

XVIII. Third Time's the Charm

May 26/27/28, 2015

2 Corinthians 13:1-14

Aim: To rest in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Corinth had been a tough go for the Apostle Paul. The good, the bad, and the ugly were there side-by-side: business, sport, tourism, sex, and religious pluralism. Nevertheless, Paul and his cohorts had planted a remarkable church in Corinth. And all went quite well until the arrival of those whom Paul called 'super-apostles,' men who preached a strange amalgam of Christianity and old-covenant strictures and triumphalist theology that imported the values of Corinthian culture right into the church. From the super-apostles' perspective, Paul suffered too much, his ministry lacked luster, his preaching was dull, he had no ecstatic stories to tell, he had no letters of commendation, and he was a poor laborer who worked with his hands. Tragically, the great apostle found himself rejected by many in the very church he had founded!

Thus, in the brilliant and stormy second letter to the Corinthians he defends his apostleship and defines authentic ministry. Chapters 1-7 address both friends and foes in Corinth, laying out for all time the ministry of the new covenant in Christ (2:12-7:1). Then chapters 8-9 explain the implications for repentant Corinthians, while the final chapters (10-13) detail the implications for the unrepentant in the Corinthian church.

The Apostle Paul bares his soul in 2 Corinthians as he does in no other of his writings. The great motif that gets repeated, passionate expression is *strength in weakness*, peaking with Jesus words in 12:9: 'But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."'

Now in verses 11-14, he surprises us as he closes his letter on a remarkably upbeat and memorable note, concluding with perhaps the most beautiful benediction in the New Testament.

A. Final Warning (2 Corinthians 13:1-4)

1. Paul's Warning (13:1-3a)

In 13:1-2 Paul turned to church discipline, which addresses the issue of what to do with those who sin and refuse to repent. The most important reason for church discipline lies in God's oft-repeated charge to His people, 'Be holy, for I am holy' (Lev. 11:44; 19:2; 20:7, 26; Ex. 22:31; Num. 15:40; Dt. 6:17-18; 1 Pe. 1:15-16; 2:9-12). God Himself disciplines His people so they can share His holiness (Heb. 12:10). As part of that process, God has given the church the responsibility of disciplining its sinning members.

a) Third Visit Planning (13:1a)

¹*This is the third time I am coming to you.*

Paul had visited Corinth twice. The first time was his extended stay when he planted the church (Acts 18:1-11), and the second was the painful visit during which he was so taken back by the brutal personal attack that he thought it better to stay away for a while (2:14). Significantly, it was in response to the rejection and abuse of the second visit that Paul issued dire warnings to his offenders if they did not repent.

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b) Two or Three Witnesses (13:1b)

Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

Why does Paul repeat the fact that this is to be his third visit (v. 1; cp. 12:14)? Some have thought this directly connected with his reference to ‘two or three witnesses,’ a quotation from Deuteronomy 19:15. Perhaps he is saying his three visits to them have been like the three witnesses the law required against an offender, so that they are being given adequate warning. Alternately, he may simply be saying that this important principle in the Law must also apply in church discipline. Certainly the need for adequate witnesses of wrongdoing is a matter of simple justice.

What does he mean by ‘every matter,’ ‘testimony,’ and ‘witnesses’? This sounds like some kind of a court hearing. A charge was first made which had to ‘be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses’ (cp. Dt. 19:5). A judgment would then be made, the apostle being present either ‘physically,’ or ‘in spirit,’ and if the accused were guilty, Paul would not spare him.

Church discipline is not a witch-hunt, where people’s reputations are destroyed by flimsy, unsupported allegations. Because God is a God of justice (Is. 30:18; He has designed a discipline process that is both thorough and fair. Paul’s chastening of the unrepentant sinners at Corinth would be carried out in strict accordance with God’s law, as his quote of Deuteronomy 19:15 assured the Corinthians. *Rhēma* (‘fact’) can refer to the allegations in a judicial proceeding. Matthew’s gospel uses it in relation to church discipline in 18:16, where Deuteronomy 19:15 is also quoted, and in 27:12-14, where it refers to the charges against Jesus at his trial before Pilate. The Old Testament Law affirmed that no one could be convicted of a crime unless the accused person’s guilt was ‘confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses’ (cp. Num. 35:30; Jn. 8:17; Heb. 10:28). That same requirement for multiple witnesses holds true in the process for church discipline. No one is to be put out of the church until a thorough four-step process has been completed (cp. Mt. 18:15-18).

c) Second Visit Warning (13:2-3a)

²I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—³since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me.

The apostle repeats a warning he gave the Corinthians on his second visit. He would not spare those who sinned earlier or any others who had done so similarly. His necessary action would prove that he spoke by Christ’s power – something that his detractors no doubt denied.

On his return there would be decisive discipline. Paul knew that a church without discipline cannot have a clear witness in the community in which God has placed it. The modern church needs to remember this in our increasingly Corinthianizing society. There had apparently been a desire at Corinth for him to provide proof that he was a mouthpiece of Christ, proof, in other words, of his genuine apostleship. Their concern for such proof was, of course, the reason for his defense, his ‘boasting’ and ‘foolishness’ in recent chapters.

