

We have arrived at the final chapter of the apostle Paul's first letter to the church of Jesus Christ in Corinth. And what seems like a very strange transition from his exposition of the glories of the resurrection and our great hope of death's utmost defeat and sufferings final end in the consuming fire of God's holiness to these somewhat odd words, 'now concerning the collection', is actually not a disconnect at all. It is, in reality, a planned and strategic opportunity which Paul is giving the Corinthian brothers to put into practice the unity which he has been emphasizing the entire letter.

The tone of the letter has been quite severe as he has exhorted the church in Corinth to grow up. They had been given much in regards to wisdom, knowledge, and teaching, and yet they hadn't made much of it in the kingdom of God. Rather, they had given themselves over to petty divisiveness, carving themselves up into cliques which reflected the Corinthian society itself. But the church is not a natural community at all, but an outpost of Christ's heavenly kingdom in this passing evil age. So, Paul begins the letter with the indicative, reminding them who Christ is and who they are in Him, and then continues to exhort them about how they are to order their lives in the light of this reality.

We saw these divisions earlier in the letter, a host of differing fractures over leadership personalities, moral quandaries regarding the eating of meat used in pagan sacrifices and sold in the market, how to handle immorality and a so-called brother pursuing sin, the use and pursuit of spiritual gifts whereby they were seeking power in one another's eyes rather than seeking to serve and edify the other, divorcing their spouses, suing each other, each one going one's own way. Rather than being a beacon of hope and the cleansing power of Christ crucified for sins, the Lord's Supper had been turned into a parody.

Yet, even though these people were the recipients of Paul's severe and stern warnings and corrections, they remained what he had called them at the beginning of the letter: "The Church of God in Corinth, those sanctified in Christ Jesus." Because this is who they are, the exhortations have teeth and the expectations bear weight.

It is easy when you get to chapter 16, then, to forget all of this and simply read this first section as a treatise on financial giving. But we must not do that. Though this is a new section, as indicated by "now concerning" (used in 7:1, 8:1, and 12:1 as well), it is not somehow severed from the general letter. We must read this new exhortation in the light of the whole, not merely as teaching on special giving or collections, but teaching which is still founded upon the Kingdom of God and the need for unity of the Church.

Even these details of how to make a financial collection to aid the saints in Jerusalem are not merely matters of the wisdom of financial planning, but is a matter of Christian doctrine which is rooted in the foundational truth of what God has done in the gospel of Jesus Christ who unites Jew and Gentile into one new humanity.

It is the gospel of Christ Jesus, the gospel of the Kingdom of God, which unites people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds into one mutually flourishing people group who are the beginnings of God's Kingdom life on the earth and will be finished when He raises them all to incorruptibility together. As Michael Horton has written, "The gospel creates the kind of community that is even now an imperfect preview of the kingdom's marriage feast that awaits us. The church originates, flourishes, and fulfills its mission as that part of God's world that has been redeemed and redefined by this strange announcement that seems foolish and powerless to the rest of the world." — Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life*

1. Christian Unity is Holy

- a. "the collection" was a particular and intensive collection, unique from the normal gifts and offerings for the works of service in the Corinthian church
 - i. monetary collection
 - ii. “the” – indicates a particular unique event
 - iii. This particular collections seems to have been a passion project for Paul, for he alludes to it in many places
 1. The Galatian churches are mentioned specifically, but also other help for the Jerusalem church
 2. In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, written a year later, also mentions this project again (2 Corinthians 8:1-9:5)
 3. To the Romans (15:25ff) he mentions this same gift, coming from the Macedonians and Achaean (region of the Corinthians, see 2 Cor 1:1)
- b. "for the saints"
 - i. “Saints” means ‘holy ones’
 1. This term refers to all those who have been regenerated by the Spirit of God to entrust themselves to Christ Jesus and to stand under Him as their Lord
 2. Thus, unity is familial – the family of God’s grace in Christ, as those who belong to Him by faith
 - ii. The Church is holy by God’s selection and design – distinctly different in position, spirit, and function
 1. The Kingdom of God realized, in this redemption and realization of the Holy God sanctifying His holy people
 2. “One holy...Church”
 - iii. The collection is a monetary support collection taken to help the saints in Jerusalem (v3)
 1. By using simply the term “saints” here, he is elucidating the common distinct heritage that they share with one another “together with all the saints” (1 Cor 1:1; Eph 3:18)
 2. This passion for the Jewish believers is related to his apostleship to the Gentiles (see the Romans passage)
 - iv. There is a view that the early church saw this collection as a fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “the wealth of the nations shall come into you” (60).
- c. For a Gentile community to make a large, regionally diverse, effort to support a small group of Jews in Palestine was odd
 - i. it is clear that Paul had commanded a collection be taken, and that he intended to pick it up when he arrived
 - ii. Paul is expecting the Corinthian church to participate in the edification of the Jerusalem church
 - iii. Paul is also giving them an immediate opportunity to show their zeal for righteousness by correcting their poor and factious behavior by doing so with other churches

