

Paul's Devotion to the Church

“Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample.”
—*Philippians 3:17*

THE APOSTLE PAUL'S devotion to the brethren both in his day and by extension throughout the Gospel Age has been abundantly manifested by the things which he said and did as recorded in the Scriptures. His consecrated life provides an extraordinary example of care and deep concern for the spiritual well-being of God's people. One factor which was so influential in his development of such passion and watch-care in promoting the interests of the church was his humility and appreciation of the Lord's grace in selecting him as an instrument for use. This was despite the fact that in ignorance, as Saul of Tarsus, he had persecuted the followers of Jesus, sometimes leading to their martyrdom, as in the case of Stephen. He knew he had been forgiven and that God had accepted him, but in various portions of his writing, Paul alludes to his former condition and how its effects were impressed upon his mind.

“I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.” (I Tim. 1:12,13) Paul was so grateful for his new standing in Christ that he was burning with zeal to do all that he could to encourage the brethren as he fulfilled his mission. Paul’s views on certain matters and his actions under various circumstances illustrated his devotion to God and furnish many lessons which should prove helpful to us in our Christian course. His doctrinal teachings provided evidence of his devotion to the brethren because he gave warnings that false teachers and grievous wolves would arise and not spare the flock. It was because of Paul’s love and faithful ministry that he wanted us to be steadfast in the faith and protected from snares of the Adversary. “I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God.” (Acts 20:27) Additionally, several other areas of focus in Paul’s life commend themselves for emulation on our part.

THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

The record of the glorified Lord Jesus’ encounter with Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus reveals that Ananias was hesitant to go to Saul because of his history of persecuting the church. “But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel. For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake.”—Acts 9:15,16

Subsequently, as the Apostle Paul, he embarked upon a course of personal study to determine how best he should carry out his mission. "Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days."—Gal. 1:17,18

Shortly after his Spirit begettal, and having preached Christ in the synagogue at Damascus (Acts 9:20-26), Paul went to Arabia for about three years before continuing with his active ministry. During this period, he probably was studying the features of the divine program and also may have received many revelations. Paul realized the importance of personal study in being able to articulate the Truth to those with a hearing ear. The word of God as contained in the Bible is the source from which true believers derive their strength. It commends itself by providing direction, hope, peace, and understanding to all who are spiritually enlightened and apply its precepts in their lives. The Apostle Paul, describing the power of the Bible, asserts, "All scripture divinely inspired, is profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for that discipline which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly fitted for every good work."—II Tim. 3:16,17, *Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott*

The foregoing furnishes a lesson which we can apply in our own lives. Those who are teachers in the ecclesia would be well advised to utilize helps such as *Studies in the Scriptures* and other aids advertised in this publication to better understand

truths contained in the Bible. Also, the matter of personal study is not limited to teachers in the ecclesia, but each member of the ecclesia should prepare in advance for class meetings so as to contribute to the mutual edification of all the brethren. “Every joint supplieth” (Eph. 4:16), and each of us should desire to fulfill our responsibility in that connection.

WITNESSING

During Paul’s first missionary tour, after he and Barnabas left Antioch in Pisidia, they traveled to Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, where they told the people about Jesus Christ and worked miracles. They had a mixed reception in that some of the hearers accepted the Gospel message, whereas others opposed, persecuted, and even stoned the Apostle Paul. (Acts 14:1-20) This pattern followed Paul throughout his ministry, but he was undaunted and never gave up. “When they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch. Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.”—vss. 21,22

Despite the opposition Paul had received in these cities previously, he returned to the brethren to strengthen and establish them by providing further instruction from God’s Word. Additionally, he exhorted the believers to continue in the faith even in the midst of widespread persecution. He reminded them concerning the cost of discipleship, and that it is through much tribulation they would enter

into the kingdom of God, as suffering in the name of Christ would reap a grand reward.

A related lesson for us today is to appreciate the necessity of follow-up work. If any of our witness efforts have uncovered an interest in Bible study, we should seek to nurture that desire by making subsequent contacts, meeting with such individuals one on one if necessary, and supplying any helps that may aid in their understanding and appreciation of the plan of God. We should not become discouraged if they do not progress as quickly as we think they should. Rather, as long as they give evidence of an active interest in the Bible, we should be willing to expend our energies to help them. On another level, too, there are brethren who may be isolated and have limited fellowship because there are no other brethren nearby. We should maintain contact with them via written correspondence, telephone, or visits whenever possible in order that they may be strengthened. Here is an admonition which should ever be kept at the forefront of our mind—"Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."—I John 3:16