Paul had not only preached church discipline but also practiced it. He had already put one unrepentant sinner out of the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 5:3-5; cp. 1 Tim. 1:20) and now gave fair warning that he would discipline when he came again. He had warned the sinning members of the Corinthian assembly to repent previously when he was present in Corinth for the second time (during the sorrowful visit; cp. 2:1). And though he was still absent from Corinth, he issued a

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warning in advance to all those who had sinned in the past (cp. 12:21) and to all the rest of the unrepentant sinners as well that when he came to them for the third time he would not spare anyone. *Pheidomai* ('spare') is a strong word, used in classical Greek to speak of sparing someone's life on the battlefield. It conveyed the idea of having mercy on an enemy. Paul's declaration that he would not spare them was not an idle threat; those who refused to repent would get exactly what their sin called for. The time for grace, mercy, and patience was over. There would be no more warnings; when he came again Paul would deal with the sinners at Corinth.

As Paul begins here, he warns them that there will be nothing arbitrary in his next visit. The apostle's judgments will be eminently measured and fair—a terrifying thought if taken to heart. Even more, his judgments will be unsparing. There is biting irony here. Paul's critics were so far from Christ in their thinking that they rejected Christlike humility and gentleness as evidence that Christ was speaking to Paul. So the irony is that if the only proof that will convince them of the authenticity of his words is power, they may get far more than they bargained for. Ironically, in holding up Paul's alleged weaknesses as reason to reject his authority, they were actually challenging Christ, who had come Himself in weakness.

The Corinthians were right in 'seeking for proof' that Christ did, in fact, speak through those who claimed to be apostles (cp. Rev. 2:2); unfortunately, they were measuring them by the wrong standards. Since Paul did not display the forceful personality traits that marked the proud, arrogant false apostles (cp. 11:20-21; 12:13), which impressed many of the Corinthians, some demanded convincing proof of his apostleship. In reality, Paul had already offered conclusive proof of his authenticity in 12:12. For the Corinthians to doubt Paul's genuineness as an apostle was to doubt their own genuineness as Christians, since he was God's instrument in their salvation and in their sanctification. They would be, in effect, sawing off the branch they were sitting on.

It is not clear whether the guilty offender was then removed, or whether the congregation withdrew its fellowship from the offender. What kind of sin warrants the excommunication of the offender? The evidence from both letters suggests gross sexual offenses. In the first letter it is apparently a case of incest (1 Cor. 5:5). In this letter, Paul refers to 'impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery' (12:21), which were 'not repented of,' that is, they were still being practiced. Paul had apparently observed this on his second or 'painful' visit and warned that on his return he would 'not spare' the offenders, by which he meant the holding of the quasi-judicial hearing followed by the grief for the unrepentant.

2. Christ's Power (13:3b-4a)

He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. ⁴For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.

The Corinthians' understanding of Christ's power was confused and outright wrong. They viewed Christ's power through their triumphalist lens as displayed in health and wealth and showy displays of power. Their views of power were Corinthian, not Christian. So Paul gives them the corrective on Christ. Paul says that *both* the cross and the resurrection display God's power. Only an all-powerful God could be strong enough to live out the weakness of the cross. Christ's taking on frail human flesh was a testament to His power, as were His arrest and beatings, and crucifixion, and becoming sin and death. *Christ's weakness demonstrated His*

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power. And further, His weakness was the platform from which His mighty resurrection was launched. Both Christ's suffering and resurrection demonstrated His power.

The Lord Jesus Christ was certainly not weak toward the Corinthians, since it was His mighty power working in them that both redeemed and was sanctifying them. Paul compares himself with Christ, who in His humanity took on weakness. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the unmistakable and supreme evidence of His weakness. His human nature was so weak as to be fully susceptible to death. But the story does not end with Christ's death. 'He lives because of the power of God,' who raised Him from the dead. Just as Christ's death showed His human weakness, so also did His resurrection demonstrate His divine power.

In contrast to the false apostles (11:19-20), he much preferred the gentle approach, but if discipline was to be needed, Christ would show His power through him when Paul paid his next visit. This was because, although crucified in weakness, He was now alive with all power. What does he mean when he says, 'He was crucified in weakness'? What he says here surely refers to the fact that the Savior assumed human nature in its weakness, that He did not resist when they came to fetch him from the Garden of Gethsemane, and that He allowed Himself to be impaled on the tree instead of calling for legions of angels to protect Him (Mt. 26:53) or using His own miraculous powers.

The example of our Savior who died and hung upon a cross in such apparent weakness should make us beware of misreading or misunderstanding apparent weakness. The Lord Jesus is never feeble towards His people, but strong. So, too, are those who properly exercise pastoral care as his representatives. They are strong in Him to do whatever is necessary.

3. Paul's Power (13:4b)

For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

Paul's point is that his very own experience of weakness and power reflect that of Christ. Paul's ministerial style was that of a humble servant—ostensible weakness. However, just as the crucified, weak Jesus gave way to the powerful, resurrected Christ who will come again in judgment, so also will Paul come in Christ's power to judge the Corinthians if they do not repent.

Paul too, because of his union with Christ, shares both in His weakness and His power (cp. Gal. 2:20). As a consequence, there are two sides to his ministry. He is called to share, on the one hand, both the meekness and willingness to suffer which Christ showed and, on the other, the power and authority He now exercises. The two sides of this paradox need to be maintained in tension in the lives of all who serve Christ in the preaching of the Word of God.

