

Alarm to Carnal Christianity 3

The Corinthian letters peculiarly address carnality in the church: a stubborn bent to think and behave after the world of unregenerate men, rather than the communion of spiritual men. In other epistles, Paul deals with other problems, but in these letters rampant carnality seems to be the chief matter of concern. He employs a literary device, "know ye not?", in order to jolt their memories with truth which they already know, and pinpoint the absurdity of their actions. There are ten of these imperative reminders in the first letter.

In the two previous Gateposts we took up the first four. We are now ready for the fifth, which will give rise to the sixth through the ninth.

*"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God?"* Or to put it more bluntly: Unrighteous people are not Christians. They are not saved, are unconverted and are on their way to hell.

There is no escaping the plain meaning of this passage, though men have employed many devices to do so. The terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven" have been batted around by cavilers of truth, trying to make them mean something in eschatology which is different from eternal salvation. But the scriptures are clear on the matter. The two terms are used interchangeably in the Bible, and they plainly refer to eternal salvation. To inherit the kingdom is to be saved; to be excluded from it is to be eternally lost.

Nor can one hide behind imputed righteousness. Some preachers of the "Grace of God" are naught but those who have *"crept in unawares . . . turning the grace of God unto lasciviousness . . ."* (Jude 4). This they do by confounding the moral ruin of the old man in Adam with the new man in Christ, which *"after God is created in righteousness and true holiness"* (Ephesians 4:24). So far from the grace of God being a means for despising the moral law, it *"teaches us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world"* (Titus 2:12). John anticipates this pretense of cheap grace that winks at sin. *"Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous."* (1 John 3:7). Don't let anyone pull the wool over your eyes about this. No man is righteous who does not behave righteously. The perverters of the grace of God tell us that we are all alike, justified and unjustified. We are all sinners. There is no difference in our behaviour, only in our faith. James blows that apart with, *"show me your faith by your works"* (James 2:18).

This is not sinless perfectionism. It is no more true to say that the Christian cannot commit an immoral act, than to say that an unbeliever is incapable of a moral deed. It is a matter of heart and lifestyle. As it is unnatural for the unbeliever to live righteously and godly, so it is contrary for the Christian to live unrighteously and ungodly. Talk about your "wretched man", "saved sinner", "justified worms" all you will. The burden of scriptures speak of the redeemed as new creatures, holy persons, saints who have been washed and delivered from the power of darkness (Romans 6:20-22; 8:9-10; Ephesians 4:24; 5:5-8, Colossians 1:13). The Christian may and does sin, but he cannot walk in it habitually. He can be, and is often, overcome in a fault; but he has power in Christ Jesus to break old sin bondages.

The Christian is not justified because of his righteous life. His righteousness is the consequence, not the cause, of his justification. And this is a righteousness that far transcends the legal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). It is, furthermore, properly called by our Lord the true righteousness of the truly redeemed, illustrated in the following verses and chapters, where he demonstrates that the Christian not only satisfies the legal demands of the law, but goes on to fulfill its more stringent spiritual ends. The law has not been set aside in Christ by grace: it has been brought to its fullest manifestation, and fulfilled in the believer's walk. *"That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit"* (Romans 8:4).

Now, with all that in view, let us consider some of the sins which were being tolerated, if not gloried in, by the Corinthian church.

There were sins of drunkenness so widespread, that some could be called drunkards. This is a sin which modern men have removed from the Bible by calling drunkards "alcoholics", who are only afflicted with a "disease". Part of the treatment for this "disease" is for the drunkard to confess that he is an "alcoholic". No Christian will do such a thing, for to do so would be an admission of a lord other than Christ. If one has not found in Christ the power to break with alcohol, then he has not found Christ and is still in his sins. Drunkards do not inherit the kingdom of God.

There were revilers, people who were known for their railing and slandering. These have manifestly never known the grace of forgiveness for their sins, for if they had, they would have come to know themselves to be the chiefest of sinners, the sorriest of the human race, and would consider every other person an angel in comparison to themselves. They shall not enter the kingdom of God because they know nothing of the grace of repentance.

There were sins of greed: Thieves, extortioners, covetous. These manifest themselves according to varying degrees of civility. Those too refined to resort to armed robbery, burglary, or cattle-rustling, arranged to steal a man's goods by cheap merchandise, overpricing, gouging for services and usury, or whatever legal loopholes might be provided for the conscienceless moneygrubber. Then there were those who lacked either the courage or the opportunity to engage in any of these overt acts. But whose covetous hearts were betrayed by their lusting looks and speech, reeking with longings for another's possessions, by their reluctance to pay their obligations, their insensitivity to the needs of others, stinginess in giving, niggardliness in business and in a score of other undeniable evidences.

Apparently, some of the Corinthians had not forsaken their idols. Professing faith in Christ, they still held some reverence and fear of pagan deities, and were unwilling to part with the images that represented them . . . just in case Christ proved insufficient.