CHRISTIAN UNITY

The unity of the body of Christ is an important theme which the Apostle Paul emphasizes repeatedly as part of his devotion to the people of God. He indicates there is diversity in the body of Christ and that such is in accordance with the Heavenly Father's will, because it is God who sets the members into the body as it pleases him. Paul continues

by indicating that each body member has a certain function and that we should not view any one member as less or more important than another. However, where the mind of Christ is sought and found in each of us, there should be mutual care and concern for each other, and, above all, there is to be no schism in the body.—I Cor. 12:12-27

Paul also addresses the problem of divisions in the ecclesia arrangement. He lovingly exhorts the brethren to be of the same mind and of one accord in Christ Jesus. The brethren at Corinth were exalting the names of men, which was leading to divisions. “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”—chap. 1:10-13

This text provides a lesson for us to consider today. The concept of divisions among the people of God should be of concern, especially if there are pressures exerted by any to hinder opportunities for fellowship with other brethren. Loyalty to, and support of one’s local ecclesia should be expected. However, efforts to prevent the exercise of liberty to attend a larger gathering of brethren apart from one’s immediate fellowship, when convenient, would be improper. There are, of course, very

legitimate reasons why a physical separation among the Lord's people may sometimes be necessary. Nevertheless, to the extent that we recognize one another as brethren in the body of Christ, there should be no manifestation of a party spirit. There should be ample room for all who can appreciate the differences between essential and non-essential doctrines to dialogue for mutual edification of one another, even when we do not see identically on minor points. If we create man-made barriers which are not scripturally authorized because of minor differences, that would reflect a party spirit, which is contrary to the doctrine of the unity of the body.

CONSECRATION AND SELF-DENIAL

Paul was an example of devotion and deep consecration. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." (Rom. 12:1,2) Paul had gone through the process of transformation himself, and would not be conformed to the world and its activities. Rather, he sought to do the will of God. Thus, it required an emptying of self, personal ambition, and gratifying the old creature, while at the same time walking in newness of life.

Paul's experiences and privileges before he became a follower of Christ were no longer of importance to him. "Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh

that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” (Phil. 3:4-7) Paul expands further, citing the excellence of the knowledge that he obtained in Christ, for whom he had suffered such loss and counted it as dung, that he might “win Christ.”—vs. 8

What is the lesson provided for us here? Like the Apostle Paul, all of us need to be transformed. This begins when our consecration has been accepted by God. (Rom. 6:3,4) When we surrender our wills to do the will of God, and Christ’s bidding, it will dictate how we spend our time, our talents, what we will say, where we will go, what we will do, and govern our entire being. Carrying out our baptism into Christ’s death represents our renouncing of earthly aims, hopes and ambitions. If we are faithful in this endeavor, not only will we now walk in newness of life, but we will have reason to entertain the following magnificent hope—“As we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.” (I Cor. 15:49,53) What a glorious prospect is ours!

ENDURANCE AND COMFORT

One of the most pointed references to Paul’s devotion to the church is mentioned where he

describes how much he endured for the sake of the brethren. (II Cor. 11:23-28) Paul willingly endured all of these experiences because of his faithful service to, and deep love for, Christ and his body members. The fact that it is recorded in this epistle is evidence that he desired the Lord's followers to know they were not alone in being persecuted and experiencing hardship. These expressions were, in fact, exhortations to faithful endurance. Paul was concerned about the brethren, and wanted them to make their calling and election sure. On another occasion, while in Athens, Paul was desirous of knowing how the believers in Thessalonica were bearing up under persecution. He sent Timothy to establish, comfort, and encourage them in the faith. He reminded them in his letter that he had predicted their afflictions. When Timothy returned to Paul and declared their faith and love were strong, Paul rejoiced and was comforted.—I Thess. 3:1-8

This also is a lesson which we can apply in our own lives. We might inquire as to how desirous are we that our brethren who are experiencing affliction remain steadfast. Sometimes it has been suggested in non-third world countries the brethren do not suffer very much. To some degree that may be true as respects organized opposition to the Truth. However, brethren may experience trials because of their stand for righteousness on the job or even from family members who are not supportive of the Truth. Many times we learn of brethren who are undergoing serious physical ailments, and yet they express a sense of acquiescence and thankfulness that they have been able to learn something from the experience while still striving to serve

God. In other instances, we may hear of brethren who have different special needs throughout the world, and we need to determine whether or not we are doing anything in the way of trying to comfort and assist them. We should be encouraged when we hear of the brethren's determination to be steadfast in the Lord despite adversity. We should communicate in helpful ways to our brethren that will encourage them towards making their calling and election sure, as Paul did, instead of being too busy with other matters. Our diligence in doing these things gives evidence that the spirit of Christ dwells within us.

