quench the spirit,

do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil.”

Thus the text does not say that we must “try everything out.” There are many things we must stay away from because they are “deep things of Satan” (Rev. 2:24). When Paul talks of “testing,” he means that the *prophecies* presented in church as revelations are to be tested. The “spirits” must be tested to determine whether they are of God.

On the one hand, prophecy must not be despised. (In those days there were still special Spiritual gifts.) On the other hand, not every alleged prophecy is to be accepted immediately (see I Cor. 14:29-32; I John 4:1ff).

*No withdrawal from life.* The expectation of Christ’s return can lead to a strange attitude of withdrawal from life, an attitude in which we do little more than stare at the clouds. It’s not right for Christians to wait passively; instead they should be busy in the midst of life.

The expectation of the “parousia” should make Christians extremely conscious of what they do with the time granted them; any sermon on the subject should make them work even harder and strive more than ever to help others. “May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming (*parousia*) of our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:23).

*Faithfulness in little things.* In this letter Paul repeatedly points back to what he taught the Thessalonians when he was with them. “For when we were with you, we told you beforehand . . .” (3:4). “For you know what instructions we gave you . . .” (4:2). Thus Paul directs the church’s attention back to the instruction he was able to give briefly *at the beginning*. In the second letter he did so as well.

These letters presented no new teaching; they were only

an elaboration of what the Thessalonians had already been told. To live in anticipation of the future, to live according to the Word, does not mean walking down unfamiliar paths; it means being faithful in following *the way already indicated*.

Living in expectation of Christ's "parousia" has nothing to do with mysterious speculation about times and circumstances. What counts is being faithful in little things and living in this assurance: "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (5:24). He will finish what He has started and will keep all His promises.

# II Thessalonians

## **1. Misunderstandings about the Day of the Lord**

*Living for the future.* When Paul preached in the synagogue at Thessalonica, he began by pointing to what the Scriptures have to say about the Messiah, the Anointed One. That Messiah, he told his hearers, is Jesus. Out of His work a church was born (Acts 17:1ff).

Now, the Scriptures speak repeatedly of “the day of the Lord.” The apostle had preached that Jesus would come in His “parousia” on that day.

This preaching hit home in Thessalonica. Yet, because Paul did not have much time to teach, misunderstandings arose. This was already apparent from his first letter. There were people who cut their ties with the present and lived for the future alone. They even gave up their jobs. After all, what was the point of working if Christ’s return was imminent?

In this respect, too, there’s nothing new under the sun. In every generation there seem to be people who figure out the exact date of Christ’s return on the basis of political conditions and various other givens. When their

predictions are not fulfilled, others come along with new sensational prophecies.

*Standing firm in a time of trial.* In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul takes up these matters in the manner of a true shepherd. He is careful to cross his “t’s” and dot his “i’s,” but he does not approach the congregation with a negative attitude. He takes the Thessalonians by the hand, as it were, and begins by pointing to what he has already taught them.

Paul opens his letter with a word of thanks to the Lord for the *faith*, mutual *love* and persevering *hope* of the Thessalonians. They have had a hard time because of persecution by the Jews. Yet, they stood firm in their time of trial, for they knew that their persecutors and oppressors would bring down judgment on themselves on “that day” (compare Is. 66:15, 5 with II Thess. 1:8ff).

## **2. A Beacon Signaling the Approach of the Day of the Lord**

*False alarms.* Because some members of the Thessalonian church were upset, Paul wrote: “Please do not get excited too soon or alarmed by any prediction or rumor or any letter claiming to come from us, implying that the Day of the Lord has already arrived” (2:2 JB). He uses the same word for *alarmed* as we find in Matthew 24:6, where Jesus tells His disciples not to be “alarmed” when they hear about wars and rumors of wars.

In offering this word of reassurance, Paul did not mean to deny that the Lord will come like a thief in the night. After all, when he taught in their midst, he told them of the things that would happen first. The Lord had spoken of

the abomination in the holy place, i.e. the temple (Matt. 24:15). *Apostasy*, that is, a turning away from the covenant, would first break out in its full horror and ugliness. A “man of sin,” by which Paul meant some sort of sinful person, would set himself up in the temple of God to rule there as though he were king.

*Covenant judgment on Jerusalem.* We have no reason to believe that Paul was speaking in symbolic terms, or that he meant the church when he spoke of the “temple of God” here and in Ephesians 2:21, I Corinthians 3:16 and II Corinthians 6:16. Like his Lord, Paul was speaking of the *lawlessness* (another theme that occurs prominently in Matthew 24) and disobedience of the *covenant people* who lived out of a false messianic expectation, turning the temple in Jerusalem into an idol and filling it with the most abominable scenes.

Here, too, statements of Christ (e.g. Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21) form the background to Paul’s words. This means that Paul is not talking about some antichrist far in the future. Instead he is speaking of covenant judgment on Jerusalem.

Paul does not draw on Jesus’ words to talk about some entirely different matter, some future antichrist or world dictator armed with a propaganda ministry. What he does is to explain Jesus’ own prophecies about the coming apostasy and the covenant judgment to which it would lead. He does not go beyond the words of Jesus; he paraphrases them. If we understood this properly, we would not be plagued by fantasies about an antichrist “at the end of time.”

*A restraining power.* Paul tells us that this lawless figure is restrained. Many think in terms of the gospel here, which blocks the advance of anti-Christian powers today. But this interpretation, too, proceeds from the false notion

that Paul is talking about a personal antichrist at the end of time. Many Church Fathers, however, assumed that the Roman empire was the restraining power, holding back the Jewish revolution for some time.

There is an end to God's patience, then. Those who rejected the gospel would ultimately be given over to the power of error, the power that makes us believe the lie. This should not lead the Thessalonians to panic. Only after Jerusalem's concentrated apostasy from the living God will Christ appear. Hence the Thessalonians were not to listen to "wicked and evil men" (see also Rev. 2:2), for "not all have faith. But the Lord is faithful; he will strengthen you and guard you from evil" (3:2-3).

