

"LEST WE SHOULD HINDER THE GOSPEL"

"If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ." I Corinthians 9:12.

The modern city of Corinth is a mean, sun-baked town, the wretched survivor of the city which was almost completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1928. In Paul's day it was the chief city of the Greek world. Of that ancient Corinth all that remains today is its magnificent Acropolis, a much more imposing one than that of Athens, rising almost 2,000 feet above the ruins of the city, and a few beautiful pillars of the temple of Apollo. Wandering among these ruins one is prone to think of the beautiful lyric on Christian love which Paul addressed to the church there, and also the sublime chapter on the Resurrection and the Immortality of the soul.

Had we been in Corinth 1900 years ago, this is what we might have seen. Passing by the bazaars and the market places and the factories where the famed Corinthian brass was made, we do down into the ghetto of the city where the Jews live. There in that quarter we come to the house of Aquila and Priscilla. They were Jews who came from the Province of Pontus, a rich province lying along the Black Sea. They had lived for a time in Rome, but had left the city at the time of the decree of the Emperor Claudius, who expelled all Jews from Rome, although in a somewhat more merciful way than Hitler and his follower's tried to accomplish the same end before World War II. From Rome they went to Corinth. Aquila was a tent maker, and Paul, being of the same trade, took up his abode in their house. Entering the house we see Aquila and Priscilla and Paul working with the heavy folds of cloth out of which the black tents were made, in which a vast portion of the people of that day lived. Perhaps Priscilla now and then threads the needle for Paul, who sight is by no means keen. When at length they had finished their task for the day, Paul arises from his bench and, leaving them, goes out to speak to the Jews and Gentiles of the city about Christ the Saviour of the world.

The reason why Paul worked at his trade there in Corinth, in order that he might support himself, was not because he did not deem it proper to be supported by the church, for this was a right which he was careful to state and maintain, that those who preached the gospel should live by the gospel. Paul told the Corinthians that if he had sown unto them spiritual things, it was no great demand of them that he should reap from them material things.

But this right which he so carefully declared in the case of Corinth, Paul waived for the sake of a greater influence in preaching the gospel, and because of a peculiar situation which existed in the church at Corinth. When you are unjustly criticized or unkindly spoken of, it may be of help to remember what happened to so great a servant of Christ as Paul. He had not a few enemies there in Corinth. They intimated that he was a bogus apostle, and wanted to know where his letters or credentials were. They ridiculed his person, saying that although he could write a weighty letter, his personal presence was weak, and his speech was contemptible. Paul did not care anything about that. What he did care about was that they should in no way be able to say that his motives in preaching the gospel were unworthy, that he was in it for what he could get out of it. Lest any should use that as handle against him, Paul waives and surrenders his right, so carefully and repeatedly stated, as a minister of the gospel to live by the gospel. That was why we see him there, toiling with Aquila and Priscilla at his trade as a tent maker. He chooses to do that lest he should, although in an altogether innocent way, hinder the gospel of Christ.

This arresting phrase of the apostle, raises the question of personal influence as members of the church, our obligation to the gospel, to support it and to spread it and to defend it in every way, and warns us against in any way hindering it.

1. The gospel is hindered through lack of faith.

At the beginning of His ministry Jesus went to the town where He was brought up, Nazareth, and preached in the synagogue, taking Isaiah's beautiful text, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty them that are bruised; to preach the acceptable year of the Lord." But His neighbors and townsfolk among whom He was brought up were filled with anger at what He said, drove Him out of the city, and tried to cast Him over a precipice and kill Him. Later in His ministry Jesus returned to His own country and taught again in the same synagogue. This time He did not encounter the open violence He had at the first visit; but the people could not reconcile His profound and beautiful sayings, and the miracles which He had wrought, with fact that He was one of their own. They said, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the Brother of James, and Joses and of Judah and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at Him."

Then comes the striking record of the evangelists, both Mark and Matthew: "And he could do mighty work, save that He laid His hands upon a few sick folk and healed them." Where the work of Christ is to be done in our hearts and done in the world, there must be the collaboration of our faith.

In the warfare against evil in the world, the success of that warfare is in some way conditioned by the belief or unbelief of Christian people in the churches. The progress of the gospel is helped or hindered by what you and I do. What power this is that is lodged in you and me, frail creatures of a day, that we should be able to hinder the work of God, that we should be able to make the wheels of the chariot of Christ and the gospel drive heavilt, that we should be able to divert the waters of the river of the Water of Life.

We can hinder the gospel, not only by what we do contrary to the gospel, but by neglecting to do anything for it. So Jesus said, "He that is not with Me is against Me." In this great warfare of the gospel there is no neutrality. If you are not helping it, you are hindering it. He who by his gifts, prayers and labors is not endeavoring to spread the gospel is hindering it. Are you helping the gospel, or are you hindering it?

2. We hinder the gospel by the things we do as well as by the things we leave undone.

There are, first of all, those things which in themselves are to us not harmful. Yet it is possible that they may hinder someone else in the Christian faith; and if so, they hinder the gospel. People speak often about their personal liberty. And so did Paul. But this is the high and noble way in which he handles this question of personal liberty. We have two striking examples of that.

(1) His personal liberty to eat meat offered to idols.

The pagan temples were the meat shops of the big cities of that day. After the sacrifice had been made, the meat was sold to the people. A few Christians, who had just come out of idolatry, felt that it was not right for a Christian to buy and eat meat that had just been offered to an idol. Paul said that he did

not feel that way. An idol to him was nothing at all, just a vain imagination. He would just as soon eat meat that had been offered to an idol as any other kind of meat. But, he said, if his exercising that personal liberty should cause a Christian brother any where in the world to stumble or take offense, he would eat no more meat. He would rather go meatless than hinder the gospel in the heart of a single man.

- (2) In this matter of the preacher being supported by the gospel.

He said it was right and proper that he should be so supported. But when he found that there were hostile persons there at Corinth who were trying to discredit him and discredit the gospel, and who were ready to say that he preached because of what he got out of it, he refused to avail himself of that right of support by the church, and supported himself by toiling at his trade as a tent maker, lest he should hinder the gospel. He says he would rather die than do that. The final test of any action is not merely whether I can do it, and not be hurt by it, but what its effect may be upon others.

Again, we hinder the gospel by anything that is unchristlike in spirit, and by anything that is wrong in word and in action. No one can lead a wrong life without affecting others and casting a shadow across their path. We ought to be careful that we do not put a stumbling block in the way of others. Live so that we can adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things. What a joy to know that we have helped a soul Godward and brought him into the Kingdom!