DISCERNING AND DOING GOD'S WILL

Paul's steadfastness in putting his personal preferences aside and seeking divine approval enabled him to be a blessing to the brethren in the Early Church and provides a model of submission to the will of God. "Now when they had gone throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia, and were forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia, After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not. And they passing by Mysia came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia, and prayed him, saying, Come over into Macedonia, and help us. And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavored to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them."—Acts 16:6-10

From the foregoing narrative, we learn that although Paul had planned to go into Asia, he was

providentially hindered from traveling in that direction, and subsequently in a dream he was led to travel to Macedonia. As a result of doing so, Lydia and her household accepted the Gospel message and the church at Phillipi was established. We also remember the subsequent experience of Paul and Silas being beaten, put in prison, and the earthquake which released everyone's bonds—but because the prisoners did not flee, the jailer and his household also accepted Christ.—vss. 22-34

On another occasion, Paul received an indication that it was the Lord's will for him to go to Jerusalem as he expressed to the elders at Ephesus. Subsequently, while in Caesarea, a prophet named Agabus indicated that the Jews in Jerusalem would bind Paul and turn him over to the Gentiles. This concern expressed for his safety did not deter Paul from carrying out his conviction that it was God's will for him to travel wherever he perceived he should go in the service of the Lord.

As an apostle, God sometimes may have used special providences, or the Holy Spirit, to convey his will to Paul. His going to Macedonia, as mentioned earlier, as well as his going to Jerusalem on this occasion were not done simply based upon his personal preferences. Rather, the Lord impressed upon Paul's consciousness the direction he should take. He then acted accordingly despite any seeming difficulties on the surface connected with following such a course. Earlier in his ministry, Paul prayed three times to have his thorn in the flesh removed. However, it was the Father's will for him to endure it so that he might learn the sufficiency of heavenly grace to provide for his

needs, even though he may have believed he would be better able to serve God without his thorn.—II Cor. 12:7-10

Here we can take a lesson for ourselves concerning how to determine God's will. We are not to expect visions or special revelations if we come to a fork in the road. In such experiences we should pause and pray about the matter, examine the Bible to see if any scriptural principles are involved, consider providential circumstances, and perhaps even consult with other brethren who might be able to furnish wise counsel. After completing such a process, we may still be faced with making a decision one way or other, but should use our consecrated judgment at that point, relying upon the promise that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose."—Rom. 8:28

SERVICE UNDER RESTRAINT

Paul was taken into protective custody in Jerusalem after the city was cast into tumult resulting from the false charge that he had brought a Gentile (Trophimus) into the Temple. After hearings before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, he began a journey which ultimately brought him to Rome, based upon his desire to appeal his case before Caesar. (Acts 28:16-31) He was placed under house arrest for two years. Although the Scriptures do not so directly state, it is widely believed that after this interval his case came before Nero and he was acquitted, released, and at some future time was brought to Rome a second time, imprisoned and ultimately beheaded. His two years of house arrest were most

productive in that he had many visitors, and he expounded the Word of God to all who came. It is believed that he also wrote the epistles to Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon during this two-year period of house arrest. Paul also wrote his second epistle to Timothy from Rome, probably shortly before his death. The contents of these letters contain invaluable instruction to assist us in walking the narrow way.

An important lesson from Paul's experiences in Rome is that a change in our circumstances does not necessarily mean that we should become inactive, even though we may have to find different ways of serving the Lord's cause. For those who are physically able but isolated, personal study, corresponding with other brethren, and witness activities through advertisements, tracts, or other means are all profitable forms of service in addition to speaking the Truth to others as opportunity may be presented. For those who are aging or physically unable to do much, perhaps they might only be able to listen to convention recordings, receive visitors, or be an example of steadfastness, enduring cheerfully under adversity, and above all, remembering the brethren in prayer. As long as we have our faculties, we can always pray for one another. Judging from the response of those who have in the past requested an interest in prayers on their behalf, they have received grace and strength. We are responsible only for doing what we can, and if there are limited opportunities for rendering extensive service, the Lord will reward us for our faithful efforts, no matter how seemingly insignificant they may appear to us.

Paul's ministry exemplified a life of faithfulness to the Heavenly Father. He showed loving devotion to the brethren in the areas of personal study, witnessing, encouraging unity of the Spirit, consecration and self-denial, endurance and comfort in affliction, discerning and doing God's will, plus service under restraint. Through his example there are many illustrations and lessons which we might apply in our own lives as well. May his recorded legacy serve to inspire each one of us towards faithfulness even until the very end, and thus receive the promised crown of righteousness.—
II Tim. 4:7,8 ■