*Ecclesiastical apostasy.* Paul's prediction about the sign of Jesus' coming was borne out in the year 70, when Jerusalem was destroyed. Yet, Jesus still has not returned. The pattern Paul sketched is seen repeatedly in church history: apostasy from the covenant, lawlessness in God's temple, and then complete ecclesiastical apostasy. Hence we must not assume that II Thessalonians 2 will only be fulfilled when "the time of the end" comes. Paul's words have *already* been fulfilled.

The sign of Jesus' coming is the historical disaster of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Paul's words should not only stir our expectations of Christ's return, they should also encourage us to use the energies that are ours today to combat false teaching in "Christian" dress and save ourselves from it.

### **3. Work and Christian Nobility**

*The importance of work.* After Paul rejects any overly

intense preoccupation with the time of Christ's return, he uses his apostolic authority to censure those who have given up on work. The congregation must avoid such people so that they will be ashamed of themselves and repent. When Paul taught the Thessalonians earlier, he impressed it upon them that whoever chooses not to work is not to be fed.

In laying down this rule, which applies to *lazy people* (see Prov. 20:4; 24:30-4), Paul did not spell out our responsibilities in detail. This does not mean, however, that he would be satisfied to see believers getting by with the minimum, working just enough to support themselves. Paul points out that he himself worked day and night with his hands (3:8; Acts 20:34), thereby setting an example. Moreover, as an apostle he was busy night and day, admonishing and teaching (Acts 20:31).

*Work as a calling.* Each of us has a calling, whether it be manual labor or "church work," and we must view ourselves as called to our work by our heavenly Lord. We do not work just to support ourselves. By using our gifts, we serve the One who has re-created us and glorify Him. If we view our calling in this light, there is no room for living off others as parasites.

This awareness also keeps us from being unduly alarmed at the signs of the times. Paul admonishes the Thessalonian Christians in the Lord to go about their own work calmly and to eat their own bread. The Christian is not elevated above the cultural mandate: the mandate is also valid for him. The noble Christian works while it is yet day.

Hope in the second advent makes us come alive. If we knew that Jesus was coming tomorrow, we would still go ahead and plant the tree we were planning to plant today, as Luther put it. We eat in order to work!

After writing a greeting in his own hand to preclude



doubts about the authenticity of his letter, Paul brings II Thessalonians to a close. The peace and grace of the high priest's benediction (Num. 6:25-6) descend on those who both watch and work.

# I Timothy

*I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock (Acts 20:29).*

## **1. A Shepherd Must Defend His Flock**

*Pastoral epistles.* The word *pastor*, which is derived from a Latin word, means *shepherd*. Pastoral letters, then, are the letters of a shepherd. Although all the letters in the New Testament are actually “pastoral” in nature and intent, Paul’s two letters to Timothy and his letter to Titus are usually called the “pastoral epistles.”

These letters were meant to support two “office-bearers,” Timothy and Titus, in their difficult work in their respective areas, i.e. Ephesus and Crete. They were written in the same spirit as Paul’s address at Miletus to the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:18-35) and probably stem from a period shortly after that event.

*The question of authorship.* There are theologians (armed with computers) who argue that Paul is not the

author of the “pastoral epistles.” They maintain that the vocabulary used in these epistles is not the same as that used in the letters to the churches. Different heresies are discussed, and a different church order is presupposed. Therefore the pastoral epistles must be falsifications.

Now, the appearance of some different terminology in these letters can also be regarded as an argument *in favor* of Paul’s authorship, for anyone trying to imitate Paul’s style would surely have stuck to his vocabulary. And how would a spurious author ever have thought of such comments as the ones about the cloak and the wine? (5:23; II Tim. 4:13). Moreover, in the other letters of Paul we also hear a good deal about heretics who were under *Jewish* influence. (Think of the Letter to the Galatians.)

As for the references to elders and deacons, it is apparent from Acts 20:17 and Philippians 1:1 that these office-bearers were already a regular part of church life in Paul’s time. To assume that Timothy and Titus were *bishops* is to impose a later development on an earlier situation.

Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy when he was still a free man. It is usually assumed that he wrote it after being released from imprisonment in Rome, but we might well ask whether the letter could stem from a much earlier time, the time before his final journey to Jerusalem (i.e. between verses 2 and 7 of Acts 20). The journey to Macedonia (1:3) would then be the journey mentioned in Acts 20:1.

*The danger of syncretism.* At the time when the letter was written, Timothy was in Ephesus, for Paul had sent him there. Timothy’s special assignment was to oppose the heretics. The church in Ephesus was in danger of being infected by misleading spirits that wished to fuse Christianity with heathen and Jewish thinking—an approach usually called *syncretism*.

Heresy could penetrate the Christian church all the more

easily because of the many strange doctrines that had crept in among the Jews. There were “teachers” of the law who put things into Bible texts that really were not there at all, claiming to find a mystical “truth behind the truth.” The stories of the Bible were embroidered as people turned their imaginations loose and used the material of redemptive history to construct myths, fables and fairy tales.

Traces of such speculation are to be found in the “apocryphal” literature of Biblical times and in various other Jewish writings. It was maintained, for example, that angels are circumcised, that Adam was both man and woman, and that the marriage of Adam and Eve was the original sin. Furthermore, genealogies were used to prove all sorts of things—perhaps even that the new teachers were of noble or royal descent.

*The effect of the false teachings.* These teachers appealed to the Bible and to tradition. The growth of all the speculative literature, such as the spurious gospels, letters and “revelations” that we find in the early church, was due mainly to the *Jews*. This was the battle Timothy had to fight. The spurious writings were a useful tool in the hands of the heretics as they sought to take the true gospel and the true law away from the church, substituting false teaching and an interpretation of the law (torah) adapted to heathendom.

The so-called teachers of the law (1:7), with their so-called knowledge (6:20), their myths and their hollow words, had a lamentable influence on the life of the church. *True* knowledge builds up the church in love, but *false* knowledge creates no unity between faith and action. It leaves the will unbroken. The result is that life is not *sanctified* (4:5) but is perverted instead. Because the “knowledge” presented by the false teachers was the fruit of pride and conceit and was contrary to the teachings of

Scripture, it could not help but have a disastrous effect on the life of the congregation.

