

Paul's Two-fold Ministry

Colossians 1: 21-29.

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If we consider that Epaphras (Col. 1: 7) was the servant of God whom God used for the blessing of the Colossians, we might be tempted to ask, "Was Paul, in addressing this epistle to them, interfering with somebody else's work?"

It would be helpful for us all to remember that service as wrought of God in Christianity, is not the private property of a servant. Souls are reached by the gospel to give them a living link with the Lord Jesus Christ in His glory. He uses one or another, but His object is to form this link with Himself.

In pursuance of this, it pleased Him to select the Apostle Paul to be the great sample for men of what the gospel can do, the great exponent of the ministry of the gospel, the great object-lesson of what the gospel is intended to produce. He was personally the pattern or delineation of how the gospel goes out, reaches the heart, and works marvellously in an individual for the very Christ against Whom he once fought.

In keeping with this object, it pleased the Lord to choose the same Paul to be also the great exponent of God's thoughts in connection with the assembly. You will notice how he is spoken of in the 23rd verse as "minister of the gospel," and then in the 25th as "minister of the assembly." It is not merely "a minister," but "minister."

We can then understand why he should address this epistle to the Colossians, even though he apparently had not been the instrument immediately used for their conversion. He tells them how great conflict he had for them.

We should study this. With regard to the great outstanding facts of the gospel, it was remarked last evening that "the gospel" must bring in the thought of Christ's resurrection. But I would go further. In 1 Cor. 15 Paul himself lays down for us the five great cardinal facts of the gospel — How Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; (2) was buried; (3) rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; (4) was seen upon earth by a number of witnesses after His resurrection; (5) and last of all, says he, "was seen by me also." This "last of all" concerns Christ as seen in exaltation and heavenly glory.

Let us suppose then that we have a company of people really trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, who have in some small measure apprehended these great cardinal facts. They have believed upon Him; with the result that they are now received and pardoned, and they belong to Him. I think you can understand how this chosen vessel, this servant of God, would be exercised about presenting to them a full exposition of what the gospel is and what it had done for them.

Such a company was found in Rome. The Holy Spirit therefore used Paul and inspired him to write the Epistle to the Romans (to which I would like to refer for a few moments), to set forth the blessing brought about by the gospel.

In Rom. 1: 1, he speaks of his peculiar separation to the "gospel of God," to bring it out in its true and complete character. Then he affirms it to be "Concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (read verses 3, 4).

The first thing to which he calls our attention in this wonderful introduction is the fact that it is the gospel or glad tidings of GOD. That is, God has glad tidings for men.

The second thing is that its subject and theme is HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. The recipient of the glad tidings has his attention riveted by what God has to say about Him.

As we read on through the epistle we shall notice how the Spirit of God presses these two thoughts upon us.

Quickened by the Holy Spirit and eager to learn, we are conducted in Rom. 1, Rom. 2, and Rom. 3, over the whole ground of man's sin and guilt. The position and guilt of men is purposely and ruthlessly exposed, whether in the most naked and blatant forms, or covered by the veneer of philosophy and outward carnal religion. History, natural conscience, law, the Scriptures, all witness to the utterly hopeless condition, which had to be faced.

But where fear and shame, and the consciousness of the just condemnation of God, might reasonably overwhelm us, we are met by the glad tidings that the very One whose wrath we deserve to the last degree, is He who — with all our sin before Him — meets us with His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. How gladly did we listen last night in the open air to some instances of the grace of God to (humanly) hopeless men. Thank God for the way He works. He Himself is the source of the glad tidings.

In order to reach and bless us, He gave forth His Son, Jesus Christ our lord. On the cross, and long before we came on the scene, there took place that transaction between God and His Son, which we find is to our advantage. There, every question was taken up affecting the glory of God and the state of ruined man; taken up between God and Christ. When all had been wrought out for God's glory, God set His seal on the value of what He had done by raising Jesus, and giving Him the highest place of exaltation at His right hand. May we fix our attention upon the Lord Jesus Christ with the understanding that GOD has done great things for us, whereof we are glad.