Paul, too, experienced the same juxtaposition of weakness and strength seen in Jesus Christ. He also was 'weak in Him;' he ministered in fear and trembling, and suffered constant sorrow pain, and disappointment. Yet Paul would 'live with Him;' that is, he, like all believers, possessed resurrection life, being raised with Christ to eternal glory. Returning to his warning, Paul told the Corinthians that 'the power of God' that raised him with Christ and gave him eternal life would be 'directed toward' the Corinthians when he again visited Corinth. The apostle would come in the authority and divine power of Christ and deal firmly with those who persisted in their sinful rebellion. When Paul returned to Corinth he would come in judgment on sin, just as the Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth in judgment. Then his authority would be seen.

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Paul will not come in the supposed power of visions or ecstasy but in the power of a godly man ‘in Christ,’ who will exhort, judge, and grieve over the unrepentant. Like Paul, we must be prepared to exhort, encourage, and discipline those who have fallen into sin as well as restore the penitent.

Corinth had earlier witnessed Paul’s power to unleash judgment when an unrepentant member was delivered over to Satan ‘for the destruction of the flesh’ (1 Cor. 5:5). This wasn’t the only time Paul engaged in such discipline. In Ephesus he delivered over Hymenaeus and Alexander to a similar fate so they would be taught not to blaspheme (cp. 1 Tim. 1:19-20).

B. Final Exhortation (2 Corinthians 13:5-6)

1. Test Yourselves (13:5)

⁵*Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!*

The Corinthians have been subjecting Paul and his claim to apostleship to intense scrutiny. Perhaps, he suggests, it is time for them to turn that scrutiny on themselves. It would have been very easy for Paul to say this at the beginning of the section of his letter in which he deals with the criticism of his opponents. That he did not do so is evidence not only of the wisdom God gave him but also of his truly Christian character. It is easy simply to reply to criticism with criticism, whereas to deal patiently with the criticisms first of all takes Christian grace, for it means we are treating even discourteous opponents with courtesy. It was right, however, that he should at last ask them searching questions about themselves.

The accusations and innuendos against Paul and his colleagues necessarily prompted them to examine themselves and their personal adherence to the faith and the genuineness of their spiritual experience. That exercise of self-examination, however, was equally necessary for the Corinthians, as for us all. Paul is not urging unhealthy introspection. Just as we may regularly have medical checks, so we need to look ourselves over on the inside from time to time.

In this passage, Paul turns the tables on his accusers and challenged them to test and examine themselves. The Greek text places the pronouns before the verbs for emphasis and literally reads, ‘Yourselves test to see if you are in the faith; yourselves examine.’ Instead of arrogantly and foolishly challenging the genuineness of Paul’s relationship to the Lord, the Corinthians needed to examine the genuineness of their own salvation. The familiar New Testament terms *peirazō* (‘test’) and *dokimazō* (‘examine’) are used here as synonyms. They convey the idea of putting in something to the test to determine its genuineness. The test was to see if the Corinthians were ‘in the faith.’ *Pistis* (‘faith’) refers here not to the subjective element of belief but to the objective body of Christian truth – the Christian faith.

Since Paul’s painful visit he had given the Corinthians some time, a gracious space, in which to repent. Paul’s enemies judged Paul to have failed their spiritual tests in that he was sub-par in everything. His looks, his eloquence, his lifestyle, his experience, his success—all were found lacking. So now Paul turns the tables on them. The test is simple: Is Jesus Christ *in* you?

The test is notably subjective. Paul doesn’t demand, as he does elsewhere, substantive beliefs—things we must confess (cp. Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:1-4). He allows that the bar of their own consciences will substantiate or disprove the genuineness of their faith. Paul believes they will

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be honest. His playfully ironic ‘unless indeed you fail to meet the test’ indicates that he is confident in them.

Paul confidently expected that when the Corinthians examined themselves they would recognize that Jesus Christ was in them. The transformed life that results (5:17) offers recognizable proof of true salvation. The New Testament affirmation that people can know that they have been saved directly contradicts the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Rome officially holds that ‘no one can know with the certainty of faith, which cannot be subject to error, that he has obtained the grace of God’ (Chapter IX of the Decree Concerning Justification promulgated by the Council of Trent). Paul’s call for the Corinthians to examine themselves to see if they were truly saved would have been pointless if such knowledge were impossible to obtain. The apostle was confident that the majority of the Corinthians would find their faith genuine and experience the blessings of assurance. Those who did fail the test could also experience those blessings if they repented and exercised genuine faith in Christ.

We are to test ourselves to see whether we are ‘in the faith’ – that is to say, to check that we are genuinely ‘born again.’ The three tests of 1 John – faith in the Lord Jesus as the Christ (1 Jn. 5:1), righteousness of life (1 Jn. 2:29), and love for other believers (1 Jn. 3:14) are fundamental evidences. Self-examination properly humbles us and reminds us of our absolute dependence upon the saving work of our Lord Jesus.

This is a good question for all of us to ponder. Is Christ in you? How do you know? What proof is there of His presence in your life? Of course, there is a core of belief that surrounds true faith. But this test asks about your subjective awareness.

2. Paul Tested (13:6)

‘I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.’