*Nature and grace.* The false teachers, who pretended to be great rabbis, did not understand the relationship between “nature” and “grace.” In their myths it was not taught that everything God has made is good and is therefore not to be rejected (4:4). That’s why they tended to look down on the natural order of things: they spoke highly of those who, as a matter of principle, did not want to marry or remarry (4:3; 5:14). It did not seem to matter to the false teachers that those who remained unmarried as a matter of principle were very troublesome people who often behaved in an arrogant way that clearly conflicted with God’s ordinances (5:11-13; 2:11-15).

It hardly needs to be said that these new rabbis with their elaborate theories and their hair-splitting were a source of great division, the cause of a lot of wasted time, and the fathers of a scholasticism that kills the spirit. How far removed they were from the Sermon on the Mount! The Word of Christ played no role in the thinking of these advocates of “progress,” who had gone far beyond the simplicity of that Word.

*The unity of faith and life.* The people who succumbed to this way of thinking were *sick* through and through (6:3ff). They spoke of the law in grand terms, but their faith had become a matter of the mind only; it had nothing to do with the heart. “Life” could go forward unrestrained.

On this point in particular, Paul wanted to help—by showing Timothy the unity of faith and life, of nature and grace. He told Timothy to take the *healthy* words of Christ as his guide in his conduct in office. Such an approach would rule out heresy and promote godliness, which is the finest form of asceticism (4:6-16).

Paul's first letter to Timothy is extremely relevant to the church of all ages. The church always faces the threat of the myth, which frees knowledge of any obedience to the Logos, the Word.

## **2. A Mature Congregation Not Dominated by Any Hierarchy**

*No clergy elevated above the laity.* This pastoral letter is important in another respect as well: it condemns "hierarchy," that is, rule by priests or clergymen or any other group of elite leaders. In our time there are all sorts of councils and conferences within churches and between churches. Because of our high regard for these meetings attended by the "leading figures," we allow something of the Roman Catholic distinction between the clergy and the laity to creep into our thinking.

In the "pastoral letters" we find no support for such a distinction. Paul does write as an office-bearer, but he takes a very humble view of himself (1:18; 4:11-16; 6:2).

*The role of office-bearers.* People who want to hear nothing about "offices" in the church need not look to Paul for support. On the other hand, Paul does not want to exclude the congregation from what is going on; he makes a point of including it. The fact that the church has office-bearers is not supposed to turn the members into lazy, carefree people who say: "The pastor knows all the answers. Don't bother me with your problems." No, the presence of the special offices within the church is intended to stimulate all believers in their general office. Not the hierarchy but the *congregation* is God's house, the pillar and foundation of the truth (3:15).

The church should not regard itself as a large organization involved in social work. The individual members of the church must help themselves and sustain the needy as much as possible. Only after their efforts prove inadequate is there a task for the deacons (5:4, 16; 6:18).

The office-bearer is not someone who performs holy (magic) deeds. His task is to proclaim the Word and to teach. The congregation must grow in the living knowledge of the Word; it must listen and receive instruction (2:11; 4:16). How can it be a pillar of the truth if it does not do so? The office-bearer who leads the worship service is not a mediator who intercedes for the people. The congregation must learn to pray *with* the one who leads the service (2:1-8).

### **3. Building Up the Congregation**

*Fighting the same fight.* Paul rightly points to his own calling and emphasizes it. His standing as an apostle is founded not in his character or his personal qualities but in the commission given to him by God. Therefore he can boldly oppose the false apostles.

Timothy, with his strange background (a Jewish mother and a heathen Greek father), is regarded by Paul as his own child. Paul refers to him as “my true child in the faith” (1:2). Thus, descent and genealogies involve faith! After Paul and Timothy met in Lystra (Acts 16:1-3), Timothy always worked with Paul and was even imprisoned with him (I Thess. 3:1-6; I Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11; Phil. 1:1; 2:19; Col. 1:1).

Now Timothy is commissioned to oppose the false prophets in Ephesus, who offer riddles about myths

instead of applied preaching (admonition), who use the law not to expose sin but as a book of puzzles. Timothy is told to recognize God's grace in his friend and teacher Paul, who showed him how to preach the healthy Biblical doctrine of salvation—which is not the same as giving answers to problems, puzzles and riddles. Timothy was fighting the same fight as Paul, with faith and a clear conscience (1:3-20).

*Praying for the government.* The admonition to pray for those in positions of governmental authority is followed by the words: “. . . that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way” (2:2). These words are often taken to mean that we should pray that *the government* will allow us to lead a quiet and peaceful life, but what they really mean is that *we*, as Christians, must conduct ourselves in a calm (non-revolutionary) way. Praying for those who hold positions of governmental authority helps hold us back from becoming a rebellious pressure group.

Such an attitude toward government will promote the spreading of the universal gospel, for the church includes the entire world in the scope of its prayers. Our God wants people of all sorts to be redeemed and to come to a knowledge of the truth. We must never think of His works in small terms, for Christ gave up His life to buy back a *new humanity* (2:1-7).

After emphasizing the earnestness and importance of prayer, Paul recommends that Christians pay some attention to what is fitting and stylish in the good sense when they meet together. Their prayers should not be hindered by quarreling.

*Women and family life.* As for the women, they are not to turn the worship service into a fashion show. Paul does not like superficial fashion dolls who show off their clothes



to draw attention to themselves (see Is. 3:18-24; I Pet. 3:3). He calls for a different approach to fashion among believers: “Women should *adorn* themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel” (2:9).

Note that Paul is not opposed to women taking measures to make themselves attractive; what he calls for is a *unique style* for the church. The church must not copy the world slavishly in matters of fashion. Moreover, women can also adorn themselves by doing good deeds. They are not to seek a leadership role within the church but must be submissive.