2. Christian Unity is Catholic

- a. The gospel creates one New Humanity from people of various ethnicities and cultures
 - i. "as I commanded the Galatian churches"
 1. we see that Paul did make commands concerning supporting other Christians
 2. These commands were "arrangements" or "directions" of who to proceed in the financial help of fellow saints
 3. Galatia was a region with many churches (Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, Iconium), not a single church
 - ii. Again, this collection seems to be very important to Paul, important enough to bring it up often, to order and structure its achievement, and to make promises to deliver it to Jerusalem

- b. This was not a normal collection, but a particularly universal effort to attend to the suffering of a church struggling
 - i. Therefore, we see that this passage is where it is because of its emphasis on the universal (catholic) unity of the family of God in Christ Jesus
 - 1. Catholic comes from the compound Greek: “kata” = “in accordance with”; “olos” = whole or all
 - a. The idea is one of universality, or the complete whole thing made up of many parts, i.e. the Body of Christ
 - b. Thus, the Church is made up of a diversity of peoples (not a diversity of core beliefs)
 - c. Galatian, Macedonian, Achaean, Galilean, etc.
 - 2. “we believe in one holy, catholic, apostolic church” (Council of Constantinople, 381)
 - a. This means that though there are many churches in many regions, there is only One Church, those who are united to Christ Jesus by faith, made holy by His blood, as revealed by the apostles according to the declaration of God in His Word.
 - ii. Why was Jerusalem church struggling?
 - 1. Persecution from Jewish leaders?
 - 2. They sold everything and thus didn't have any means of production (from Acts 2)?
 - 3. There was a famine (Acts 11:28)?
 - a. during the reign of Claudius
 - b. attested to by Josephus (Antiquities 20.2.5, 49-53; 20.5.2, 101)
 - c. This famine may have been as late as 48AD, but this would be at least 6 years before the letter to the Corinthians
 - iii. This connection with the universal (catholic) Church connects the initial struggles which the Corinthian church had with its solution again: unity.
 - 1. They were divisive and factious, and this call and command to participate in the mutual support of the Jerusalem church together with churches from Asia Minor who were prospering gave them opportunity not only to "do all things for edification" for one another locally, but globally as well
 - 2. Therefore, Paul is immediately giving the Corinthians an opportunity to make things right by uniting themselves to the Church in unity – to stop being self-seeking, not only in their local church but by doing so with the global Church
 - iv. This Christian unity is founded upon only one thing: the crucified and risen Jesus Christ:

“In a profound sense, the arms of Christ spread-eagle on the cross in his final agony become a fitting symbol of his sacrifice’s achievement. With one outstretched arm he grasps believing Israelites, and with the other he grasps believing Gentiles; and, in his person offered up in holy oblation, he unites the two. Accordingly, ‘he himself is our peace, who has made the two one.’” (Bruce Milne, Dynamic Diversity)

3. Christian Unity is Edifying by Design

- a. Paul gives particular instructions regarding this edification of the saints
 - i. He is purposeful, organized, and clear
 - 1. "during (kata) one from a Sabbath"
 - 2. 'the first of the week'
 - ii. this indicates order, arrangement, structure to the collection of support for the saints
 - 1. The collection for the saints was usually collected on the day of gathered worship, i.e. Sunday very early in church history (Justin Martyr mentions it in the 2nd century as well)
- b. What we see hear is wisdom in regards to financial support of believers who are in need
 - i. There is long-term collection, not spur-of-the-moment giving

