

Epistles of Christ

2 Corinthians 3.

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In the Third Chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul brings Christ before our souls in three ways.

First, Christ is presented as written upon the hearts of the believers that formed the Assembly at Corinth (v. 3).

Secondly, Christ is presented as manifested to "all men" by this Assembly (vv. 2, 3).

Thirdly, Christ is presented as a living Person in the glory — the Object before these believers (v. 18).

Thus there passes before us God's intention that, during the absence of Christ from this world, there should be gatherings of believers on earth who have Christ written upon their hearts; Christ manifested in their lives; and Christ before them as an Object in the glory.

As we read the last touching instructions of the Lord to His disciples, and as we reverently listen to the Lord's prayer to the Father, we are made conscious that underlying both the discourses and the prayer, there is ever kept before us the great truth that believers are left in this world to represent Christ — the Man that has gone to glory. It is God's intention that though Christ personally is no longer here, yet Christ morally should still be seen in His people. Further, it is manifest, that all the Epistles press upon us our privilege, and our responsibility, as believers, to represent the character of Christ to a world that has rejected and cast Him out.

In the addresses to the Seven Churches in Revelation, we are permitted to view the Lord walking in the midst of the Churches taking account of their condition, and giving us His judgment as to how far they have answered to, or failed in, their responsibility. In result we learn that the great mass of those who profess His Name, have, not only entirely failed to represent His character before the world, but have become so hopelessly corrupt and indifferent to Himself that in the end, they will be spued out of His mouth and thus utterly rejected. Nevertheless, we also learn that in the midst of this vast profession there will be, until the end of the Church's history on earth, some who, though they have but a little strength, will answer to His mind by setting forth something of the loveliness of His character.

Seeing, then, that it is still possible, even in a day of ruin, to express something of the character of Christ, surely everyone who loves the Lord will say, "I would like to answer to the Lord's mind and be of the number who, in some little measure, manifest something of the beautiful traits of Christ to the world around."

It is true that it is possible for the world to form some estimate of Christ from the Word of God; but, apart from the Word — which they may call in question, or fail to understand, even if read — it is

God's intention that in the lives of His people there should be a presentation of Christ "known and read of all men."

This being so, it becomes a searching question for us all, "if the men of this world are to gain their impression of Christ from the gatherings of His people, what conclusion will they reach as to Christ, as they look upon our individual lives; as well as the collective life of God's people?" Let us remember the Lord's searching words, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples if ye have love one to another." Apply such a test to the gathering with which we may be connected, and should we not have to hang our heads with shame as we recall occasions when envy, evil speaking, and backbiting, were more in evidence than the meekness and gentleness of Christ. Let us remember that whatever the circumstances — even if called to face reproaches and insults — our one business should be to set forth the character of Christ. One has said, "It is better to lose your coat, than to let go the character of Christ."

If then we would answer to the Lord's mind and set forth His character before the world, we shall do well to heed the teaching of the Apostle in this portion of the Word.

1. CHRIST WRITTEN ON THE HEART

First, then, let us notice that the Apostle speaks of these believers as "the epistle of Christ". He does not say the "epistles" but the "epistle", for he is not thinking simply of what is true of individuals, but of the whole company, though, obviously, the company is composed of individuals.

Then let us remark, that Apostle does not say "Ye should be the epistle of Christ", but that "Ye are the epistle of Christ". Entertaining the wrong thought that we ought to be epistles of Christ, we shall set to work to become such by our own efforts. This would not only lead us into legal occupation with ourselves, but would also shut out the work of "the Spirit of the living God". The fact is that we become epistles of Christ, not by our own efforts but by the Spirit of God writing Christ upon our hearts.

A Christian is one to whom Christ has become precious by a work of the Spirit in the heart. It is not simply a knowledge of Christ in the head, which an unconverted man may have, that constitutes a man a Christian, but Christ written in the heart. As sinners we discover our need of Christ, and are burdened with our sins. We find relief by discovering that Christ by His propitiatory work has died for our sins, and that God has set forth His acceptance of that work by seating Christ in the glory. We rest in God's satisfaction with Christ and His work, and our affections are drawn out to the One through whom we have been blessed. "Unto you therefore which believe He is precious." Thus Christ is written on our hearts and we become the epistle of Christ. If we are not the epistle of Christ we are not Christians at all.