Thus Paul recognizes the place of women in the church, assigning them their own position. He wants nothing to do with any revolutionary emancipation! The church must be especially careful not to let false teachers undermine the importance of the woman’s task as *mother*. If the Lord gives her children, she must accept her calling as a mother in faith (2:15).

What a blessing it would be if these golden words would be taken to heart by modern society, which worries about the population explosion and preaches birth control! Paul’s message is that bringing forth children is an *office* and a *privilege*. How liberating it would be for many people in our society to see that the benefits of Christ’s redemption are also present in natural family life!

In the days of Paul and Timothy, the *heretics* were the ones who stood in the way of total redemption. Today heresy still has a stranglehold on the doctrine and life of many people.

#### 4. Office-bearers in the Church

*The role of elders.* The reports and documents issued by ecumenical organizations discuss all sorts of topics, but they say almost nothing about the role of elders. Is the “elder” a remnant of a past bourgeois age in which people did not yet rely heavily on specialists and functionaries?

Scripture is for all ages. If the church wishes to remain the pillar and foundation of the truth, it must not leave the government of the church in the hands of individual officials but must take the trouble to choose a council of reliable elders.

An overseer (Greek: *episkopos*) should be able to give leadership. Therefore he must be someone who is sober and earnest in his private life and public conduct alike. How else could he look after the house of God and be a true steward of what God has entrusted to his care?

*The church's task.* Over against the fanaticism that accepts personal feeling as normative, Paul rightly calls for order and points to the Word as the standard by which to measure. The Word is the brake that keeps us from galloping off in the direction of a heretical or revolutionary vantonness—whether during the apostolic age, the Reformation era, or our own “ecumenical” age.

The same applies to the choice of deacons. The congregation should develop a better awareness of the demands to be made of office-bearers, for it is a house of God, a Beth-el. The church's task is to disseminate the revealed mystery about the Savior who became flesh and was glorified.

*A hymn against heresy.* Paul concludes his argument on this point with a hymn, a confession that contradicts heresy. The false teachers argue that “the natural” or “the flesh” is of no value. Therefore Paul sings in 3:16:

He was manifested *in the flesh* [advent],  
vindicated in the Spirit [resurrection and glorification],  
seen by angels [Easter],  
preached among the nations,  
believed on in the world [proclamation of the gospel],  
taken up in glory [ascension into heaven].

## 5. No Split between Nature and Grace

*Difficult times ahead.* Revelation in the *flesh* and justification through the *Spirit* go together. Yet, the heretics have some bad words to say about the creation.

Paul sees difficult times ahead for the coming generation of believers. There will be false teachers who forbid them to marry and who declare certain foods taboo. There will be a new Phariseeism that tells believers to stay away from all sorts of things, a Phariseeism that has no room for the declaration: “And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was *very good*” (Gen. 1:31). The new rabbis will fail to appreciate the value of this world, which is God’s creation.

*A good deacon.* Paul himself did not disdain the natural order of marriage, and he was certainly no monk or ascetic. “For everything created by God is good,” he wrote, “and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer” (4:4-5).

Timothy must hold this before the brethren as a good deacon (servant) of Jesus Christ and must stay away from any shrewish prattle and self-torment. Piety must come first, for it contains a promise for the present and the future (4:7-8). Despite his youth, Timothy must proceed calmly and seek to set an example. The One who calls will also give the increase.

## 6. Office and Duty

*Advice for office-bearers.* To serve as an office-bearer requires insight and sensitivity. Old men must be approached in a different way than young men; the same manner is not suitable for both. And then there is the problem of the widows! There were so many young widows who wanted to receive regular support from the deacons so they would have an easy, idle life. Paul gives Timothy a few sober hints, for he knows that satan is busy trying to get people to talk disapprovingly about the church and to drag its name through the mud (5:1-16).

The apostle concludes his advice with a series of admonitions having to do with examining candidates for the office of elder, supporting elders in their work, and censuring them when they go astray. In passing, Timothy is advised not to overlook the contribution that wine could make to his health, which was weak. Paul was certainly no libertine when it came to drinking, but he was no teetotaler either. He wanted nothing to do with the diets recommended by the sectarians. Everything created by God is good, provided that it is received with thanksgiving.

*Authority relationships.* Timothy must bear in mind that it is not always immediately apparent what is evil and what is good (5:24-5). The ideal of unity in the church should not lead further to a complete overthrow of all social distinctions. A Christian slave must be obedient to his master, whether his master is an unbeliever or a believer. However lowly the slave's position in life may be, as a Christian he is obliged to live a life of *service* (6:1-2).

Apparently the false teachers were undermining authority relationships, which is what always happens with fanatical sects and groups with strong heretical leanings. This is not to say that Paul approved of the institution of

slavery, any more than the Reformation approved of the financial exploitation of the peasants by the higher classes. Yet, Scripture does not approve of revolution, rebellion and general hostility toward authority.

*The dangers of wealth.* The step from revolution to materialism is not a long one. Paul also condemns the latter in strong terms. Timothy is told to stay away from materialism and to fight the good fight of faith. He must tell the rich to fix their hopes on God and to use the wealth entrusted to them for good works (6:3-19).

The distance from the wealth entrusted to certain people and the gospel entrusted to Timothy is not all that great either. “O Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you” (6:20). Timothy must be on guard against the unholy and hollow words of those who prophesy in comfortable surroundings. Hymenaeus and Alexander went astray completely and were excommunicated by the apostle; they were excluded from the fellowship of the congregation (1:19-20).

*High stakes.* Timothy must be sure to let the sheep know what is at stake, even though he himself is young and modest. Being involved with a flock as a true pastor means both upholding the teaching and using discipline when necessary (6:20-1; see also 4:11-16).

A good shepherd is one who knows what must be done. In the face of false religion, there is *no room* for an attitude of sympathetic understanding or for comments like: “They’re believers, too, after all.” The church, then and now, must stand or fall on this point. Guard what has been entrusted to you, Timothy, and keep your eye fixed on Jesus Christ and the gospel *He* taught!