What a strange and startling irony that to examine themselves and discover that their own faith was true would in fact point to the genuineness of Paul’s apostleship! Why does the one follow from the other? Because it was through him that they had come to faith in Christ in the first place, so that this said something about God’s use of him in this way.

But Paul, too, would benefit when the majority examined themselves and discovered their faith to be real. In fact, since they were the fruit of his ministry, it would prove that he was a genuine apostle. The Corinthians were caught on the horns of a dilemma. If they doubted Paul’s apostleship, they would have to doubt his message. But if they doubted his message, they would also have to doubt their own conversion. The most convincing proof of Paul’s apostleship was the Corinthians’ own transformed lives: if they were truly saved, then he had to be a true apostle. Paul knew the majority of the Corinthians were genuine believers and would therefore realize that he did not fail the test.

He knows that if the Corinthians discern that Christ is in them, they must admit that Christ is in him—because he introduced them to Christ! And, therefore, they must embrace his apostleship.

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C. Final Prayer (2 Corinthians 13:7-10)

1. Right Living (13:7)

⁷*But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed.*

As Paul wrote this epistle to affirm his authenticity in the face of the false apostle's attacks, he was not jealously guarding his own reputation. But he was very aware that if the church turned away from him it would be turning away from Christ. It would have been natural, humanly speaking, for Paul to have wanted to come to Corinth to convincingly display his power. But his concern for the Corinthians did not necessarily require his pressure. Instead he could pray to God that they would do not wrong but that they would do what is right. His prayer was that the Corinthians' obedience would make it unnecessary for him to come to wield his authority and discipline them, or if he came, they would have repented so there would be nothing to confront. Like a loving father, he was more concerned with his children's obedience than his own reputation.

Paul's prayer that his detractors 'may not do wrong' is not a prayer that they will prove they have passed the test, so that it will be seen that Paul has passed the test and is authentic. Rather, Paul is so selfless that he prays that the Corinthians 'may not do wrong' and will 'do what is right,' even though it may make him appear to have failed.

Some of his enemies were so unsparingly critical that they would maintain with twisted logic that Paul's decision not to display mighty acts of judgment (on the *repentant* Corinthians) proved that he was weak and fraudulent!

In verse 7, Paul shows again that his chief desire was not for self-vindication. He prayed that they might make progress in the right way, and he was more concerned about this than for personal vindication.

It was essential that the Corinthians accept Paul as a true apostle. Rejecting him in favor of the false teachers would be rejecting the truth of the gospel for Satan's lies. Thus, it was crucial for Paul to be 'approved' by the Corinthians for what he really was, an apostle of Jesus Christ. Yet in a remarkable display of selflessness, Paul's main goal was not that he himself might appear approved. As important as that was, Paul, ironically, would gladly 'appear unapproved' if the Corinthians' obedience obviated the need for him to display his apostolic power. Their purity and obedience took precedence over how men viewed him. Let the false apostles and their deceived followers go on considering him disqualified as an apostle; as long as the majority were living in obedience to the truth, Paul was content.

2. Right Doctrine (13:8)

⁸*For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.*

Verse 8 serves to underline this. Paul is more than content simply to allow the truth to be exposed to view. What is true must triumph in the end, because God is the Author of truth.

But, of course, the abiding rule for Paul is that he 'cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.' His apostolic powers can never be displayed to show off, but only to enhance and effect the truth.

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The ‘truth’ is a way of expressing ‘the gospel,’ the good news of our Lord Jesus. It is particularly appropriate because He Himself is the truth (Jn. 14:6; cp. 2 Jn. 1).

Paul could ‘do nothing against the truth.’ *Alētheia* (‘truth’) refers here to the whole of God’s revelation in Scripture. If the Corinthians were living in obedience to the truth, Paul could not and would not discipline them. On the other hand, he would not hesitate to act decisively for the truth if some of the Corinthians persisted in disobedience. Loving the truth means honoring it, and Paul would not hesitate to confront those who strayed from it.

3. Restoration (13:9)

⁹*For we are glad when we are weak and you are strong. Your restoration is what we pray for.*

If the Corinthians are ‘strong’ due to their repentance and embrace of Paul’s authority, then he will appear ‘weak’ because he will not have to enforce his authority with powerful acts. Paul’s heart-desire for his critics in Corinth was their restoration to their former favorable condition even at his apparent expense. Paul beseeches Heaven for those who have belittled him and rejected him. But he prays that his critics will do no wrong, but only what is right, and that his detractors will be strong and he will remain weak (cp. Mt. 5:44-45).

Verse 9 should be read in the light of verses 2 to 4. The weakness of which Paul writes here is in fact the gentleness and meekness of Christ (10:1), which he so much wanted to show to the Corinthians.

Paul’s willingness to be perceived as weak, as long as his children were strong (cp. 1 Cor. 4:9-13) prompted him to write, ‘We rejoice when we ourselves are weak but you are strong.’ His concern was that the Corinthians be obedient and strong. Nor did he mind appearing weak in the eyes of the world, even though actually he ministered in the power of God (4:7; 6:7; 13:4). He had learned that weakness was the path to power; it was his human weakness that allowed God’s strength to flow through him.

Our prayer, he tells them ‘is for your perfection,’ or, better, for their ‘mending.’ Paul’s primary concern was their ‘mending’ as a Christian community. What will encourage Paul is the knowledge that the Corinthians are ‘strong’ Christians.

