

“O Ye Corinthians”

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*—II Corinthians
6:11*

IT SEEMS REASONABLE to conclude that the Lord overruled in the affairs of the various congregations of the Early Church in such a manner as to suggest to the

apostles the subject matter found in their various epistles. The Heavenly Father knew in advance that this general pattern of attitudes and experiences would be found among his people throughout the Christian age. Thus, the apostles would, in writing these letters, actually be ministering to the entire church in a timely and effective manner. Certainly there was much in the church at Corinth that is prevalent among the Lord's people today. A great deal was praiseworthy, but some was not.

In his first letter to the Corinthian brethren, Paul reveals their carnal, or fleshly, spirit of attaching themselves to one or another of the teachers who came among them. Some said, “I am of Paul,” others said they were “of Apollos,” and still others claimed to be “of Cephas.” (I Cor. 1:12) These various teachers

were not themselves to blame for this situation. Inasmuch as they all proclaimed the same Gospel, there was no doctrinal basis for the brethren to favor one above the other. They were all laboring in the same divine cause. As Paul explained, he had planted, and Apollos had watered, but it was God who gave the increase.—I Cor. 3:6

The fact that there was something for all the brethren to do in the Lord's service, and the importance of recognizing Christ only as the Head of the church, are set forth in much detail in chapter 12 of this first letter. In this chapter Paul is careful to emphasize that God sets every member in the "one body" of Christ as it pleases him. (vss. 12,18) In view of the situation existing among the Corinthian brethren, this instruction was very timely, and has continued to be important for the Lord's people in every part of the age, including today.

The church is commissioned to be the "light of the world." (Matt. 5:14) This calls for life and activity. In Paul's reference to the various members of the "body," with Jesus as the Head, he emphasized that there is something for each member to do. In the realization of this, however, there is the possibility of becoming engrossed in the spirit of activity, while losing sight of the proper motive which should prompt service in the Lord's vineyard. Hence, in I Corinthians 13 we have that heart-searching treatise on love, showing that without love all else is vain.

GROWTH IN GRACE

By the time Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthian brethren they had given evidence of

considerable growth in grace. He does not now mention their carnality. He implies that they now appreciated more fully the fact that Christ alone was their Head, saying, "He which stablisheth us with you in Christ, and hath anointed us, is God; Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts."—II Cor. 1:21,22

Nevertheless, there was one point on which at least some of the Corinthian brethren were not yet clear. This pertained to Paul's position of authority in the church as one of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. He mildly hints at this in the opening of chapter 3, asking, "Do we begin again to commend ourselves?" Toward the close of the letter he touches very definitely on this point, emphasizing that he "was not a whit behind the very chiefest apostles."—II Cor. 11:5

Paul did not press this point in order to glorify himself, but he realized the danger they were in by not recognizing that he did speak under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, to seemingly exalt himself appeared foolish to Paul from the human standpoint. He wrote, "Would to God ye could bear with me a little in my folly: and indeed bear with me. For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ."—II Cor. 11:1-3

After Paul's cautious reference to this point in the beginning of chapter 3, he proceeds to outline that great truth of the Gospel that during the present

Gospel Age, the disciples of Christ are “workers together” with the Lord. (II Cor. 6:1) Those found faithful unto death will be qualified to be “ministers of a new covenant,” and as associates with Christ shall restore mankind back to God during the Messianic kingdom. (II Cor. 3:6, *International Standard Version*; Rev. 20:4,6) This lesson begins with verse 3 of chapter 3, and continues into chapter 6, embellished, of course, with important side thoughts.

WORKERS WITH THE LORD

It is in the beginning of chapter 6 that we read, “Working together with him we entreat also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (for he saith, At an acceptable time I hearkened unto thee, And in a day of salvation did I succor thee: behold, now is an acceptable time; behold, now is a day of salvation): giving no occasion of stumbling in anything, that the ministration be not blamed.”—II Cor. 6:1-3, *Revised Version Improved and Corrected*

Drawing from his own rich background of experience, as an example to them, Paul continued, “In everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in watchings, in fastings; in pureness, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in kindness, in a holy spirit, in love unfeigned, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; as deceivers and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;

as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”—II Cor. 6:4-10, *RVIC*

Here is a wonderfully complete summary of what it really means to be an ambassador for Christ, a worker “together with him.” Not all have as many trying experiences as those which came to Paul, but all who are faithful will have more or less tribulation. Everyone who has covenanted with God by sacrifice should examine this summary in order to know what it means to be faithful. These words also help us to know the qualifications for the ministry, which are love, purity, kindness, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and the proper use of the “armor of righteousness.”