2. CHRIST MANIFESTED TO ALL MEN

Having set forth the true Christian company as composed of believers upon whose hearts Christ has been written, the Apostle presents the second great truth when he says, not only "Ye are the epistle of Christ", but also, "*Ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ*" "*known and read of all men.*"

It is one thing for a gathering of believers to be an epistle of Christ, and quite another for the gathering to be in such a right condition that they manifest to all men something of the character of

Christ. The responsibility of any gathering of saints is, not to walk well in order to become an epistle, but, seeing they are an epistle of Christ to walk well in order that the epistle may be read of all men. If anyone writes a letter of commendation it is to commend the person named in the letter. So when the Spirit of God writes Christ on the hearts of believers, it is in order that they together may become an epistle of commendation to commend Christ to the world around. That by their holy and separate walk, their mutual love to one another, their lowliness and meekness, their gentleness and grace, they may set forth the lovely character of Christ.

Thus it was with the Corinthian saints. They had, indeed, been walking in a disorderly way: but, as the result of the Apostle's first letter, they had cleared themselves from evil so that the Apostle can now say, not only that as an Assembly they were an epistle of Christ, but, that they were an epistle "known and read of all men".

Alas! the writing may become indistinct, but it does not cease to be a letter because it is blotted and blurred. Christians are often like the writing on some ancient tomb stone. There are faint indications of an inscription, a capital letter, here and there, would indicate some name was once written on the stone. But it is so weatherworn, and dirt-begrimed, that it is hardly possible to decipher the writing. So, alas, may it be with ourselves. When first the Spirit writes Christ upon the hearts of a company of saints, their affections are warm and their collective life speaks plainly of Christ. The writing, being fresh and clear, is known and read of all men. But, as time passes, unless there is watchfulness, and self-judgment, envying, strife, and bitterness, may creep in, and the gathering cease to give any true impression of Christ.

Nevertheless, in spite of all our failure, Christians are the epistle of Christ and it ever remains true that it is God's great intention that all men should see the character of Christ set forth in His people. Here, then, we have a beautiful description of the true Christian company. It is a company of individual believers, gathered to Christ, upon whose hearts Christ has been written, not with ink, but "with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart". As in the tables of stone of old, men could read what the righteousness of God demanded from man under law, so, now, in the lives of God's people, the world should read what the love of God brings to man under grace.

3. CHRIST THE OBJECT IN GLORY

How then, we may ask, is the writing of Christ on the hearts of God's people to be kept clear and legible, so that, in the gathering of God's people the character of Christ can be manifest to all men?

The answer to this question brings us to the third great truth of the chapter. Christ will be manifested to all men only as we have before us the living Christ in the glory as our Object. So the Apostle writes, "We all looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory" (v. 18, N. Tr.). There is a transforming power in beholding the Lord in glory. This transforming power is available for all believers — the youngest as well as the oldest; "*we all*," not simply "we Apostles", beholding the glory of the Lord "are changed into the same image". This change is not affected by our own efforts, nor by wearying ourselves in the endeavour to be like the Lord. Nor is it by seeking to imitate some devoted saint. It is by beholding the glory of the Lord. There is no veil on His face, and as we behold Him, not only every veil of darkness will pass from our hearts, but morally we shall become increasingly like Him, changing from glory to glory. Gazing upon the Lord in glory we are lifted above all the weakness and failure that we find in ourselves, and all the evil around, to discover and delight in His perfection. As the bride in the Song of

Songs can say, "I sat down under His shadow with great delight, and His fruit was sweet to my taste."

In the course of the Epistle the Apostle gives us a taste of some of this precious fruit. Turning to 2 Corinthians 5: 14, that "*the love of Christ* constraineth us." Here the love of Christ is presented as the true motive for all ministry, whether to saints or sinners. The greatest expression of that love was His death. "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." Again we read, "Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself for it." With such love before his soul the Apostle can well say, "that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves but unto Him which died for them and rose again." In the light of this Scripture we may well challenge our hearts as to the motive that actuates us in all our service. Is it the love of Christ that constrains us, or is it the love of self, Are we living unto ourselves, or are we living "unto Him", and thus, like Him, willing to forget self in order to serve others in love. One has said, "Alas! how often have we to reproach ourselves with going on in a round of Christian duty, faithful in general intention, but not flowing from the fresh realization of the love of Christ to our soul." (J.N.D.).