# II Timothy

*But the word of God is not fettered (2:9).*

## **1. Paul's Last Triumphant Message**

*Enemies without and within.* The second letter to Timothy is sometimes called Paul's "testament," for the apostle wrote it when he was close to death. It is a very moving letter.

How miserable the circumstances in which Paul found himself! He had been arrested and was being guarded heavily, just as though he were a criminal highly dangerous to the state (2:9).

Just what was the accusation against Paul? When and where was he arrested? It is usually assumed that he was being imprisoned in Rome for the second time, but it is also possible that this was the imprisonment of which Acts 21:33ff tells us. Thus, Paul must have been in either Caesarea or Rome.

The activities of the Jews had something to do with his being arrested as a terrorist. The church always has to live with the suspicion that it is a revolutionary organization.

Like his Lord, Paul often suffered the consequences of being accused of rebellion. How often his own brothers in the flesh had made trouble for him and made accusations against him before the authorities!

Not only was Paul beleaguered by enemies *outside* the church, he also had to suffer a great deal from his “own people,” i.e. the members of the church. How painful it is to read that they had all let him down at the time of his first *apologia* or defense (4:16). “You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, and among them Phygelus and Hermogenes” (1:15).

*Faithful helpers.* Only Onesiphorus, whose family lived in Ephesus, helped Paul. Onesiphorus found Paul’s name on a list of prisoners in Rome after searching for a long time. Then he did all he could for the apostle (1:16-18).

At the time Paul wrote this letter, Onesiphorus was no longer with him. But the physician Luke, who was the author of the third “gospel” as well as the book of Acts, kept him company. Paul’s other colleagues had left him to return to their work—except for Demas, who was “in love with this present world” (4:10).

Paul asks Timothy to come to him before the winter makes sea travel impossible. Mark, whom we know as the author of one of the “gospels,” is to come along. Thus the young man who had once deserted the apostle (Acts 13:13) now turns out to be “very useful in serving me.”

*Hard times ahead.* Although this letter can make us feel sad, it also gives us some comfort. The apostle sees *external* dangers, but he also sees dangers from *within*. There is opposition from “the world,” and in the church the apostle is misunderstood. Moreover, there is the natural fear of a martyr’s death. Even worse, heresy is rearing its ugly head in these “last days,” this last phase of world history.

A faithful servant has a hard time of it. Just as there can

be no ideal state before the coming of Christ, so the church will not evolve into an ever greater and more encompassing body with an ever deeper spirituality. On the contrary, there will be repeated heresies deforming the church.

Paul was prepared to die in harness. His successors must be good soldiers of Jesus Christ, more concerned with preparation than parading around (2:3-5; 4:7). In the era after the time of the apostles, the church would indeed have a hard time.

*Relying on God's Word.* As the church faces those "last days," it should bear in mind what Paul said to Timothy. "The word of God is not fettered" (2:9). "The Lord knows those who are his" (vs. 19). Making the message more personal, Paul affirms: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom" (4:18).

The militant church can already rejoice triumphantly today: "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness" (4:8 NIV). It is not necessary for us to know whether Timothy saw Paul once more or how Paul died. The Bible does not give us biographies. When we are given a close-up of a particular situation at a given moment, it is only for the sake of a *message* that the Lord wants to give us, a message about the continuing upbuilding of Christ's church.

"God's firm foundation stands" (2:19). Paul can die, and Timothy has been prepared for the suffering he will face (Heb. 13:23; II Tim. 3:12). We can rely on the Word: "If we endure, we shall also reign with him" (2:12).

## **2. God Uses Means**

*Entrusted with the gospel.* An aged person in prison naturally thinks back over the course of his life. Paul,



writing to his “beloved child” Timothy, sees how his covenant God has taken care of him and provided for him throughout his life.

Because of his upbringing and the piety of his parents, Paul was already committed to the service of the Lord early in life (1:3). He had indeed persecuted the church for some time, but the Lord intervened to correct him and chose to use him for the lawful growth and expansion of the church.

Timothy’s life was similar. He had a pious grandmother and mother, and what they taught him bore fruit! You may be familiar with a painting of Rembrandt that depicts Timothy as a small boy leaning against the skirts of his grandmother Lois as she sits with a Bible on her lap telling him a story.

People sometimes like to contrast Paul, who was called suddenly and dramatically, with Timothy, who was converted in a “gradual” way. Yet Paul himself would never agree with such a comparison, for in prison he gave thanks for the upbringing *he* had received from his parents, an upbringing that had a positive influence on him later in life. To Timothy he said: “Be thankful that you were born into such a home, for you have received the true tradition. Therefore cling to that tradition and defend it against all the distortions of the heretics. Brace yourself for the battle in these difficult times. Fight against halfheartedness and false shame, and be ready to die for the gospel. Guard the precious gospel that has been entrusted to you” (see 1:5-14).

*Passing on the apostolic Word.* After saying a few words about his own circumstances (1:15-18), Paul gives his “child” more encouragement. What Timothy has heard he must pass on to reliable people who can in turn teach others (2:2).

This text has rightly been regarded as Scriptural warrant

for the church's involvement in educating men for the service of the Word. One of the functions of the office, then, is to prepare others to hold the office. Timothy may not let this matter slip, for the future will require people who can pass on the apostolic Word.

Paul uses three metaphors to press Timothy to be active. Timothy must concentrate on his task like a *soldier*. He must not be concerned about tomorrow's needs, for the leader of the army will make sure there is food. As an *athlete* he must see to it that he competes according to the rules. Finally, as a *farmer* he must not let things slide, for a lazy farmer need not expect to enjoy the first fruits.

*God's faithfulness.* The gospel is worth everything, and therefore Paul endures all things. After all, it is the gospel of the *risen* Christ (2:1-10).

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;  
if we endure, we shall also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he will also deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—  
for he cannot deny himself (2:11-13).

God is faithful to both His promises and His threats. Therefore Timothy must take decisive action against the heretics who run the risk of bringing down disaster on the heads of their followers. There are already some who have gone astray by denying the resurrection of the *body* when Christ returns. According to them, there is only a 'Spiritual resurrection,' and it takes place in the present.