“O YE CORINTHIANS”

It is immediately following this presentation of qualifications, and of what faithfulness will mean in terms of sacrifice and tribulation, that Paul exclaims, “O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged.” To this he adds, “Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompence in the same, (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.”—II Cor. 6:11-13

Paul had presented a beautiful and comprehensive outline of the marvelous grace of God which had made provision for all the true disciples of Christ to be workers together in the ministry of reconciliation. However, he seemed to question whether or not the Corinthian brethren had matured spiritually to the point where they could fully appreciate the great privilege the Heavenly Father had extended to them.

Were they willing to be unknown by the world in order to be known and loved by God? Were they ready actually to die with Christ in order to live and reign with him? Were they agreeable that their faithfulness in the ministry should lead to experiences of trial and difficulty, yet be able to rejoice in the Lord and in the power of his might? Were they willing to make themselves poor, that through their ministry of the Truth others might be made rich in faith and hope? Were they prepared to give up everything so that in reality they would have nothing, yet in faith rejoice that as heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ they possessed all things?

Paul wondered if their hearts had been sufficiently “enlarged” by the message of the Gospel, and by the love of God reflected through his Word, to enable them to enter into the real spirit of the ministry. Such a spirit would permit them to stop at nothing, that the joy of the Truth might be communicated to others. This is a test which confronts all who undertake no longer to live unto themselves but unto the Lord.—II Cor. 5:14,15

It may not be too difficult to say, “Lord, I give to you my all.” The test comes when we undertake to carry out this promise. True, the Corinthian brethren had been generous in donating to the physical needs of their brethren in Jerusalem. Paul compliments them on this, and says that he had even boasted of their liberality. Even so, he considered it expedient to encourage them further along this line. (II Cor. 9:1-7) Shrunken indeed would be the Christian heart which felt no impelling desire to assist brethren who needed food and clothing.

A HIGHER LIBERALITY

The ministry of the Truth, however, called for a higher type of liberality, one that was based on faith, and motivated by the spiritual needs of others. It was such a ministry which also often led to “distresses,” “stripes,” “imprisonments,” and “tumults.” They could donate money for the aid of their needy brethren, and be rewarded by appreciation. Yet, if they faithfully bore witness to the Truth, the immediate result could easily be tribulation or even bitter persecution.

To be faithful ministers of reconciliation has always been a test upon the consecrated. Jesus admonished us to seek “first the kingdom of God,” permitting the material needs and comforts of life to become of secondary consideration. (Matt. 6:33) We start out with the determination to be guided by his admonition, and let us seek strength from the Lord that we may continue in it, for there is always the danger of becoming “weary in well doing.” (Gal. 6:9) Let us not assume that the Lord will be pleased if we give to him merely the “leftovers” of life. Surely no consecrated follower of the Master means to take this position.

A common expression in the world, descriptive of the lifelong noble aims and efforts of the majority of people, is “making a living.” Most of the Lord’s people, likewise, find it necessary to make a living. Ordinarily, nothing is permitted to stand in the way of this important responsibility. Those of the family who are employed do not stay home from work because the weather is not favorable, nor because those who may work next to them are uncongenial. There is a living to be made, and the

unfavorable circumstances associated with the task are not permitted to interfere.

So it should be with us as disciples of Christ. Spiritually speaking, we also are making a living—striving for “glory and honour and immortality, eternal life.” (Rom. 2:7) So far as the flesh is concerned, there is much that is unpleasant involved in our effort. We have to give up everything in order to “possess all things.” Ultimately, we actually must die in order to live. Shall we be any less devoted to the task of attaining the prize of the High Calling of God in Christ Jesus than we are in securing the physical needs of this temporal life?—Phil. 3:13-15

ENLARGED HEART

Paul told the Corinthian brethren that his heart was enlarged, both toward them, and for the promotion of the ministry generally. However, he was not so sure about their hearts. He had done all he could to expand their understanding and love, yet he wrote, “Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels.” (II Cor. 6:12) The Greek word here translated “straitened” means “narrowness of room,” or to be “hemmed in.”

The Corinthian brethren had restricted their own capacity to love and to serve. Their view of the Lord’s service and of the brethren was too “hemmed in.” They had not caught the spirit of love which prompted God to give his Son that sinners might be reconciled to him and have life. Their prejudices and their fears were standing in the way of a whole-hearted ministry of reconciliation.

Chapter 10, verse 7 of this epistle may reveal one of the reasons for the Corinthians’ “hemmed in”

attitude. We quote: "Do ye look on things after the outward appearance? If any man trust to himself that he is Christ's, let him of himself think this again, that, as he is Christ's, even so are we Christ's." Perhaps the Corinthian brethren, while sure that they belonged to Christ, were reluctant to acknowledge that certain others also belonged to the Master, basing their opinion on outward appearance.

