

"Stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding."

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In many respects a distinct likeness can be traced between the state of things which existed in Corinth and in the Corinthian assembly, as depicted in Paul's first epistle to them, and that which prevails to-day amongst the Christians, and in the lands where English is spoken.

Corinth was a city of learning, luxury and licentiousness, and by these three things the assembly in that city was affected. The apostle put it on record that when first he came amongst them he deliberately abstained from anything like "excellency of speech or of wisdom" because he knew their tendency to over-rate human learning. "I determined," he says, "not to know anything *among you*, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2: 2). He spoke "wisdom" elsewhere, "among them that are perfect," but he had not done so at Corinth. A little further on in the epistle he says to them, "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you" (1 Cor. 4: 8). So that evidently they had plenty of this world's goods and used them largely for self-gratification. 1 Corinthians 5 is evidence of how licentiousness had crept into their midst.

Living, as we do, in lands where similar conditions prevail, we are very liable to be affected similarly to the Corinthian saints, and, there can be no doubt about it, *we have been so affected*. The apostle plainly told the Corinthians that he could not address them as spiritual, but as carnal, though there were some among them who were approved. He appealed to the parties which existed among them, with their consequent envy and strifes, as proof of their carnality. Their strifes were even brought into connection with the Lord's supper and marred the character of that holy ordinance, as 1 Corinthians 11 shows. Where has division in the professed church of God been carried to greater lengths than in the English-speaking lands? Where has more contention raged round the supper of the Lord, which is properly a symbol of unity?

The Corinthian saints combined a certain intellectual arrogance (see 1 Cor. 8: 1 and 2) with considerable intellectual and spiritual instability, and consequently some among them were so far carried away as to deny the resurrection of the dead (see 1 Cor. 15: 12), not perceiving that thereby they were destroying the very foundations of their faith. An intellectual and speculative religion, rather than a practical, had attractions for them; and one of the necessary features of it was that of progress or novelty, and that which appeared to be firmly held one year might be abandoned next year as new ideas were introduced. Here again, we fear, the Christians of English-speaking lands have in modern times gained an unenviable notoriety.

Ought we not, therefore, to pay particular heed to the exhortation with which Paul closed his first epistle to the Corinthians? Twice he repeated it with somewhat varying words. First he said:-

"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Cor. 15: 58).

And then again:-

"Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong. Let all your things be done with charity" (1 Cor. 16: 13 and 14).

The main idea in both these passages is that of stability. We are to be stedfast or firm, and

unmoveable, and if this is to be we must stand fast in the faith. There can be no stability of Christian character unless our faith strikes its roots down deeply into the faith, and for this we must be well instructed in what the faith is: "nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine," as the apostle says to Timothy. If we are to attain to this we must be diligent in our reading of the Word of God, and give it its proper place of authority in our souls. To approach it with any degree of confidence in our own intellectual abilities is fatal. We shall then begin to read our own thoughts into it rather than extracting God's thoughts from it, or we shall feel inclined to fall out with it and dispute its instructions as the Corinthians did. There seems to be almost a touch of sarcasm in the apostle's words, when he wrote, "What? came the Word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14: 36 and 37). In truth the Word of God came *unto us* only, never came *out from us*. Our place is to receive it humbly and implicitly, and the more spiritual we are the more fully we shall do so.

What stability is imparted to the soul that is rooted in the faith and grounded in the Word of God! The believer of worldly mind is necessarily unstable. He is more or less at the mercy of the strong currents and cross currents of human thoughts and opinions, for there are prevailing fashions in the world of thought as well as in the world of dress. Not so the believer whose faith reposes on what has been aptly termed, "the impregnable rock of Holy Scripture."

The verses that immediately precede the exhortations we are considering are very significant. Let them be carefully read. Having established the truth of resurrection as exemplified in the resurrection of Christ, the apostle shows us that we who by nature were simply of the order of the first man,; Adam, are *now* of the order of the second Man, the last Adam, by His own quickening action, and that for us resurrection will be the taking up of the image of the heavenly Man. Then all will be complete, as far as we are concerned, and in immortality and incorruptibility we shall be in all the victory which characterizes that resurrection world. But the victory is already ours by faith, since that resurrection world and its glory already shines before us through the resurrection of Jesus.