Katartisis (‘complete’, ‘restoration’) which appears only here in the New Testament, means ‘adequate’, ‘fully qualified’, or ‘sufficient.’ The related verb *katartizō* (cp. v. 11) has the basic idea of putting things in order, or in their proper place, or restoring or fixing something that is broken. Perhaps the English word *integrity* best expresses the meaning of *katartisis* in this passage. A person with integrity is one whose thoughts, beliefs, words, and actions are all in perfect harmony. For the Christian, integrity involves having every area of life in submission to the truth of God’s Word, and with nothing inconsistent or out of sync.

As Paul and his colleagues prayed for the Corinthians, they prayed for their spiritual maturity, whatever the cost of the achievement of that goal to those who served them.

Such prayers do not make us His sons and daughters, but they indicate that we are living like His sons and daughters—the way He redeemed us to live. Don’t give up praying for your critics. Pray that they will do good. Pray that they will be strong, though you are weak.

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4. Reason for Writing (13:10)

¹⁰*For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.*

Five books of the New Testament contain an explicit statement of their purpose, although this is often clear to us through reading them. In verse 10, however, Paul indicates his general purpose in this epistle. He is so keen to be able to come in a spirit of gentleness and not of strong discipline. He saw the main purpose of Christ's commission to be to edify them, not to subject them to strong discipline, although the latter might be necessary at times. As in 10:8, Paul's language here may be intentionally reminiscent of Jeremiah 1:10.

His motive in preparing the ground for his third visit was not the pulling down of the Corinthians but their upbuilding. He wanted his visit to be memorable for its encouragement, not for discouragement. His example reminds us that authority should never be exercised harshly, but gently and purposefully, for the encouragement of God's people in their relationship with them.

Paul's goal in 'writing these things while absent' from Corinth was so that when he was present with them again on his upcoming visit (12:14; 13:1) he 'need not use severity' in confronting them. He much preferred to use the positive 'authority which the Lord gave' him 'for building up' the Corinthians and not the negative for tearing them down.

Paul then gave a final warning, if the situation warranted—if some of the Corinthians persisted in their sin and defiance of the Word and will of the Lord—he would not hesitate to act. *Kathairesis* ('tearing down') could also be translated 'destruction,' or 'demolition.' Paul used it in 10:8, when he also spoke of using his authority to edify the Corinthians, not to destroy them. He fervently hope they would heed the rebukes in this letter so his third visit could be different from his second one, which was so sad and painful for him (2:1).

The authority which the Lord gave Paul was for the 'building up' of Christians and churches, not 'tearing down' (by which he apparently means the necessary but negative process of judging and mourning; 12:21-13:2).

We are curious to know what the Corinthians did in response to Paul's letter. Did they continue as they were, allowing the newcomers to exert their influence? Or did they heed the apostle? The fact that the letter was not torn up when the Corinthians received it and that it has come down to us suggests that they deferred to Paul. When Paul arrived in Corinth, he stayed three months (Acts 20:2-3) and wrote the letter to the Romans, where there are only faint echoes of the present difficulties. We conclude that the Corinthians and the apostle were reconciled.

Did Paul succeed? Did the Corinthians heed his admonitions, repent, and turn away from the false teachers? Did they welcome Paul on his third visit? The apostle did, as he promised, visit Corinth again. Acts 20:2-3 records that he spent three months in Greece (Achaia). Since Corinth was located in Achaia, Paul undoubtedly spent most or all of that three-month period in that city. Though the New Testament offers no specific details of that visit, four lines of evidence suggest that the Corinthians responded positively to this letter and his visit to them was the joyful one Paul hoped for.

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First, Paul wrote Romans during this three-month stay in Corinth (cp. the references to Phoebe, Gaius, and Erastus—all of whom were associated with Corinth—in Romans 16). Nowhere in Romans did Paul express any concerns about his present situation. That implies that things were calm and peaceful while he was in Corinth. Second, Paul wrote to the Romans about his plan to visit Spain via Rome (Rom. 15:24). If things were still chaotic in Corinth, it is unlikely that he would have had imminent plans to leave there. Third, Romans 15:26-27 indicates that the Achaians (i.e., Corinthians) had responded to Paul's appeal regarding the collection for the Jerusalem church (2 Cor. 8-9). The Corinthians would not likely have made that contribution (particularly by handing it over to Paul) if they still harbored doubts about whether he was a true apostle. Finally, the inclusion of 2 Corinthians in the New Testament canon argues that the Corinthians responded favorably to the letter. Had it failed to achieve its purpose, it would not likely have been accepted by the church as Scripture. This letter, in which Paul poured out his heart to the Corinthians, achieved its goal of reconciling them to him. Like the rest of Scripture, it will infallibly achieve what God designed it to achieve.

D. Final Words (2 Corinthians 13:11-14)

1. Closing Commands (13:11)

¹¹*Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.*

The five brief admonitions listed in verse 11 show a distinct change in tone as Paul introduces them with 'Finally, brothers, rejoice.' Paul had earlier used the term 'brothers' when he opened each of the first two major sections of the letter (1:8; 8:1). But 'brothers' is notably absent in the final section (chapters 10-13), in which he assails the unrepentant in the Corinthian church. Now, however, he addresses everyone in the Corinthian church as 'brothers' in hopes that all will be considered brothers (and sisters) due to their repentance. Optimism brightens Paul's final words.