With regard to our entrance into, and our progressive understanding of these "great things," may it not be illustrated by Columbus starting out from Spain with a new world before him. He only dreamed of it in his imagination at first, but it was there for him to discover and explore. When a soul gets his first assurance that God has blessing for him through Christ, he starts out to explore the extent of it, and soon finds something of the immensity of that New World, infinitely more wonderful than the one which Columbus discovered: and the centre of which is Jesus Christ the Lord. In Rom. 4: 24, we see that this transaction of nearly two thousand years ago between God and Christ has a very great import for us. "But for us also, to whom it [righteousness] shall be imputed if we believe on Him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead."

Now, you notice, we believe on Him. On whom? Surely GOD, of whom it is said that He raised up JESUS OUR LORD from the dead. We now understand that by means of that transaction on Calvary He has dealt with the whole question of our guilt. Hence, just as Christ was delivered in view of our offences, so He was raised again in view of our justification. God announces, by Christ's resurrection, His clearance from all those sins with which He charged Himself for us. Further, in Him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Thus we see and understand for ourselves the import of what took place between God and Christ in this work of redemption.

Look at Rom. 5: 1 "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with GOD through OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST." We are brought into the presence of this God, to find that each matter that

once stood against us, with all its resultant fear, shame, and judgment, has been dealt with in righteousness through the Lord Jesus Christ; so that we have peace with God. All unrest and disquiet is gone, and the conscience, though enlightened as to the sin, is at rest because it has been dealt with by God Himself.

So also in Rom. 5: 11, the crowning point to which the believer is led in that section, "Not only so, but we also joy in GOD, through OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST." All that we learn — of our standing in grace, our hope of God's glory, our place in God's ways, our enjoyment by the Spirit of His love, our assured benefit from Christ's risen life as well as from His death — leads up to the conclusion that this wondrous God is very blessed in Himself, a fact which we are now fitted to enjoy because through Christ we have received the reconciliation needed.

But not only has God settled the question of guilt; He has also taken up that of race.

There is a popular idea that if you can only improve the conditions of the human race — eliminate war, conquer disease, settle disputes by arbitration, provide a living wage, and secure better housing, etc. — the race will turn out all right. When, however, we learn the depth and extent of our sin as before God, we find that that kind of talk will not do. The race is away from God. It is radically wrong, from fallen Adam, its head, downward. If there is to be any true blessing according to God, there must be a new race, and another Head. To this new Head and this new race we are introduced in the latter part of Chap. 5. We have in Rom. 5: 15: "For if through the offence of [the] one many be dead, much more the grace of GOD and the gift by grace, which is by ONE MAN, JESUS CHRIST, hath abounded unto many." God has disconnected our link with Adam by the death of Jesus as representing us, and now in His own mind connects us with Christ risen as the new Head, who secures all His race in grace, righteousness, and life.

Let us look at Rom. 6. This takes account of us as having been under the domination of sin. We were under it as surely as the Israelites were under the domination of Pharaoh in Egypt. But by this great transaction the whole state to which sin had brought us, the whole order of life in which sin was our master, has been removed in the death of Jesus, before God. To us also who believe in Him, sin's domination is over. We are set free from sin's masterful control (Rom. 6: 18-22), and are become servants to God. The wages of sin is death truly, and we have so learnt it; but we have equally learnt that the gift of GOD is eternal life in CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD (v. 21).

There is much help for us in thus seeing how God has wrought for our advantage in His Son. At this point we might be tempted to think that now all will be plain sailing, and that now we shall always be all that we ought to be and do all that we ought to do. Surely if set free from sin's jurisdiction (we might argue), and brought under the influence and love of Christ (Rom. 7: 1-4), we should never do wrong and nevermore have a wrong thought.

Alas! what honest Christian is there, who does not find that the very opposite is the case? Oh! what a heart-rending discovery it is to realise the workings of evil within. If in the distress occasioned by it we think that perhaps more earnest striving after holiness or power will alter it, a little more reading of the Bible early or late, a deeper earnestness in prayer, our every effort disappoints us. With every good intention, we yet find that we have no power to improve the flesh. It becomes in this way a veritable misery to us. It is not that we fear judgment for our sin; that matter is settled once for all. But we long for experimental freedom from the working of sin within, that we may pursue without distraction the will of God; yet here is this sinful propensity within. The renewed mind is toward God and God's will; the flesh, the carnal nature within me, if ever it moves, moves only for sin. Is it not here that the deeply exercised believer may be heard to cry, in effect, "O wretched man that I am! who shall

deliver me?" (Rom. 7: 24).