*Misleading doctrines.* Patiently but firmly, Timothy must combat these false and misleading doctrines. The house of the church has an unshakable foundation on which it is written: "The Lord *knows* those who are his," which is exactly what Moses said to the revolutionaries

Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:5). God preserves His church despite its apostasy and deformation.

On the other hand, there is such a thing as personal responsibility. Therefore the following words are also written on that foundation: “Let every one who names the name of the Lord *depart from iniquity*” (2:19). This sentence reminds us of the evacuation of the area around the tents of Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:26). It also reminds us of the resurrection hymn of the Old Testament church in Isaiah 26: “Thy name alone we acknowledge” (vs. 13). “Thy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise” (vs. 19).

*Satanic action.* In Ephesus, which was a hotbed of magic and mixed religions, Paul became acquainted with Jewish wizards, books of magic, and the fanatical service of Artemis (Acts 19). From Christ’s message to the church at Ephesus, we learn of a struggle against false apostles (Rev. 2:2-6). Timothy battles the same satanic action which, in the form of false teaching, threatened the church like a cancerous growth.

But didn’t the “last days” begin with Pentecost? Moses, after all, was not opposed only by Korah, Dathan and Abiram; there were all sorts of magicians standing in his way (3:8). There will always be deceivers and false leaders who try to enchant the church. Fortunately, people will see through them, just as Moses saw through the false leaders in his time. We can live by the assurance that the Lord will hold on to His church.\*

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\*In 1526, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) presented a painting to the city fathers of Nuremberg, a city which had gone over to the Reformation a year earlier. The painting depicted John, Peter, Mark, and Paul, with the following texts drawn from their writings listed underneath: II Pet. 2:1-3; I John 4:1-3; II Tim. 3:1-7; Mark 12:38-40. Dürer’s reason was that in dangerous times, all temporal rulers must see to it that they do not accept the misleading words of men as the Word of God, for

### 3. Preach the Word and Accept Suffering

*A stream of memories.* The Lord uses “means” as He preserves His church. Paul makes a point of expressing his appreciation for the faithfulness Timothy has shown since he started following the apostle.

Like Jacob just before his death (Gen. 48:7), the aged apostle has many memories running through his mind. He

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God wants nothing added to His Word and nothing taken away from it (see Rev. 22:18-19).

In Nuremberg the Reformation was an accomplished fact, but Dürer saw an enemy arising within its own camp, i.e. Anabaptism, fanaticism, revolution. Through the influence of a rector at Nuremberg who was committed to mysticism, three painters (perhaps former students of Dürer) had already arrived at some sort of “God is dead” theology. Therefore Dürer gave the painting to the city as a testament of warning. It has been demonstrated that Dürer had these texts in mind from the very beginning as he worked on the painting.

The Elector Maximilian I of Bavaria asked the city fathers of Nuremberg for the painting in 1627. After considering the request carefully, the city fathers sent the painting to him together with a copy, in the hope that the Elector would accept the copy and send the original back. The original painting was damaged by this time. The texts referred to underneath would hardly please Munich’s Jesuits, since they warned against the Antichrist and spoke of human decrees and so forth. But the Elector, who knew art, had the “offensive” text references underneath cut off. Then he sent them back to Nuremberg with the copy, keeping the original *without* the Biblical commentary. Apparently texts warning against *fanatics* were seen as applying to *Roman Catholics*.

In 1922 the painting and the inscriptions beneath were finally reunited. (The painting now hangs in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich.) But how many visitors to this museum will understand the revealing Biblical language of Dürer’s painting, which is still relevant today?

thinks of Antioch, Iconium and Lystra. In those days the Jews chased Paul wherever he went and persecuted him. In Lystra he was even stoned (Acts 14:19). Timothy was with Paul at the time, for Lystra was where he used to live and where he became a disciple. At Lystra he showed his loyalty to the persecuted apostle.

*Drawing strength from Scripture.* The church is not a flourishing, profit-making enterprise, which is what the heretics wanted to make of it, and therefore it may not compromise in order to escape persecution. “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (3:12).

Timothy must not let go of his “first love.” (Think of Christ’s message to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:4.) Just as he was taught the Scriptures thoroughly from childhood on, so he must continue to concentrate on them, for *only* in them will he find the strength to combat the false teachers. It is through Scripture that the “man of God” is “equipped for good work of every kind” (3:17 NEB). The term *man of God* makes us think of Moses and of the prophetic task (see also I Tim. 6:11).

*The whole Bible.* Timothy must oppose the myths with the New Testament gospel (4:4-5), but at the same time he is to hold on to the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul himself sets the example here: in his last days he has Mark and Luke, the authors of two of the “gospels,” with him. He also asks for “books and parchments,” by which he clearly means the Old Testament Scriptures (4:11, 13).

Across the centuries so full of heresies flattering to man, we hear Paul’s mandate from prison:

Before God and before Christ Jesus who is to judge men living and dead, I charge you solemnly by his coming appearance and his [present] reign, proclaim the message [as a herald], press it home on all occasions, convenient or

inconvenient, use argument, reproof, and appeal, with all the patience that the work of teaching requires. But you yourself must keep calm and sane at all times; face hardship, work to spread the Gospel, and do all the duties of your calling (4:1-2, 5 NEB).

*The end of the race.* Paul then passes on the torch. Let Timothy take it. In his faithfulness to the apostle, he can be an example to the church throughout the world, the church that threatens to fall prey to a “progressive” theology and a new morality.

Paul sacrifices himself as a libation. The time is nearing when he will be freed of his work on earth. The good fight has been fought, and the end of the race is in sight. Paul has kept the faith. Who could help but shed some tears when reading this moving testament?

*Personal requests and messages.* For Timothy, Paul’s words meant that he had to come quickly, even before the winter. In conclusion Paul has a few requests to make and some messages to pass on. He sends greetings to his good friends Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila—notice that he mentions the wife’s name first—and also to the ‘household’ of Onesiphorus, who had looked after him in prison. He sends greetings from the brothers in Rome and also from sister Claudia. These people, at least, had not deserted him. “The Lord be with your spirit. Grace be with you” (4:22).