Closely connected with this idolatry were a host of sexual sins, partially carried over from paganism, which sponsored temple whoredom; and partially encouraged by a misguided “Christian liberty”. “*Such (incest) fornication is not so much as named among the heathen*” (1 Corinthians 5:1). When sexual activity is allowed beyond the bounds of Godly restraint (one man and one woman for life), it has jumped the fence and must be held in check by means of public censures. There were precious little of these in the Roman Empire at this time. Without the Christian church speaking directly to the matter, the conscience was unaided. Therefore, all forms of fornication, adultery and homosexuality could be allowed to run rampant without a voice of protest or warning. This leaven will quickly destroy a church. The Apostle reminds them that of such they were, but have been justified and delivered from the power of these desires, and must, therefore, forsake them (1 Corinthians 6:9-20).

The next problem taken up by the Apostle demonstrates the impossibility of a Christian fornicator. This he does by showing the peculiar nature of sexual sins that render them particularly odious to Christian conduct. Three “know ye nots” are employed, and they must all be considered together:

*“that your bodies are the members of Christ?” (6:15)*

*“that he which is joined to an harlot is one body?” (verse 16)*

*“that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price” (verses 19-20)*

The peculiar nature of sexual sins is set forth in verses 13 and 18. “*Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats: but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body.*” “*Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body.*”

The individual organs of our bodies which were made for certain biological functions related only to this present life bear no particular relation to Christ. They will pass away with our transition to a glorified body. But the whole body, which is doubly sacred, since it is at the same time a member of Christ’s whole body on earth (the church, Ephesians 1:22-23), and the temple of the Holy Ghost, cannot be considered so dispensable and profane. Even when the body is involved in some other sin, such as drunkenness and gluttony, and certain organs harmed, such as the liver or stomach or heart, these are all physical and impersonal organs. The whole body, however, is the vehicle of the whole man, and involves the spirit, the habitation of God (verse 19). When a person engages in sexual intercourse with another, he is not merely subjecting certain organs of his body to biological functions. He is committing the whole of his person in an intimate union with another. The word of God tells us that such a union makes one of two (verse 16, Genesis 2:24). A Christian, then, who is one with Christ (John 17:21-22), must not, cannot, make his body, a member of Christ, one with a harlot. The Christian cannot consider his body in the profane way that unbelievers do. They view their bodies as their own, to do with as they please, to use to gratify their own desires or to employ to achieve their own ends. The Christian, however, knows himself to be redeemed by the death of Another, and that he belongs to Christ, and his body, therefore, is for one singular purpose: to serve and glorify God. Such a thing is so contrary to Christianity, that it can be said without qualification, “fornicators shall not enter the kingdom of God.”

These considerations logically bring us to the ninth warning, which states in effect that not all who run, win. “*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth a prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible.*” (1 Corinthians 9:24-25).

Paul here uses the figure of the athlete who is running in a race with several others. Of all who are running, only one wins; the rest have run in vain. The single object of being in the race is to win the prize. You either win the prize, or nothing. We must not suppose that he is speaking of Christian walk and work as if we were competing with other Christians in an effort to excel and grab for ourselves what they otherwise would have won, for that would deny the very nature of Christian charity and self-giving for others. Christians do not compete with one another for their incorruptible crown, nor will they who gain it consider it something they have merited. It is the gift of God to those who savingly believe on Jesus Christ and whose faith has been demonstrated by a life of obedience. All Christians run and win together. That is the point. Our aim is to make our calling and election sure (1 Peter 1:10), to make certain that we are not empty professors of a grace we do not possess, hypocrites whose pretense is betrayed by the discovery that our true natures are not spiritual but carnal.

If one doubts the meaning of this exhortation, and considers himself beyond the possibility of falling, let him learn from the Apostle: “*I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it unto subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway* (1 Corinthians 9:26-27). The Greek *adokimos* translated here “castaway”, is used seven other times in the New Testament, translated once “rejected”, and the other six times, “reprobate”. Its clear meaning is to be rejected and cast aside by God.

Spiritual men do not presume upon their “conversion experience” and count themselves saved irrespective of consistent fruit appropriate for repentance. The easy, “got it made”, “once saved always saved” travesty of the Bible doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is an invention of carnal minds intended to lend credibility to a host of false converts who give no evidence of a changed heart in their lawless lifestyle. It is the intention of the Holy Spirit, by these warnings, to rout people out of such false hopes.

Nor will the doctrine of divine election save the person who loves it solely because of his imagination that it will exempt him from any responsibility to fight the good fight of faith (2 Timothy 4:7). None but the Lord can save; and the Lord Who saves is sovereignly LORD. Sovereign grace is no haven for the lawless, lazy and frivolous. Christians take God’s sovereignty seriously: They believe He is to be obeyed, and that right diligently.

And let us not be deceived by those who would say, “But this epistle was written to Christians. Therefore, Paul could not be suggesting that some of them be lost.” I submit to you that Paul never assumed that anyone was infallibly saved, especially these

carnal Corinthians. That is exactly the point he is making in all of these warnings. As he closes the second epistle, after having been among them twice and having been promised by the Lord that He had “much people” there (Acts 18:10), he had no reservations about questioning their standing in grace: *“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates”* (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Not all who run, win. No one wins who does not run. Some run in vain, gain nothing, and lose it all for a mess of carnal pottage. If we would win, we must run, positively, certainly, consistently, and persistently. And we must keep our bodies under . . . in subjection to Christ, for they are made for Him.

- C. M.