And what then do you find? Look at v. 25: "I thank GOD through JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD." We need not despairingly set about to improve the flesh, but thankfully see God's judgment upon it; owning that by our own trying experience with it we have been brought to the point where we see that nothing but ending it under God's judgment would meet the case (Rom. 8: 3). Then, freed from the vain effort to improve self, and thankful to see it ended under judgment, we turn evermore to be occupied with Christ who is God's delight. Here our hearts get that enjoyment of liberty and relationship and support which we never could get by looking within.

Finally (as to the gospel), look at the end of Rom. 8. We have necessities, weakness, suffering and opposition. But through all we have the support of the Spirit within, and the intercession of Christ on high, and the blessing and enjoyment of God's love. In verses 38, 39, we read: "I am persuaded that . . . [nothing] shall be able to separate us from the love of GOD which is in CHRIST JESUS OUR LORD." Oh! the pleasure and affection with which God regards Christ Jesus our Lord! Yet in all that affection I stand associated with Him as one who has believed His glad tidings concerning Jesus Christ our Lord.

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But now in the Epistle to the Colossians Paul is found to be minister not of the gospel only, but also of the assembly. The first fourteen verses seem to be preliminary, so that hearts may be set perfectly in rest before the Father, with every question settled, and all pressure provided for. We are seen to be brought out from the power of darkness into the kingdom of the Son of His love. We find ourselves put under the sway of the One who as Son dwells in His Father's love, object of the Father's affection, in whom He finds ineffable delight. This is a kingdom where love is supreme. Are we not thus prepared to find something of the dignity and glory of His Person? Notice how the apostle is inspired to go on.

We read: "Who is the Image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of every creature. For by Him were all things created that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers; all things were created by Him and for Him."

Greek students tell us that in that verse there are three prepositions bearing upon this creating of all things. The last one is "for Him." That we can perhaps understand a little. We, and indeed the whole creation, are not made as a man might turn out something by machinery, but really to serve the purpose of glorifying Him who made us. Then also "by Him" in the end of the verse, we can somewhat grasp. He was the active agent in the work of creation. But the first line seems to me to be deeply mysterious. It was not merely that He was agent in their creation (it may perhaps be rendered "in Him;") but it implies that "He was the One whose intrinsic power characterised the creation." The creation, all creation, the all things, including thrones, etc., were so created as to bear — each detail in its measure — some impress of His glory. If we knew the language of the heavens above our heads, or of the earth beneath our feet as He created them, every form of life, every atom, every colour, every shape, every sound, and every authority, would utter some impress of the wisdom and glory of Christ. He created it in such a fashion that there is no part of it but interprets, and brings into evidence, something of His majesty, His wisdom, His power. "From the world's creation the invisible things of Him are perceived, being apprehended by the mind through the things that are made, both His eternal power and divinity" (Rom. 1: 20, N.T.).

Then: "He is before all things, and by Him all things consist." By study of this little planet we are supposed to know something of the law of gravitation, by which it, and the other planets, are held in

relation to the central sun; orbits within orbits, wheels within wheels. So also our sun, and other suns (possibly with attendant systems of their own), may all revolve around some great central point which astronomers have tried in vain to discover. But the simple Christian is after all wiser than the astronomers, for he can say, "By Him all things hang together." He is the central Pivot, the glorious Person in whom every part of the universe is concentrated, and He holds everything for God. He is also the central authority, and He has put the stamp of His glory upon every subordinate authority.

Further, as with every atom of the material creation, so also has He put the impress of His glory upon the whole resurrection world. He is the Firstborn from the dead. He carries, and supports the whole of the resurrection system, and from Him everything emanates.