"THEREFORE," says the apostle, "be ye stedfast, unmoveable," and stedfast we are, as the risen Christ and the world of glory connected with Him, shine brightly before our faith: we then become unmoveable. Facing bonds and afflictions, and even the inroads of wolves among the flock, and an impending breakdown amongst the shepherds, the apostle could say, "But none of these things move me" (Acts 20: 24). But this was the man who could write the third chapter of Philippians as the expression of his own heart experience, which means that the risen Christ in His world of glory was the object by faith of his soul.

Further, we are to be "always abounding in the work of the Lord." The Christian who, as to the faith and as to character, is most unmoveable, will be, as to service in the Lord's interests, most mobile. He will not be erratic, pursuing the uncertain zig-zag course that marks the flight of a butterfly; he will move rather with the business-like precision which marks the flight of a bee.

The Corinthians were saints who were enriched in both knowledge and utterance. (See 1 Cor. 1: 5.) They knew much and could talk well and abundantly. In his second epistle Paul mentions that they *abounded* "in utterance and knowledge" (1 Cor. 8: 7), but evidently they did not equally abound in the humble and laborious service of *work*. It is not otherwise today.

For one saint who really abounds in the work of the Lord we often find half a dozen who abound in talk or discussion, or in knowledge of how things should be done, without doing them. Yet we have the weightiest incentive to diligent work in the Lord's interests in the knowledge that our "labour is not

in vain in the Lord." Vain it may appear to be as far as man and his little world are concerned; but in the Lord and as connected with the order of things established in resurrection it is not in vain.

What a story of failure is presented to us in the history of the church and of the individual servants of the Lord. Not a movement, however spiritual its beginnings, but it has collapsed or been perverted! Not a servant but there has been failure — more or less — in his mission! And in so saying we do not necessarily condemn the movement or the servant. Let the Apostle Paul be witness. A prince among faithful servants, he; and yet in his closing epistle he writes, "All they which are in Asia be turned away from me," and "Demas hath forsaken me . . . only Luke is with me.... Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil.... At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me." Thus was he permitted to live just long enough to see his labours ending in what men would call defeat; and thus it has been ever since, only that subsequent servants less instructed and less faithful have themselves sown the seeds of defeat in the inherent defects of their own work. A Luther, for instance, is instrumental in working a great deliverance for many a saint in setting them free from the domination of the Papal system, but only to bring them into bondage by an unscriptural subservience to the State.

Yet Paul's work was not in vain. Nor was Luther's in so far as it was "in the Lord." Nor is ours today, subject always to the same qualification. Not one item of the work of the Lord done by any of us *In the Lord* will be found fruitless or in vain in the day when we enter the resurrection world with all the saints. Jeremiah; who was chosen of God to be His witness in the last decadent days of Judah's history, had a most heart-breaking experience as disaster after disaster and failure after failure rolled in upon him. No word of his seemed to prosper, yet the coming day will reveal that the Word of God put into his lips did prosper in the thing whereto the Lord sent it (see Isa. 55: 11), and he will find that his work was not in vain. And then see what stability and unmoveableness marked him! What other Old Testament servant of God was made "a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land"? (Jer. 1: 18).

We live in the last days of the church's history on earth, and the times are difficult, yet we have far more abundant sources of encouragement than ever Jeremiah had. The resurrection world was not full in view of his faith as it is of ours. The victory through our Lord Jesus Christ is given to us as it never was to him. We may well watch and quit ourselves like men in this our day. The Corinthian saints were all too frequently quitting themselves like children, playing with the spiritual gifts entrusted to them as with new toys and using them to show themselves off, the meanwhile often quarrelling amongst themselves. The same tendencies are in our own hearts. Let us watch against them, and quit ourselves like men — men of faith to whom the resurrection world is more real than the poor passing world that is — and let us not sacrifice love in so doing.

"Let all your things be done with charity" or "in love" is the apostolic word; and this directly follows the word "be strong." The tendency of the strong man of the world is to carry his firmness and strength to the point of brutality. If we quit ourselves like spiritual men and are marked by spiritual strength, we shall always act in love and be characterized by the grace that love begets. There are no exceptions to this rule, for *all* our things are to be done in love. We are no more at liberty to sacrifice love in the display of strength in ecclesiastic matters than in our ordinary and private affairs. This the epistle itself shows, since amongst the all things to be done in love was the excommunication of the erring brother, as directed in 1 Corinthians 5. Indeed, if comparison at all be permitted, we are less at liberty there, for in matters ecclesiastical we act, at least professedly, in the name of the Lord, that is, as His representatives.

