

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF PAUL'S SECOND LETTER TO THE CORINTHIANS - PART FOURTEEN

At last Paul was on his way back to Corinth with a nervousness about what he would find but a sense of anticipation of what God would do. He had visited for the first time in Acts 18 and was now returning as described in Acts 20:2,3 for his third visit. He must therefore have made a quick trip to Corinth somewhere during his 3 years in Ephesus. If there were still significant outstanding problems when he arrived, how was he to deal with them? He would be tough but loving. What would that look like in practice? The Christian church has struggled with this question for nearly 2000 years, swinging between the extremes of the Inquisition in Europe in the 16th century to a modern liberal tolerance of everything.

The first essential in loving toughness is fairness. Action must be based on fact not opinion. Fact is established by the evidence of 2 or 3 witnesses not one person's possibly biased view. This process was required in Deut.17:6; and 19:15 to ensure justice for the accused, realizing that malicious accusers could otherwise use the law to get rid of someone they disliked. The law also required that if the charge carried the death penalty, it was the accusers who were to begin the process of execution as Jesus demanded in John 8:7. Gossip and slander behind someone's back has no place when Christians deal with problems. The issue, as we have already seen, was not primarily behaviour but false teaching which justified that behaviour. The way of exposing that teaching was not by rumour or by throwing stones but by the word of God. The result would be healthy Biblical debate, as in Acts 15:2,7, which led if at all possible to minds being changed, not people being destroyed and thrown out.

The second ingredient in loving toughness is strength to stick with people and follow the process through to a God-honouring conclusion. When Jesus allowed Himself to be crucified, it seemed like weakness but it was the strongest act in human history. As Paul recognized in chapter 12, when he was at his weakest, Christ's strength became most evident. Only Christ in us can deal with problems in a way which brings real benefit to all involved.(13:1-4)

At other times Paul had given check lists against which they could review their heart attitude and its outworking in life.(7:11; 12:20) Now he set the final examination at the end of the course. There was only one question. Is Jesus Christ in you? The examination markers are us. We are to sit the examination and then decide whether we have passed. No-one else except God has any business checking our papers. There are only two possible outcomes, a pass because I know He is in me, or a fail because I know He is not. There are no grades of pass or fail and no borderline candidates. The implications of this test are enormous. He knew he had passed the test because he knew that Jesus Christ lived in him. They were not to test Paul but he hoped that they would listen to his confident testimony because this is the basis of Christian fellowship between us, not our measurement of each other's behaviour.(13:5,6)

In a final prayer for his students Paul prayed that their lives would show that Christ was in them. Again he urged them to stop testing each other and him. He wanted them just to accept one another as they were. He wanted them to know, not their own strength, but the strength of Christ within. 'Complete' in Greek means 'prepared and equipped', like a soldier armed for battle. Knowing that Jesus Christ is in us does not mean we have arrived, but that we are ready to get started in Christian growth and service. Paul's authority as he had often said before, (10:8) was simply that of the word of God with which he could build the weak up, not destroy them with criticism and discouragement. (13:7-10)

In closing Paul summed up the instructions which he had developed throughout the whole book, and reminded them one last time of just what God had promised. He regarded them as brothers with the same Father not children under his control. The instructions were six:

- Rejoice - know and experience just how rich we are in the grace of God.
- Be made complete - let that process of preparation and equipment with the word of God continue.
- Be comforted - let our knowledge of God's grace and strength within match situation by situation every pressure we will experience whether external or internal.
- Be like-minded - share the mind of Christ who alone can make us truly one. (Phil.2:2-5)
- Live in peace - live out that oneness, knowing that if we share His thinking we cannot be at war with each other. (Phil.4:2-7)
- Greet one another with a holy kiss - make everyone welcome including the lonely and the less easy to love.

Trusting God to do this in us would have four marvelous consequences:

- The presence of the God of love and peace in every situation.
- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ as their inexhaustible resource for every pressure.
- The love of God which would mean that they would want to share His grace without measure with the needy.
- The fellowship of the Holy Spirit so that in the loneliest situation they would never be alone. (13:11-14)

Two final questions for further study:

1. How does the theme of Christ's comfort in our affliction follow right through the book? Summarise the book chapter by chapter around this central message. Look for everyday ways of illustrating this theme to those around you.
2. What in your life so far, and in the present time, have been the greatest pressures upon you? How has Christ's comfort met each one?