Now may God help us to understand a little at least, as to the ministry of the assembly. The assembly is formed for a very peculiar purpose in connection with this risen and glorified Man. It is formed to be a transcript down here, and, at the present time, of all that Christ is up yonder in glory. The day is coming when God will bring into evidence all that Christ is, and then everything will be subordinated to Him. But He is absent for the time being, hid in God; and we saints of the interval, who form the assembly, are left on earth to be the counterpart here of all that He is there. This seems to be the teaching of the Colossian epistle. The chosen apostle Paul indicates to us, not only his own deep exercise and conflict of spirit as to it, but likewise the great desire of God that it should be known — "to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Time will not permit of the development of Colossians; but we seem to have preliminary teaching from the same Apostle in the Epistles to the Corinthians as to the assembly, which prepares us for the understanding of the later epistle. Studying Corinthians with all humility and in dependence on the Spirit of God, it will be noticed that it is addressed to the assembly of God, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints. They are assured in 1 Cor. 1: 9, that "God is faithful, by whom ye were called to the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord."

The saints in Corinth had certain instructions given to them regarding their constitution as in the assembly, and their practical conduct, so that they might be found in every detail of life, service, and testimony, consistent with the fellowship into which they had been called.

This fellowship, into which God in His sovereignty has called every true Christian, is in 1 Cor. 10 of the epistle called "the Lord's Table." It is the name given to the partnership to which by grace we belong; and there is no other partnership or membership or fellowship to which we can rightly belong. We find it to be based upon Christ's death, the teaching as to which is developed in 1 Cor. 1 to 11. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" That partnership is first of all connected with the death of Christ; and consistency with the import of that death is enjoined upon us in every circle in these chapters referred to.

But as the Apostle proceeds with his unfolding of the truth of the assembly he indicates our further privilege of being consistent with the resurrection of Christ, and all that God has established in connection with Christ risen, and in the power of the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 12 to 16); and in the second epistle carries on the saints in Corinth to value their privilege of knowing Christ in glory that they might also see their responsibility to be consistent with all that He is there too.

Reverting to the 1st epistle, the concern of the Apostle was that they should be consistent with the fellowship into which as God's assembly in Corinth they were called.

The Lord's Table is not merely a gathering. There is nothing about the assembly meeting in 1 Cor. 10, or about the saints' conduct in a meeting. It is a continuing thing. The true Christian is in that partnership called the Lord's Table every day of the week; and wherever he is, at home, at business, on holiday, he is responsible to be loyal to the fellowship or partnership into which he has been called. We are, to use the human figure, all brought as partners into the business, and are to see that in no way do we bring injury to the business or dishonour to the Name. If a man is not a Christian he is not in the partnership set forth in this term, the Lord's Table. If we become consistent with the truth of the Lord's Table, what a clearing there is of everything that is inconsistent.

Then let me emphasize what we have in 1 Cor. 1: 2 "With all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours."

The Scriptures never contemplated the idea of the assembly in one place being independent of the assembly in another place. The instruction of the epistle is not addressed to one locality only, but to every place where saints are found. Hence the man who had to be put away in 1 Cor. 5 would be recognised as put away, not in Corinth only, but also in Cenchrea, and Philippi, and Jerusalem. The fellowship of the Lord's Table may be locally expressed, but the principles which obtain in it apply equally to every locality where it is found. All else is disorder and confusion, and is inconsistent with the terms of the partnership.

Finally, I have to say that the ministry of the gospel and the ministry of the assembly proceed from the One Head, Christ in glory. We can see the wisdom of God in selecting the Apostle Paul as the one single vessel in which both ministries were to be exhibited and worked out into result. Had Paul been the minister of assembly truth, and Peter the minister of evangelical truth, we might have followed the one to the neglect of the other. Divine wisdom set both ministries in one vessel that we might learn never to pursue the one line to the detriment of the other.

In the teaching of Christ's interests in the assembly, and in urging Christians everywhere to be consistent with the truth of it, let us not fail to exercise our hearts in full fellowship with the outgoings of the heart of God in the gospel.

And in presenting the truth, let us do so in the spirit of holy affection. If we associate bitterness of spirit with the truth we teach, we prejudice the truth itself in the soul of each one of our hearers. And the truth is too valuable for us to lose or let slip. May God exercise every soul here to properly value the truth of Christ with every faculty of his soul.

Then, as to preaching the gospel, let us not forget that we have fallen upon very difficult days. May God make every one of us careful that we preach the gospel under clean conditions. If we preach a clean gospel, free from every association which would mar the testimony, or that would be inconsistent with the terms of that fellowship to which we are called, we should doubtless find the exercised saints of God in harmony with this testimony almost to a man.