

THE CHURCH AND ITS LEADERS

I Corinthians 4:11-21

Paul here gives us an inside view of his sufferings and his conduct in the midst of them. His life as a Christian had been a stern one right up to the moment of this writing.

Those men who were the servants of Christ, the stewards of the mysteries of God in this world, suffered hunger and thirst, were naked and buffeted, and had no certain dwelling place. They toiled, working with their own hands. They labored to the point of weariness. It was not simply a case of earning a livelihood, but of real hardship in the getting.

Not all the glory accrued to these noble men by what they suffered. It was, as much or more, by the way they endured it. Men railed, but they blessed. Men persecuted, but they suffered with magnificent self-control. Men slandered and abused, but they entreated and gently pleaded with them. They used those bitter occasions as pulpits to proclaim Christ. They received stones and gave back bread. They received cursings and gave back blessings. When they were hated, they returned love. Abuse they requited, not with counter-abuse, not even with silence, but with blessing; persecution with patience; calumny with gentle words of entreaty, as Christ had counselled in the gospel according to Luke when He said, "Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you." So, when Paul and his associates were reviled, they only blessed their revilers. When they were persecuted, they only suffered it, and in no sense did they fight back. When they were defamed, they only entreated.

What was the world's attitude toward Paul? He was regarded as refuse, as the offscouring of all things. Paul spoke of himself and his fellows as being regarded as the scum or rubbish of humanity. The word is used here only in the New Testament and in the more general sense of refuse that has to be removed. The significance of their position is not appreciated until we realize that this means they were considered as the scrapings and sweepings of the streets. As this minute description begins and ends with the same phrase, "unto this present hour," it would seem that Paul was suffering from some very recent indignity.

It is difficult for us, who delight in honoring the memory of the great Apostle to the Gentiles, to realize that there was a time when he was reckoned as nothing but the filth and offscouring of a dirty world.

If the Apostle's remarks were taken to heart, the description which he gave must have rebuked the self-conceit of his readers. The contrast is between a conceited, puffed-up attitude of those who have turned from the great evangel and the word of the cross to discussions and disputes among themselves, so that they go round, every one of them, proud in his own supposed cleverness, and the true ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, whose pathway is one of self-denial and sacrifice.

Severe as were his words in verses eight to thirteen, the Corinthians were given to understand that Paul's motive in writing them as he did was the very best. Lest his anger against the folly of the schism-makers should be misunderstood, Paul closed the subject on a note of tenderness: "I write not these things to shame you." Shaming might here mean simply humbling, making them acknowledge and bow down, and take the place of cringing. I do not want you to do that, said the Apostle. It is not a personal matter that I have in mind. He wrote as a father who desired the correction and not the shame of his children. He wrote thus in order to stir them up and to get them to realize how selfish they were in their living. He was saying to them, "You are mine. I brought you to Christ. That is why I am grieved when I see you forfeiting future reward for present ease." It cut Paul to the very quick when he observed his converts consuming their energies and spending their abilities in selfish and disgraceful rivalries.

Paul loved the Corinthians as a father, because they were begotten in Christ Jesus through the gospel which he preached unto them, and these words are his admonition to them. Not by way of shaming you do I write these things, said he, but as an admonition to my beloved children. He stood in a unique relation to the Corinthian church. In substance he said to them, "You are mine, my sons in the gospel, and I love you, and it is because I love you that I warn you that you will lose out by wasting your time in things that just appeal to the flesh, when you might put in that time in self-denying service for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ."

Then Paul made a tremendous appeal. "Though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel." There is a strong relationship that does exist between any man or woman who is the means of leading another to Christ. If indeed one has passed from death unto life, he cannot forget the person through whom the message came, which caused the light to break through. In the case of the Corinthians, other teachers had built upon the foundation, but it was Paul who had laid it.

Paul reminded the Corinthian babes that they had plenty of child-trainers, but only one father. He told them that he had led them to Christ; therefore, he was their father in the Lord. How can you tell when people are still in spiritual babyhood? One way is by the fact that they cannot enjoy the deep things of God. Haven't you heard Christians, after having been converted a number of years, say, "I am not interested in Bible sermons; they are too dry for me; I like something simple." Naturally, if you know and love the Lord, you get the impression that they would like to lie down on a couch and have a nursing-bottle and a nipple on it, in order to suck down a little weak truth.

What a wonderful climax when Paul says, "Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me"! A man must live for God in order to make an appeal like that, and Paul could certainly do it. He said, "I want your life to really count." Perhaps they replied, "But we do not know what to do." "Well then, imitate me. As an apostle of Christ I have counted everything loss for Him. My one desire is to glorify Him."

Had Paul been an average man, his exhortation, "be ye followers of me," would have resounded with arrogance, but he was a man of preeminent excellence, Christlike in spirit, deportment and ministry. There were three good reasons why they should imitate him.

1. He was a follower of Christ.
No living man was following his Lord so closely.
2. He was their spiritual father.
He had begotten them in the gospel.
3. He was not a partisan.
Various other teachers in their midst became leaders of parties, and these parties were contending one with another. Paul followed Christ devotedly and refused to belong to any party. Christ's ministers should guide their people by their lips and by their lives, going before them on the way to heaven, and not contenting themselves by merely pointing out the way. Paul did not ask of others what he himself did not do. He wanted the Corinthians to become imitators of him by being ready to suffer such pain and shame as he had suffered. There is not one standard of duty and suffering for an apostle and another for the rest of the members of the church. He suggested that in order to safeguard their spiritual interests they had better take their eyes off the various instructors who have come with their teachings and put them on him.

Paul told the Corinthians that he was sending Timothy to them, and again he adds a startling thing, namely that Timothy would put them in remembrance of his ways in Christ, that is of his doings and teachings. Timothy was in a position to explain to them how he had taught in the various churches where he had ministered. The standard he had set for the

Corinthians and the demands which he had made upon them were not special or peculiar. They were the very same ideals which he had held before all the churches.

Paul did not want them to follow him in the dark, so he sent Timothy to inform them about his ways and teachings in the various churches to which he had gone. A man certainly must have a high consciousness of rectitude who can trust the representation of his character and work to one who knows him as well as a son knows his father.

Apparently Paul's sending Timothy to them had led some of his critics there to believe that he was afraid to face them himself, but he promptly disabused their minds of that idea. He let them know that he was coming to visit them in the near future, if it was the Lord's will for him to do so. Paul believed that God had a will concerning him. It was on this that he based all of his calculations. All his plans and purposes were subject to and contingent upon the will of God. God's will is not only absolute and righteous, but benevolent; therefore, to acquiesce in that will is not only right, but wise also.

To them Paul said, "What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?" He thus inquired as to how they wanted him to come. It was as though he had told them that how he was coming depended entirely upon them. If they profited by what he had written to them, if they turned from their folly and stupidity, and if they manifested the spirit of true Christian humility, he intended to come in tenderness. But if not, then he was prepared to come with a rod. He called upon them to choose and to determine which it would be.