There is nothing more restricting than a viewpoint of this kind. We knew from the time that we were first enlightened by the Word of God that every member of the Adamic race is fallen and imperfect. We know that our standing with the Heavenly Father is not upon the basis of our own righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ. (Rom. 3:10; Phil. 3:9) However, when we note the imperfections of other brethren it may be easy to conclude that they do not belong to Christ at the same level as we do.

In addition, what we see when we "look on things after the outward appearance" may not be anything which is displeasing to the Lord. It may simply be that the other brother or sister is different from us in some ways. The "hemmed in" mind would like to have everyone think and act alike, with the pattern, of course, being our own way of thinking and acting.

Paul's viewpoint was the correct one because it was the viewpoint of an "enlarged heart." To paraphrase his thought, it would be this: "You have confidence that you belong to Christ and are enjoying the Lord's blessings; but remember I have the same confidence. We both believe that we are striving to be pleasing to the Lord. I may not like some of the things which you say and do, and you are often annoyed with me, but this gives us no reason

for judging each other.” Such a viewpoint properly sees things as Paul later wrote to Timothy, that “the Lord knoweth them that are his.”—II Tim. 2:19

NOT LIBERAL IN PRINCIPLE

There can be a wide difference between being broad-minded and having an enlarged heart. In saying this, we are thinking of liberality from the standpoint of overlooking violations of the great principles of truth and righteousness set forth in the Word of God. No true follower of the Master will do this.

The Holy Word clearly sets forth the fundamental elements of God’s plan of salvation. We cannot truthfully say that it makes no difference to the Lord whether or not we believe such plainly stated teachings. Not only are we to adhere faithfully to these principles and Christ’s doctrine, but in addition, we are admonished to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3) We are to “fight the good fight of faith” and help others to do the same in order to be pleasing to the Lord and thus “lay hold on eternal life.”—I Tim. 6:12

However, as Paul urged the Corinthian brethren, we should permit the Truth to enlarge our hearts toward our brethren in Christ and also toward the whole world of mankind. The imperfections of the flesh are sure to be manifested from time to time in our fellowship. Each one of us is different in some respects from others. If our hearts are restricted, “hemmed in,” these differences, which in reality are most often unrelated to fundamental doctrine itself, might very well cause us a great deal of concern, and rob us of much of

the joy we might otherwise have in fellowshiping with those of “like precious faith.”—II Pet. 1:1

An enlarged heart, on the other hand, gives us a happier outlook on every aspect of the Christian life, especially in our associations with the Lord’s people. This does not mean that we condone the wrongdoing of others. Nevertheless, we should accept our brethren in Christ because they are the called of God, remembering that when the Lord called them he knew all about those traits and characteristics they possess which perhaps annoy us so much. In addition, it will help to keep our hearts enlarged if we remind ourselves occasionally that we too have traits which may be just as trying to others as theirs are to us.

It was Paul’s largeness of heart that enabled him to rejoice that the Gospel was being proclaimed even though the motive some had in doing it was to add to his suffering. (Phil. 1:15-18) It is unlikely that any of the Lord’s people during this end of the age will ever be confronted with an experience of this kind as Paul was. We cite it merely as an illustration of the wholesome outlook an enlarged heart will give us in all the difficult experiences we may encounter as we labor together with the brotherhood in the glorious ministry of reconciliation.

JESUS’ PERFECT EXAMPLE

Jesus was perfect, and the imperfections of his apostles must have been very apparent to him, yet he loved them, and did so to the end. In praying for them, Jesus said, “Thine they were, and thou gavest them me.” (John 17:6) Do we always remember that our brethren have been given to us by our

Heavenly Father in the sense that he called them, even as he has called us? To think of our brethren in this light should help to keep our hearts enlarged toward them. Surely we would not want to criticize God's choice.

The psalmist wrote, "I will run the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart." (Ps. 119:32) Important among the Lord's commandments is the one given by Jesus that we should love one another as he loved us. (John 13:34,35) If we thus love our brethren we will lay down our lives for them, not merely by manifesting an interest in their physical needs, but in their spiritual welfare also. If our hearts have been truly enlarged by love we will rejoice in our privileges of association with the brethren, laboring together as ministers of reconciliation.

As we go forward unitedly in this ministry, we will encounter opposition from various outside sources. If our hearts have been enlarged we will not add to these burdens, but will do all we can to help bear them. Certainly we will see fleshly weaknesses in our brethren, and they will see such things in us as well. At times, however, what we look upon as a weakness may be but a scar, "gained on some hard-fought field, where we would only faint and yield," as the poet has written.

Let us, therefore, not judge, but with hearts enlarged, go forward together in the pathway of sacrifice, spending and being spent for one another, and for the Lord. Let us do this in the certain knowledge that God "is able to make all grace abound" toward us, that having all sufficiency always, and in all things, we "may abound to every good work."—II Cor. 9:8 ■