The pronoun *you* that Paul uses here is a plural form. Thus he was not thinking of Timothy alone. The letter was also intended for the church Timothy served.

The churches must remain sober in these last days. Yet, they have the reliable Word, the Word of grace to which Paul had earlier commended the elders at Ephesus, knowing that fierce wolves would come and would not spare the flock (Acts 20:29-30, 32).

# Titus

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## 1. Paul's Co-worker in Crete

*Another "child" of Paul.* Titus, too, was a "true child" of Paul (1:4). The apostle had known him for a long time. From Antioch (Syria), where there was a "mixed" congregation of Jews and Gentiles, Paul took Titus along on an official trip to Jerusalem (Gal. 2:1ff). Despite the opposition of some false members who had slipped into the church, Titus was accepted by the leaders of the congregation in Jerusalem, even though he was a *full-blooded Gentile*. The apostle never had Titus circumcised—unlike Timothy, who was half Jewish (Acts 16:1-3). On account of the faith they shared, Paul gratefully accepted Titus, his "true child," as one of his colleagues and fellow workers.

It is clear from the second letter to the Corinthians that Titus operated in that "difficult" congregation in a powerful yet tactful way and did a great deal to smooth things out between Paul and the church in Corinth. "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (II Cor. 7:6).

*Problems in Crete.* From Paul's pastoral letters we deduce that Titus must have been left at Crete to straighten things out there (1:5). Apparently the churches established by the apostle on that island were not yet ready for "self-government"; they were in great need of someone from Paul's inner circle. Moreover, the nature of the Cretans also played a role here. A church is affected by the milieu in which it lives.

To make matters worse, there were false teachers at work among the newly converted Christians. You know how things often go at such times: people who are still a little shaky on their feet can easily be bowled over by a good talker.

The heresy described in the letters to Timothy resembled the one that became a virtual epidemic in Crete. Apparently the Jews with their fairy tales had played a major role in promoting this heresy (1:10, 14).

*A revolutionary heresy.* If the young churches in Crete were taken in by the false teaching, they would be lost. What would people outside the church think then?

In essence the heresy threatening the church was revolutionary. Refusing to accept authority relationships, it opened the door to all sorts of evil practices. After all, aren't Christians "above" earthly things? But if Christians actually accepted such teaching, "the world" could rightly call them *misanthropists*, i.e. haters of mankind, since they would be taking an offensive attitude toward their fellow man and would be a destructive rather than a positive influence in their community (3:1ff).

In this letter Paul advises Titus with regard to the difficulties he faced. He makes some points that the church today should take to heart if it wants to remain committed to sound doctrine.

Just as in the letters to Timothy, Paul does not lay down dead laws and rules. Patiently he derives everything from



our deliverance in Christ. “Ecclesiastical law” must also stand under the sign of deliverance.

## 2. The Office Versus Heresy

*Qualifications for the office of elder.* After introducing himself in a pregnant sentence as an apostle and preacher and as the author of the letter, Paul starts talking about Titus’s work. Titus is told to complete the work of founding the church by establishing councils of elders wherever possible (e.g. in the towns).

Naturally, he is to pay careful attention to the character and qualities of any candidate for such an office. Men who lived as hedonists could not serve as elders, any more than men lacking in good judgment or men who could not stand up in an argument when the doctrine they believed was attacked. No, the elders would have to be men who subjected themselves to the discipline of the Word but also knew how to oppose others when necessary.

*Chastisement for heretics.* Paul pointed out that false teaching was already having a devastating effect on the congregations in Crete. Entire families were being upset by such teaching. A quotation from the famous Cretan philosopher and poet Epimenides cleverly illustrates this.

Epimenides, who lived in the seventh century B.C., is sometimes counted as one of the seven wise men of Greece. When Paul speaks of him as a “prophet,” he means simply that the Cretans regarded him as such. Strictly speaking, the Bible awards the title of “prophet” only to those within the circle of the covenant.

Logicians like to use Epimenides’ statement about Cretans as a logical puzzle. Epimenides says that all

Cretans are liars. But he was a Cretan himself. Consequently, what he said was a lie.

To make sure Titus realized just what he faced, Paul told him that the heretics, most of whom were Jews, were to be chastised quickly and without ceremony. Moreover, he was to warn the congregation against them. He was to show no interest in Jewish myths and was not to let himself be influenced by rabbinical views on the question which foods are clean and which are unclean.

The Gentiles are not bound by the ceremonial regulations in the Mosaic legislation. Those who serve the Lord are pure. And for those who are pure, everything is pure. But those who are not purified by the blood of Christ defile the most beautiful gifts in the creation (1:14-15).

*Impurity of the heart.* Paul's statement that all things are pure for those who are pure is not to be taken as a license to enter sinful territory. When Paul says "all things," he does not mean *anything good or bad*; what he means is that which is *created* good (see I Tim. 4:1-5; Mark 7:1-23).

The Phariseeism of the new teachers wanted to do away with ceremonial impurity, but at the same time it opened the door to impurity of the heart. Paul formulates his point as follows: "They profess to *know* God, but they deny him by their deeds; they are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good deed" (1:16). Obviously the false teaching had far-reaching moral consequences. This manmade piety brought forth revolutionaries in "all areas of life."

### 3. A People Prepared to Serve Him

*Each in his place.* As Paul continues, he points to the attitudes that the various groups should assume—old men, old women, young men, slaves. In our age of false freedom, Paul’s words are all the more valuable.

Paul does not play the role of the sympathetic psychiatrist who “understands” everything, nor is he fighting for “human rights.” He puts people in their place and reminds them of the impression that the poor conduct of Christians must make on those who are outside the church looking in.

Old women must be priestly in their behavior, as people involved in holy service. They must devote proper attention to their households and be submissive to their husbands, so that “the word of God may *not be discredited*” (2:3, 5).

Titus himself must set an example for the young men by his conduct and sound preaching, “so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say of us” (2:6-8). Through their faithfulness, slaves must likewise “*add lustre* to the doctrine of God our Saviour” (2:10 NEB). Everyone must obey the government authorities and “*show perfect courtesy* toward all men” (3:1-2).