'Finally' introduces Paul's farewell remarks to his beloved brethren at Corinth (cp. 1:8; 8:1). The five brief, mostly one-word imperatives (in the Greek come rapid-fire and with a singular focus on bringing unity to the Corinthian church.

The Corinthians certainly needed to get things in order; to repent of their sin, reject the false teachers, and return to Paul, acknowledging him as the genuine apostle that he was and submitting to the truth of God he preached. To help them align themselves with God's truth, Paul gave them five final exhortations: five commands expressed by five imperative verbs.

a) *Be Joyful*

The command 'rejoice' comes first because Paul longed for the Corinthians to be a cause for his own rejoicing. He knew there would be rejoicing in the Corinthian church if the errant members repented. So 'rejoice' is a bright imperative full of faith and the expectation that the Corinthians are on the verge of joyous unity.

The first is joy. Some translations render *chairete* ('rejoice') 'farewell' or 'good-bye,' since the word was also used as a greeting (like *shalom*). Using *chairete* as a greeting was appropriate, because joy is essential in the life of the church.

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b) Be Restored

The second imperative, ‘Aim for restoration,’ has the sense of ‘to put back in place or mend’ and therefor is an exhortation to the Corinthians to work at restoring their unity in Christ. Paul lays the responsibility directly on them—‘Pull yourselves together’—work at restoration. This would call for forbearance and love (Eph. 4:1b-3; cp. 13:10).

The key to understanding this verse lies in the phrase ‘be made complete.’ *Katartizō* (‘be made complete’) is the verb form of the noun *katartisis* (v. 9). It has the sense here not of adding something that is lacking, but of putting things in order, of adjusting things that are out of adjustment. Paul exhorted the Corinthians to mend their ways, to straighten themselves out, and restore harmony among themselves. Spiritual wholeness comes when the church, both collectively and individually, is in complete conformity to God’s Word. As the imperative form of the verb *katartizō* indicates, believers are command to pursue integrity; it is not optional.

The word translated ‘Aim for perfection’ means ‘put in order’ and is often used in the sense of ‘restore’ or ‘mend.’ It is also used in verse 9. This was most appropriate in view of the problems of which Paul was aware at the church. This is a fine example of the relationship between God’s grace and the Christian’s responsibility. Paul clearly recognized that the Corinthians could not put things right unaided and that they were dependent on God’s grace for this. For this reason he prays for them. He also recognizes, however, that the responsibility for putting things in order is theirs. God’s grace does not take away our responsibility but rather works through it.

This exhortation is ‘aim for restoration’ of perfection. We are to determine to grow in Christ, and in Christlikeness.

c) Be Comforting

So the Corinthians were first to ‘rejoice,’ second to ‘aim for restoration, and third to ‘comfort one another.’ Paul was aware of the depth of the hurt among both those who were in the right and those in the wrong. He himself had needed comfort during this Corinthian fray, and Titus had been the man (7:6-7). The situation then and now in Corinth demanded mutual tenderness and comfort. Comfort is the currency of concord and unity.

The third exhortation is to submit. *Parakaleō* (‘be comforted’) can refer to speaking authoritatively and could probably be better translated here ‘exhorted’ or ‘admonished.’ Submission to authority was essential if the Corinthians were to get their church in order.

The verb translated ‘listen to my appeal’ can also mean ‘be of good comfort,’ and it would be apt here in either of these meanings. The fact, however, that the other three exhortations in this verse are all challenging and clearly relate to their tendencies to division makes it more likely that the first of these meanings is correct.

d) Be Agreeable

The next command is to ‘agree with one another.’ Every church needs this admonition, but no church needed it more than Corinth! This command was not a call for harmony for the sake of harmony, but for unity in the apostolic truth that Paul has been teaching in this letter. They were to agree with one another on the main things, not on everything. This meant that God’s Word must be the standard and the source of unity.

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The command to ‘be like-minded’ reveals a fourth exhortation: be committed to the truth. The Greek phrase translated ‘be like-minded’ literally means, ‘thing the same thing’ or ‘have the same convictions and beliefs.’ The conformity Paul called for is the antithesis of a shallow, superficial truce based on the notion that doctrine is divisive and everyone’s opinion is equally valid.

When as believers we strive to think in the same way, God the Holy Spirit is always present to enable us to have the mind of Christ.

e) Be Peaceful

Lastly, that ‘live in peace’ flows out of such agreement is self-explanatory. Nevertheless, living in peace requires thought and determination. Now, stepping back and looking at the whole, we see that the power of Paul’s closing admonitions lies in no single command but in the aggregate of these five terse, staccato injunctions about rejoicing, restoring, comforting, agreeing, and living in peace—all present imperatives calling the Corinthians to continuous action day in and day out.

The final demand Paul made of the Corinthians is unity, which underlies the command that they ‘live in peace.’ Peace and unity flow logically from a common understanding of and submission to the Word of God.

f) God Be With You

If the Corinthians persist, then they have a promise: ‘and the God of love and peace will be with you.’ God imparts His unique inner qualities to His children as they actively do His will. The Christian life and the existence of unity within the church do not come through passivity. We must work at every aspect all the time. Restoration is work, comfort is work, agreement is work, peace is work, and even rejoicing requires thought and effort. Paul called for continuous, specific effort for the church—and everything depended on their response.

