

A Spectacle unto the World

"For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep"—1 Corinthians 11:30

IN WRITING to the Corinthian believers the apostle Paul warns them against their party spirit which set forth some teachers in opposition to others. This is a fleshly characteristic that must be guarded against among every generation of Christ's followers. Let us consider some of the warnings and exhortations given by Paul in this important matter, contained in 1 Cor. 4.

Some of the Corinthians boasted "I am of Paul," others, "I am of Apollos." This boasting in various teachers, leaders or guides inevitably leads to factions in the One Body of Christ, marring the true spirit which should pervade it.

Paul and Apollos were, of course, not opposing leaders. Paul could have mentioned other teacher-leaders among the Corinthians themselves, but he does not do so. He singles out himself and Apollos only, as examples and deliberately refrains from mentioning any other names. He says in v. 6—

"These things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another."

It was not written or revealed who was superior to others in the One Body. Now is not the time for the manifestation of varying degrees of rank and glory, but we are all brethren in the Lord. To boast of being better or superior is at the expense of, or in opposition to others.

Such an attitude and frame of mind is foreign to that meek and gentle spirit which esteems the other better than himself to be. And see how Paul refrains from naming names. He could have; but it was not expedient and would not help.

The Corinthians did not have the proper attitude toward their teachers. Paul and Apollos, rather than being opposing teachers, were both of one and the same class, as Paul says—

"Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1).

Paul and Apollos, rather than being leaders of different factions, were *ministers of Christ*—his authorized stewards— answerable to no man in their day. They must give account of their stewardship to Christ, their Master, when he returns.

Paul points out the basic requirements in a steward among men; that he be found *faithful, dependable, and reliable*—

"Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self" (vs. 2-3).

It appears that some of the Corinthians were pre-judging Paul's stewardship. But a human day of judgment was a small, insignificant thing to him compared to the day of *divine* judgment. We continue reading Paul's line of thought:

"For I know nothing of myself: yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord" (v. 4).

Paul did not know anything against himself, having a clear conscience; but, though his conscience was clear it did not mean that he was justified or approved. Conscience, then, can be wrong, even though there be not the slightest feeling of guilt. We can do a wrong thing in all good conscience, as Paul himself before his conversion.

We must continually examine ourselves by the searching light of God's Word, applying its corrective thoughts and lessons to our daily walk.

Even by doing this, as Paul did, let us remember that Christ is still our Master, and he will be our judge in the end. Paul has in mind judgment to condemnation or approval—*final* judgment, and not the many matters of practical judgment we must necessarily decide during our probationary state. He continues (v. 5)—

"Do not form any premature judgments, therefore, but wait until the Lord comes back. For he will light up the darkness that now hides things and show what the motives in people's minds are, and then everyone will get from God the praise he deserves."

The praise each deserves is due praise, appropriate praise: what each deserves at the final appraisal by Christ. Factions should not give undue praise to their self-appointed leaders.

The true appraisal from Christ will not be based upon outward appearance of events and actions, but also according to motivating principles, *whether we are moved by a love of God, Christ and our brethren, or moved only by a love of self—*

"The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9).

It is a natural thing to be deceived by the heart, requiring no effort or guidance for love of self. The motivations that drive us along in life must be searched out and examined and brought to light now—*today*—by the light of God's Word. Motives must be revealed for what they are. Love-of-self motives must be suppressed, and love-for-God motives must be engendered fully and continually.

If we fail today to bring to light our motives, they will then be brought to light in the very near future. *Boasting is not prompted by good motives.* There should not be any boasting among Christ's followers; no one should be puffed up; praise should not be given at the expense of another.

We should not boast of what we are; for all has been given to us. This is the way Paul continues in v. 7—

"For who maketh thee to differ? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"

"Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?"

The boasting of faction meant self-satisfaction, of being well-filled and smug in their social status concerning spiritual things. So Paul says in v.8—

"Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us."

Such satisfaction, leisure and feasting were not the status of the true Christian. This demeanour and manner is prevalent in the world, but should not be in evidence among Christ's followers.

The status of all Christ's followers, least of all the apostles, was not one of fleshy satisfaction, enjoying riches and reigning as kings, a behaviour that went hand in hand with the boastful, factious attitude. Speaking on behalf of the apostles (used in the broader sense to include more than just twelve) Paul declares (v. 9)—

"For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men."

The true Christians were not feted by the world, but persecuted by it, as their Leader had predicted—

"The world loves its own . . . In the world ye shall have tribulation."

In this 9th verse quoted above, Paul may have in mind the persecutions of Christians in Roman amphitheatres.

"For it seems to me, God has exhibited us apostles at the very end of the procession, like the men condemned to die in the arena. For we have become a spectacle to the whole universe, angels as well as men."

What a contrast between the boastful Corinthians and the apostles! Paul goes into some detail to point up the difference (the seeming difference) between them (v. 10)—

"We are made fools of, for the sake of Christ, while you are men of sense, though being united with him. We are weak, you are strong. You are distinguished, we are despised."

In so many ways the difference was quite apparent (could not be more apparent); for wherein could there be a greater obvious difference than between fools and wise, weak and strong, honourable and despised? V. 11—

"To this day we have gone hungry, thirsty, and shabby; we have had rough usage, we have no home, we have worked with our hands for a living.

"When people abuse us, we bless them; when they persecute us, we put up with it; when they slander us, we try to conciliate them.

"We have come to be like the scum of the earth, the dregs of the world, and we are so now."

See, then, the spectacle made of the apostles! It all begins with being a fool (in the eyes of the world) for Christ's sake. They were weak by worldly standards, only to be despised. Their end, through privation and persecution, is as the filth of the world and the off-scouring of all things. A far cry, this, from the boastful, self-satisfied, filled to repletion, easy-living Corinthians.

But Paul, their spiritual father, is setting the proper example for them to emulate. He beseeches them to follow him. He would soon come to them, but for now he would send them Timothy, a dear (spiritual) son of his, a true servant of Christ, one on whom they could depend.

Some of the Corinthians, however, seemed to think Paul had no intention of visiting them and they were putting on airs about it: that is, in their boastful spirit they insinuated that Paul would not dare to visit them. "But," he says—

"I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will" (v. 19).

There was no question about his intention. He was definitely planning it. The only unknown factor about it was the Lord's will.

Since he was coming to visit them, the only question concerned the demeanour in which he should appear in their midst. He was appealing to the spiritually weak Corinthians by word and example and did not wish to exercise his authority, though he could do so.

Paul was an apostle, possessing the power of the Spirit, but he would rather persuade them by meekness and gentleness of Christ. But it was their choice to make—

"What will ye?"

That is, what kind of Paul do you want to visit you?—

"Shall I come with a rod (authority and chastisement), or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?"

Let us be impressed with the fact that a similar choice faces each of us, as Paul points out later in this same epistle:

"For this cause (lack of discernment—v. 29) many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep.

"For if we would judge ourselves (now), we should not be judged (by Christ)"
(I Cor. 11.30-31).

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