*Christ’s redemptive accomplishments.* The point to bear in mind is that Christ’s redemptive work is an accomplished fact. He has purified for Himself a people of His own possession (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 14:2) who are “zealous for good deeds” (2:14). Philanthropy, that is, our Savior God’s love for mankind, has manifested itself; the Holy Spirit has been richly poured out over the congregation and has washed the church in the waters of regeneration (3:4-5).

All the purifications by the sects enamored of baptism

and all the ceremonies and “works of righteousness” that one might perform will not bring about deliverance and a renewal of life. Deliverance and renewal come only through the triune God by way of the gospel of *grace*, which preaches the “hope of eternal life” (3:7).

Naturally, this hope is not something uncertain, as so many believe. The beginning of Paul’s letter makes it apparent that it is not a human expectation tormented by doubt and uncertainty; it is a hope of life in the Messianic era, a “hope of eternal life which God, who never lies, promised ages ago”! (1:2).

Christ’s redemption *has* come! This must be apparent from the church’s way of life. Therefore Titus must reject all those questions about genealogies and the practices prescribed in the Mosaic laws. He should not waste any time on those stubborn heretics and should not hesitate to discipline them.

*Financial obligations.* Paul asks Titus to meet him in Nicopolis, which is in Dalmatia (II Tim. 4:10). To take Titus’s place, he will send Artemas or Tychicus, whom we encounter in other letters.

Meanwhile, Titus must see to it that the congregation provides properly for the two who delivered the letter, namely, Zenas and Apollos, who is also a familiar figure (Acts 18:24). Unfortunately, spiritual charlatans seem to have no lack of money (1:11), while the true stewards of God (1:7) are often in precarious financial condition.

Paul points to the congregation’s obligation to provide for messengers and for those who serve the church. The fruits of faith are also apparent in the figures in the church’s financial records.

*Encouragement for Titus.* With this Paul concludes his letter to the temporary “superintendent” of the young congregations in Crete. Titus has been given some

encouragement. After all, the liars and lazy ones are also “people of the Lord’s possession.”

Paul’s epistle and the coming of a new Christian teacher will give Titus a great deal of support in the face of the heretical sects that seek to turn things upside down, with the result that the church is put in bad light. Christ’s grace does not break things down but *activates* us.

“Let our people learn to apply themselves to good deeds” (3:14) and thus show others the way. Unfortunately, the believers in Crete had not made much progress toward this goal (see Matt. 28:19).

# Philemon

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*Bringing master and slave together.* Paul's letter to Philemon could be characterized as a letter of introduction. It was written while Paul was in prison. It was addressed to a man named Philemon, who lived in Colossae, to his wife Apphia, to Archippus, who may have been Philemon's son (see Col. 4:17), and to the congregation that gathered for worship in Philemon's home.

The occasion for writing the letter was that Onesimus, one of Philemon's slaves, had run away after stealing from his master. In some way or another he met Paul, who won him over to the gospel. Paul now declares that he had become the "father" of Onesimus (vs. 10). In the Letter to the Colossians, Onesimus is referred to as "our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you" (4:9 NIV).

The purpose of the letter is to persuade Philemon to take back his slave, who had proven to be an unworthy servant. Paul argues: "Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved *brother*" (vs. 15-16).

*The ideal of Christian brotherhood.* The beautiful thing that shines through in this humble and genuinely human letter is that social relationships are to be viewed in the light of Christian brotherhood. Paul does not use this letter as an occasion to condemn slavery as such—even though slavery is certainly not an institution Christians can support. He uses the gospel as his standpoint in looking at the relationships that result from this institution. And it is in the strength of the gospel that he seeks to persuade Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly (vs. 14).

Thus Paul does not come with a plan for “social” reforms. He leaves relationships as they are: the slave remains a slave, and the master remains his “boss.” Because of this, a lot of people today shrug their shoulders at this letter, maintaining that Paul was a defender of capitalism who sent Onesimus back to Philemon with a few pious words so that he would be available for further exploitation. And Onesimus is scorned for meekly going back to his original master. Don’t Paul’s recommendations in this matter endanger the worker’s “rights”? Doesn’t the church encourage a slave morality that will keep people from taking the proper revolutionary path to achieve the needed changes in society, politics and race relations?

*True renewal.* It’s true that Paul does not take a revolutionary approach here. The Bible is never revolutionary. Each person must stay in the calling to which he is called (I Cor. 7:20, 24). Scripture does not break life down but heals it, by pointing to the new humanity, the brotherhood within the church; within the fellowship in which Christ makes all things “new.”

The “worker” is not really helped when the labor union fights for his “rights,” and his “boss” needs more than “social awareness.” Neither a quiet transformation nor a brutal revolution will bring about a renewal of human

relationships. The abolition of slavery has been no more successful in bringing about universal happiness than has the socialization or nationalization of various industries in certain countries. It is in the church of Christ that relationships are first set right.

*Advice for the whole congregation.* It should not escape our attention that the congregation, the local church, receives heavy emphasis in this short letter. Paul writes in Timothy's name as well as his own, and he addresses himself not just to Philemon but to his household as well. Thus the other slaves of this wealthy man are drawn into the "Onesimus affair"—without the intervention of any "Council for the Promotion of the Ethical and Social Interests of Slaves and Workers."

Paul makes it clear that Onesimus—whose name means *useful*, although he had earlier been useless—is indeed useful in the service of the gospel. Paul would gladly have kept Onesimus with him.

Paul hopes to be released from prison so that he can visit Colossae, for he knows that the congregation in Colossae is sending up prayers on his behalf. (The pronoun *you* in verse 22 is a plural form in the Greek.) His fellow prisoners also send greetings. The *you* in the final verse is again a plural form; here Paul is addressing the whole congregation.

Above this small epistle we could set the words of Article 28 of the Belgic Confession: "This holy congregation is an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation." Thus, "social" life will never be restored by itself.



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