
THE CHRISTIAN PROSPECT

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The Good Qualities of the Seven Churches

Revelation 2-3

In this essay we wish to explore the good characteristics of the seven churches in Asia. As we previously noted, there were more than seven churches in Asia, but these were chosen for examination. Seven is symbolic of completion, sometimes more narrowly the completion by man of God's commandments. These seven churches, then, might be taken as a complete representation of the state of the church.

To clarify the point, as a complete representation, a church at any time throughout history could examine the good and bad characteristics of these seven and find itself represented by one or more of them. We might be tempted to examine each individually and think that, since we are not like any one in particular, there is little to learn. But, taken collectively, we will all find ways in which we are a bit like this one, and a little like that one. An honest assessment will be valuable.

Ephesus

Revelation 2:1-7

If your Bible has paragraph headings in it, Ephesus may be referred to as "The Loveless Church." This is the case in my NKJV. This is commentary on the part of the publisher, and not at all accurate. It is unfair to reduce our thinking about these good people to a single complaint against them and ignore the many great things they were doing. Be careful not to be prejudiced by editorial comments like this.

Now that our rant is complete, let us consider more carefully what was happening in Ephesus. Jesus says He knows their works, their toil, and their patient endurance. The Greek word translated toil or work means "to engage in activity that is burdensome."¹ Toil brings to mind difficult physical labor, like digging a ditch in the hot summer sun. These were hard working people in a difficult situation. Despite the hardship, they were fully committed to accomplishing their work.

Among their difficulties were false apostles and those who followed the practices of the Nicolaitans. In both cases the Ephesians had tested these people and rejected their lies and false teaching. They could not "bear with those who are evil." Through it all they patiently endured and did not grow weary.

Outwardly, they showed all the signs of a healthy, prosperous congregation. But Jesus knows the heart, and their hearts were found wanting. We hope to explore this aspect of the congregation in a future essay. Had the Lord not decided to share His perspective on their character we would not know anything more than what was outwardly apparent. There is much to admire and imitate in the outward expression of their faith.

Smyrna

Revelation 2:8-11

There are no negative comments made about the church in Smyrna. There is also not much said about their activities. Instead, Jesus says a lot about what was happening to them. In both the NKJV and MEV Jesus acknowledged their works, so they had not given up on their faith. They were poor and persecuted, and lived with much tribulation.

In addition to their suffering, they had endured the "slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan" (2:9). Jewish leaders of that time had a history of persecuting Christians, and had shown themselves willing to pledge their allegiance to Caesar when it was convenient (John 19:15). It is probable that ethnic Jews in Smyrna were persecuting Christians, and helping others to do the same.

¹ Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). p. 558.

With regard to their saying they were Jews, but were not, Paul had explained to the Romans that God's allegiance had changed from ethnic Jews to Christians.

Romans 2:28-29 *For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God. (ESV)*

Being a Jew by birth no longer grants a person a place in God's kingdom. Instead, those who are obedient to His will are His chosen people. The Jews of Smyrna may have claimed to be doing God's will, just as Saul of Tarsus had once believed, but in fact the opposite was true. Because of their actions Jesus refers to them instead as the synagogue of Satan.

Furthermore, these Christians are told that the devil will have some of them thrown in prison, and that they will be tested, but that their faithfulness would be rewarded with a crown of life. The inspirational message to Smyrna is simple to understand, if difficult to live: God knows His people, and any suffering in this life will yield great reward in the life to come.

Pergamum

Revelation 2:12-17

Christians in Pergamum lived in the same neighborhood as "Satan's throne" (2:13). Pergamum was a city overtaken with idolatry and emperor worship.² It was a difficult place to be a Christian, but Christianity was needed there. The risk in such a place is theological error and compromise, and indeed, some had given in to false teaching (2:14, 15).

In spite of the competing religions, they held on to the name of Jesus and did not deny Him, even when one of their own, Antipas, was murdered. It is tempting in the face of such evil to make spiritual compromises in order to get along, but they had held on to their profession of faith.

Thyatira

Revelation 2:18-29

There were many good things to say about the church in Thyatira. They were workers, full of love and faith, diligent in their service, who patiently endured the difficulties of life, and were not discouraged by them. In fact, their works continued to grow and improve! What we find at Thyatira is a pattern of growth. They loved God and the church. They had faith in His promises. These things made them good stewards of His blessings.

Yet among them were those who practiced immorality. There was a woman there who was teaching falsehood and idolatry. The Lord would deal with her, but those who did not follow her ways would not be blamed.

Sardis

Revelation 3:1-6

The church in Sardis was spiritually dead. They had a reputation, but it would not stand up to scrutiny. Their works were incomplete, they had failed to grow. The only good that could be said of them was that a few individuals had not soiled their garments (2:4). These would be rewarded.

Philadelphia

Revelation 3:7-13

Jesus' message to the Christians in Philadelphia is perhaps the most hopeful. He is complimentary of their work, but more than that, He opened a door of opportunity for them. Their strength, though little, was proof that they were ready for new challenges. They had demonstrated faithfulness to God's word and had not denied His name when faced with opposition.