Passing to 2 Corinthians 8: 9, we come to another lovely characteristic of Christ. There we read of "*the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*" The Apostle is pleading on behalf of the poor Jewish believers, urging the richer Corinthian saints to help in meeting their necessities. In both vv. 6 and 7, he speaks of giving as a "grace". Then he sets before us Christ as the One in whom we have a transcendent example of the grace of giving. He was rich, surpassingly rich, and yet to meet our deep needs He not only gives, but, such is His grace that, *He becomes poor to give*. "For your sakes He became poor, that ye through His poverty might be rich." By the incarnation He became poor, and His poverty is witnessed by the manger at Bethlehem and the humble home at Nazareth, and that, in the days of His ministry He Himself said, the "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head" (Luke 9: 58). To reach a poor fallen woman and bring heaven's best gifts to earth's worst sinners, He became a poor, needy, and lonely man by a well side. The very moment when He is enriching us with a fountain of water springing up unto eternal life He Himself has become so poor that he has to ask for a drink of water (John 4: 7, 14).

Turning to 2 Corinthians 10: 1, we find some more refreshing fruit that marked the life of Christ. First we read of "*the meekness of Christ*" The Apostle is correcting the spirit of rivalry that had been working amongst the Corinthian saints, whereby some of the gifted servants were measuring themselves with one another, and seeking to commend themselves. So doing they were walking in the flesh, and warring after the flesh, glorying in their gifts, talking about themselves, boasting in their work, and belittling the Apostle. To correct their vanity and self-assertiveness, he brings before them the meekness of Christ who never asserted His rights, or defended Himself; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again. The chief priests may defame Him, but "Jesus held His peace"; He is falsely accused before Pilate, but "He answered him to never a word". He is mocked by Herod, but "He answered him nothing". Good for us, if, in the presence of defamation and insults we could catch something of the spirit of the Lord and show the meekness that refuses to assert our rights, stand upon our dignity, or defend ourselves.

Then the Apostle speaks of "*the gentleness of Christ*". Another lovely quality that He ever exhibited in the presence of opposition. Seeking to obey the word of the Lord and maintain the truth we shall soon find that there are those who will oppose and raise questions that lead to strife. But the servant of "the Lord must not strive" but seek to act in the spirit of the Lord and be "*gentle* unto all men, apt to teach, patient". The gentleness of Christ speaks of the manner in which He acted and spoke. How often, with ourselves, even if our motive is right, and the principles we stand for are true, all is spoilt because our manner is lacking in graciousness and gentleness. Let us remember the striking

words of the Psalmist. "Thy gentleness hath made me great" (Ps. 18: 35). Our vehemence may easily degenerate into violence by which we belittle ourselves in the eyes of others; but gentleness will make us great. Violence draws out violence; but *gentleness is irresistible*. "The fruit of the Spirit . . . is gentleness."

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 12: 9, we read of "*the power of Christ*". The Apostle is speaking of bodily infirmities, insults, necessities, persecutions and distresses. He learned by experience that all these things only become an occasion for the manifestation of "the power of Christ" to preserve the believer through the trials and lift him above them. Thus we learn that whatever the trial, His "grace is sufficient", and His "strength is made perfect in weakness".

Thus, with our eyes upon Christ in the glory, we are reminded by the Apostle of the perfections of Christ as He passes before us.

"The love of Christ",

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ",

"The meekness of Christ",

"The gentleness of Christ", and

"The power of Christ".

As we look at Christ in the glory and admire these lovely moral traits, set forth in all their perfection in Christ, we find His fruit sweet to our taste, and, almost unconsciously to ourselves, shall begin to exhibit something of His gracious character, and thus become changed into His image.

Thus the Holy Spirit not only writes Christ on the heart so that we become epistles of Christ, but, by engaging our hearts with Christ in glory, He transforms us into His image and so keeps the writing clear that it may be read of all men.

What a wonderful testimony it would be if the world could look upon any little company of the Lord's people and see in them "love", and "grace", and "meekness", and "gentleness", and a "power" that enables them to rise above all circumstances.

May we realise, in deeper measure, that it is the mind of God that His people should be the epistle of Christ to manifest Christ to all men, by having Christ in the glory before us as our one Object.