The wonderful promise that attends obedience to these exhortations is divine blessing by the presence of the ‘God of love and peace.’ It is not, of course, only perfect churches that enjoy the blessings of God’s presence. There are no perfect churches, because all are made up of imperfect sinners. But those who diligently pursue completeness will enjoy the rich reward of God’s presence in ‘love and peace.’

‘The God of love and peace will be with you’ is a reminder not only of God’s concern for their unity, but perhaps also of the fact that He is the Source of it and that love is indispensable to it.

Paul guarantees that with obedience to these imperatives, God’s blessing will come. Where love and peace exist, God is present.

2. Closing Greetings (13:12-13)

a) Holy Kiss (13:12)

¹²*Greet one another with a holy kiss.*

Paul was so concerned about restoration and unity in Corinth that he became remarkably directive about demonstrating affection. Note carefully that Paul was the very first person in the Greco-Roman world to instruct members of a *mixed social group* to greet one another with a kiss. Therefore, the ‘holy kiss’ between unrelated men and women for the purpose of receiving

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others as family was a Christian innovation, unique in the sprawling paganism of the Roman Empire. The descriptive ‘holy’ indicates that it was non-erotic, and probably not to the mouth.

The kiss was intended to be a symbol of love and peace. It was to be a *holy* kiss. A kiss was the regular greeting in first-century society. The word ‘holy’ reminds us that a kiss could easily be abused, especially if men and women kissed one another.

A kiss was a common form of greeting in the ancient Near East (cp. 2 Sam. 15:5; 20:9; Mt. 26:48; Lk. 7:45). It typically was a cheek-to-cheek embrace between members of the same sex. In the early church it was not a mere formality, like a handshake in Western culture today. The ‘holy kiss’ took on a special significance as a physical expression of brotherly love and mutual affection between church members (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 1 Th. 5:26). That it was to be a ‘holy’ kiss eliminates any suggestion of sexual impurity. Unfortunately, it gradually became a formal institutionalized part of the church’s liturgy, lost its true meaning, and eventually faded from the church altogether. Today, it seems to be making a welcome comeback in some churches.

The kiss is an expression of love and is still much used in the Near East as well as in many other places as a form of salutation as well, but, of course, with the implication that there is a good relationship between the two parties involved. Paul refers to it here as ‘a holy kiss,’ as he does also in Romans 16:16, 1 Corinthians 16:20, and 1 Thessalonian 5:26.

Paul’s injunction was brilliant. First, because to call another person ‘brother’ was a breach of Roman protocol, as it was unlawful to call people brothers or sisters who were not of one’s family. Thus, the everyday language of Christianity asserted that Christians were family in spiritual relationship. Second, the kiss was an expression of affection among family members—a token of deepest relationship and unity. Paul’s insistence upon the kiss, including the heretofore dissident factions, was a call to symbolize and celebrate deep spiritual reality. In other words, the mutual exchange of the holy kiss could well effect the restoration of dissident brothers.

As we make the journey from Corinth to our own hometown or church, we must own that our language and our actions have so much to do with our concord and unity. ‘Brothers’ and ‘sisters’ is the language of the covenant community, and we ought to use such terms with forthright affection, not derision. And the holy kiss? Well, it survives as a public convention in most European cultures—the obligatory kiss on each cheek. Maybe it’s time to bring it back to the church, for we are family.

b) All the Saints (13:13)

¹³*All the saints greet you.*

Paul extends the greetings of his cohorts in Ephesus with ‘All the saints greet you.’ The unity he desires to reestablish in Corinth is universal. Christian unity is true for the whole Body of Christ.

Though distance prevented them from giving the Corinthians a holy kiss, ‘all the saints’ with Paul when he penned this epistle still wished to greet (send their love to) their Corinthian brethren. They would have been Macedonians, since, 2 Corinthians was written from Macedonia (probably Philippi). Brotherly love, then, is not to be confined to members of the same congregation; it is to be shared by all believers.

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3. Closing Benediction (13:14)

¹⁴*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

a) Trinitarian

The last verse of Second Corinthians is extremely well-known. It would be very difficult to find a Christian who does not know it, even if he or she is unaware of its location in Scripture, for it is used with great frequency in Christian services, often twice a Sunday. In fact, it is almost certainly the most-quoted verse in the whole Bible.

Used so often as a final prayer of benediction among Christians, and sometimes said aloud in unison, these words constitute one of the loveliest and most meaningful prayers of the New Testament. It is a prayer to use and treasure, and upon which often to meditate.

To pronounce a benediction is to solemnly invoke a blessing, and Paul frequently did so in his epistles (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 16:20; 1 Cor. 1:3; 16:23; Gal. 1:3-4; 6:18; Eph. 1:2; 6:23-24; Phil. 1:2; 4:23; Col. 1:2; 1 Th. 1:1; 5:28; 2 Th. 1:2; 3:18; Phm. 3). No New Testament benediction, however, is as theologically rich and profound as this one. It is the only one that mentions all three persons of the Trinity. Two important features of this magnificent benediction call for closer examination. First, it is a Trinitarian benediction, reflecting a truth that is central to the Christian faith. Paul does not give here a formal, systematic exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity; this Trinitarian statement just flowed in natural and uninhibited fashion from him, as every blessing in the Christian life flows from the triune God. But this benediction is not only Trinitarian but also redemptive. It is in salvation that the Trinity is most clearly seen.