- ii. There is incremental giving, saving up smaller gifts, as one prospers during a week
 - iii. In this way, there would be no need to have a collection when Paul arrived, but it would already be complete and ready to take to support the church in Jerusalem
- c. Everyone was to be involved
 - i. "Each one of you" - full participation in universal life of the church
- d. Everyone was to give conscientiously
 - i. "before himself"
 - ii. This phrase is commonly omitted in the English, but indicates the conscientious participation of the giver (not wantonly public, but rather, 'on his own')
 - iii. thus, the obligation is not publicly pressured, but done out of love according to one's own conscience before the Lord
- e. Everyone was to give when his/her week was 'successful'
 - i. "place things stored up by which anyone has been prosperous"
 - ii. The manner of the 'placing' is "storing up whatever might be successful"
 - 1. This indicates a surplus of resources
 - 2. "successful" is a compound word meaning 'good + way' = prosperous success during the week
 - a. This word puts the emphasis on God, for it is passive and 'roadish', i.e. it is the means of prosperity which are not in the hands of the worker, but in the hands of God, i.e. fortunate success.
- f. The collection is to be made incrementally as each one prospers so that there will be no collection when Paul arrives
 - i. Why?
 - 1. There were clearly those who believed that Paul was a money-seeker, and he wants to avoid the impression
 - 2. He didn't want only those who prospered when he came to be able to participate, nor for those in poverty to bear an unbearable expectation of participation
 - a. What good would it do for the poor to place themselves in abject need to support those in abject need? That is not the norm for the life of the church.
 - ii. It also distinguishes this collection from the normal tithing done by the church for the purpose of ministry in Corinth

4. Christian Unity Extends Grace and the Opportunity for Renewed Obedience

- a. Paul promised to send their gift by the means of carriers whom they deemed worthy, along with letters (of approval by him and them, presumably).
- b. There is careful accountability, but also inclusion here
 - i. They had to approve the carriers of the gift
 - ii. Paul would vouch for their gift with the appropriate letters of recommendation
 - iii. The gift was "theirs", not Paul's
- c. Recognize also the incredible grace shown by the apostle, by handing power over to the Corinthian church in manners which enable them to avoid the humiliation of a church who is struggling
 - i. While admonishing them strongly and often in this letter, he does not let the need for such admonition preclude the opportunity to share power in this matter
 - 1. He defers to their judgment in regards to worthy men and the plan of carrying the money
 - 2. Often we think that someone is unworthy in one area should not be given any responsibility in another area, but Paul is giving them the opportunity to work towards unity with their brothers, the particular area where they seemed to struggle
 - a. They are being given the power to seek the edification of others, to make all things about Christ and Him crucified, to show grace because they have been shown grace

- b. This gift being collected is a grace (that's the word used), it is not earned by the Jerusalem brothers, nor is it owed. It proclaims the gospel.

“On the tenure of “do this and you will live,” a spirit of fearfulness is sure to enter; and the jealousies of a legal bargain chase away all confidence of intimacy between God and man; and the creature striving to be square and even with his Creator is, in fact, pursuing all the while his own selfishness (blessing) instead of God's glory. With all the conformities which he labors to accomplish, the soul of obedience is not there, the mind is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed under such an economy can it ever be. It is only when, as in the Gospel, acceptance is bestowed as a present, without money and without price, that the security which man feels in God is placed beyond the reach of disturbance. Only then can he repose in Him as one friend reposes in another...the one party rejoicing over the other to do him good...in the impulse of a gratitude, by which is he awakened to the charms of a new moral existence.” (Thomas Chalmers, *The Expulsive Power of a New Affection*)

- d. Grace *generates* godliness, not the Law
 - i. “The kindness of God leads to repentance”
 - ii. Paul is showing them the grace of God, then commanding their obedience because of that grace, and finally giving them opportunity to *conscientiously* work out their salvation with fear and trembling

Conclusion:

The implications of this gracious gospel of Jesus Christ are tremendously important to the function of the church. As the New Humanity, the Body of Christ in this world, we are the outposts of His Kingdom in a world which is passing away. We are the colonies of God's grace and the dispensation of His mercies to all who close to Christ in faith, where distinctions of race and culture and political self-righteousness break down and find their melting point in Jesus, the crucified and risen Son of God. This means that you, O humbled Church, are the premiere testament of God's reconciliation to the world. You, O humbled Church, are the evidence of the resurrected and living Jesus, in whom God has proclaimed to the world His glory and now through His testimony in your new Humanity as well. This means, Emerald Bible Fellowship, that we are to be active in grace, unified in the gospel of grace together with the saints around the globe, humble in our vision of ourselves and seeking to edify others, and emboldened to give up our own power to glorify the King. We are to be centrally about the glory of God in our midst, the Creator of this New Humanity and the Worker of all that is Good for us and in us. It is to the glory of God that we have been united in Jesus alone, that no law or system or racial boundaries stand between God and man in Christ! He is seen in this new creation of reconciled sinners made saints from every people and position and politic. And He is glorified for being the One bringing all things together under the great Reconciler: Jesus the Reconciler, though the blood of His cross, by the sovereign grace of God. Worship Him! Expend your energies on Him! Delight in Him! Hope in Him! For, He is our only hope, both for ourselves and for our neighbors. Let us, then, labor in doing His works for our brothers around the world. Amen