Now we come to the lovely, lyrical benediction. The benediction is, of course, Trinitarian. But Paul is not attempting to teach us the ontological distinctives of the Trinity or to parse the three persons. The triune God is simply the air Paul breathes, as is seen in his other references to the Trinity (Gal. 4:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 1:3, 13-14; 2:18; 3:14-17; 4:4-6).

This well-known verse is Trinitarian in form. It is, however, noteworthy that the order of Father-Son-Holy Spirit, although the most frequent in the New Testament, is not invariable, and we see from a passage like this that other orders are quite appropriate. This is because the three Persons are equal in nature and so in honor. It is sometimes possible to see a reason for the order of mention. Here it seems to be that of Christian experience.

What surprises us here is the order because where we would expect the Father-Son-Holy Spirit of the later creeds, we have the Son (Jesus Christ) first, then God, and then the Holy Spirit. This is because Paul's benediction mirrors the experience of all those who have come to Christ. It is ordered in the sequence of salvation. It is the subjective testimony of our hearts. The benediction falls like refreshing fragrances.

The three persons of the Trinity are mentioned, but in the order that reflects Christian experience.

b) Grace

First there is 'the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.' It takes us back to the sheer mercy of God that we experienced in salvation as we were exposed to the fire hose of Christ's relentless grace and goodness. And now we live in the overflow of grace. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ has made us rich (8:9). Paul loved to bless with grace.

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First, there is ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ’ which is encountered in the ‘message of reconciliation’ (5:19; 6:1) and through which we are made ‘rich’ (8:9).

It was through the ‘grace of the Lord Jesus Christ’ in dying as a sacrifice for sins that salvation was effected for the redeemed (Rom. 5:6; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pe. 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:2).

We pray, first, for the grace of our Savior’s forgiveness, presence, and strength. It is at the cross that our saving experience of God finds its beginning and the thought of it so often fills us with amazement at this manifestation of divine grace.

c) Love

Next, as a consequence of knowing ‘the grace,’ there came the knowledge of ‘the love of God,’ which is seen in the death of His Son (cp. Rom. 5:8; 1 Jn. 4:10; Jn. 3:16).

Then, as a consequence, we come to know ‘the love of God’ from the one Paul has just described as ‘the God of love’ (v. 11).

We pray, secondly, for the knowledge, assurance, experience, and power of God the Father’s love. Through the death of Christ we are introduced to the love of God, for His death was the supreme demonstration of God’s love (Rom. 5:8) and, at the same time, of course, of the love of Christ Himself (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:1, 25).

The ‘love of God’ the Father caused Him to plan redemption and choose those who would be saved (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8-10).

d) Fellowship

The ultimate consequence of Christ’s grace and God’s love is ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.’ This is the blessing of the new covenant. God has poured out His Holy Spirit upon us, and the result is a stunning unity of fellowship (cp. 1 Jn. 1:3). The fellowship of the Holy Spirit includes fellowship with the Father and the Son—Trinitarian fellowship—and then a profound fellowship with others who share in that fellowship.

As a result of salvation, believers are ushered into the ‘fellowship of the Holy Spirit,’ as he indwells them (Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 6:19; Gal. 4:6) and places them into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13).

Finally, also as a consequence, we experience ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,’ which refers to the Spirit’s fellowship with our spirits and also the fellowship which exists between those in whom the Spirit of God dwells.

Thirdly, we pray for the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as our Counselor, the fellowship of His intercession, and the fellowship into which He desires to bring us with the Father and the Son, and with one another.

What does ‘the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ mean? If the grace and love here are those that emanate from the Son and Father respectively, then it seems most likely that Paul is thinking here of the fellowship which has the Spirit as its divine Source. If that is so, this expression coheres well with verse 11, for peace among the saints is expressed in their fellowship, created among them by the Spirit whose work not only binds them to Christ but also constitutes them together as His body (1 Cor. 12:12, 13).

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Here then, at the close of his epistle, Paul demonstrates that concern for the unity of the Corinthian church that has been in his heart throughout his correspondence with them, most explicitly in the First Epistle, but also in the Second. Such loving unity in Christ is not of human creation, but comes from God through His Spirit. We should treasure it.

By this prayer Paul is reminding the Corinthians that their ‘mending’ does not lie within themselves but with the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the Spirit’s fellowship. The grace of Christ removes aggressiveness, the love of God dispels jealousy, while the fellowship created by the Spirit destroys bitterness. As God answers that prayer, the problems so manifest in Corinth and in every troubled church will be overcome.

Paul’s benediction forms a fitting conclusion to this epistle, which despite all its stern rebuke of the Corinthians’ folly and sin ends on a note of blessing. It was the apostle’s desire that the Corinthians put themselves in a position to experience all the blessings that salvation brings. It was with that goal in mind that he defended his commission and his message, and that he rebuked, encouraged, and prayed for them. There can be no higher goal for any faithful pastor than that his people would know the full riches God grants them through redemption.

For next time: End of Bible Study. Summer break!