Like the church in Smyrna, they were persecuted by the "synagogue of Satan." But it seems that vengeance was about to come to those who were persecuting God's people (3:9). The success of these Christians would be met with more success.

Furthermore, because they obeyed His command to persevere, they would be kept safe during a time of persecution. This does not mean they would not face difficulty or hardship. Every Christian will suffer for their faith (2 Timothy 3:12), but the

² Smith, James E., *Behold! The Revelation of Jesus Christ*. (Orlando: 2017). p.48.

faithfulness of God would not allow Satan to stand in the way of the opportunities they were being given. God rewards those who serve him, both in this life, and in the one to come.

Laodicea

Revelation 3:14-22

It is conceivable that the Laodiceans were the most startled by Jesus' words. They are described as wealthy, self-confident, and self-reliant; Jesus has nothing but criticism for them. In His eyes they were none of those things; they were the opposite of their own perception. The Laodiceans are often given the harshest treatment by commentators, but there is nothing here to indicate their fault was anything more than apathy. There is no reason to think they were not kind, friendly people who got along with their neighbors.

There is no mention of any sin they were engaged in. No false teaching is mentioned, nor immorality of any kind. We also find no reason to think they suffered any kind of persecution or hardship.

There is one good thing said about the church at Laodicea; it is not a compliment but a statement of fact. They were still a congregation of His people. The Lord had not disowned them. He loved them and wanted them to repent. There was still an opportunity for them to find their purpose and grow. Being good, moral people is not enough.

What can we learn from these churches? What characteristics does the Lord find desirable in his people? This is in no way an exhaustive list, and some of these are rather obvious, but are worth remembering.

- 1) God appreciates hard work. The churches at Ephesus, Thyatira, and Philadelphia are commended especially for their labor. Though none of their specific works are mentioned, we can easily assume they were busy carrying out Jesus' commission to spread the gospel. They may have arranged regular studies among the members to encourage and train them more fully. Some may have been engaged in taking care of sick or elderly members. Whatever work need done, they were busy doing it. Every member of the body of Christ should be thoughtful about their purpose and how they can best serve its objectives.
- 2) Sometimes holding on is the best you can do. Smyrna and Pergamum both faced terrible persecution but did not deny their faith. We may encounter difficult times in our own lives and find ourselves doing all we can to simply maintain what we have. This is certainly not a winning long-term strategy or desirable attitude to have. Times of suffering do not last, and when they are over, we must be careful to return to a productive course of action.
- 3) Every city needs the gospel. Pergamum was the place where Satan's throne was, yet the Christians in that city were not told to pack up and move. It is easy to look at certain places in the world and convince ourselves that nobody living there would want to hear the gospel. We might also believe such places would not be good for a Christian to try and live in. But Jesus commanded His people to go into "all the world," He did not make exceptions for places that were exceptionally wicked. Paul and his companions often found themselves in hostile areas but continued their mission to preach the gospel to the lost.
- 4) We can be faithful to Christ even when other members are not. Some of these churches suffered from false teachers, others from members who engaged in immoral conduct. But again, the faithful are not told to go find a better congregation. Instead, their time is to be spent encouraging and educating the weak. They may need to undertake disciplinary action against those who will not repent. How are sinners supposed to remember what they had received and heard (3:3) if faithful brethren are not there to remind them?
- 5) Churches are held responsible for their teaching. The church in Philadelphia is specifically praised for keeping the word. That cannot be done without good teaching. As a result of good teaching and faithfulness to the word a door of opportunity was opened to them, through which, we would assume, more teaching would be done. This is one of the main objectives of the church (See Romans 10). The Ephesians were praised for testing false teachers and rejecting the works of the Nicolaitans in order that only the truth would be taught. In contrast the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira had allowed false teachers to lead some of their members astray, putting their souls in jeopardy. As Jesus makes clear to both, there would be serious consequences for those who did not repent. It is the responsibility of every member, and church leadership in particular to carefully select those who are allowed to teach in their number, and watch those who are teachers to make certain they remain faithful to the word.

- 6) Those who are evil must be identified and marked. Paul told the Romans to “*note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them*” (Romans 16:17). The Ephesians were careful to do this. They would not bear those who were evil. The church is to be peaceful and provide an atmosphere that encourages growth in its members. Like the Ephesians we must be on guard to protect the body of Christ from those who would do it harm.
- 7) God is faithful. The church in Philadelphia had demonstrated their faithfulness and growth, and God was ready to open a door of opportunity to them. And because they had kept His word (3:10) God was prepared to ease their way forward. The whole world was about to enter a period of trial, but they would be spared so their work could be carried out.

The seven churches of Asia were no different than churches are today. They had successes and failures, good times and bad. When we consider Jesus’ letters to them, we find many examples that can encourage our own spiritual lives. Some demonstrated good growth, while others faced difficulties but found ways to endure. One thing was common to them all, Jesus knew their works, just as He knows ours. We would all do well to take time and compare ourselves to these seven and honestly evaluate our own growth.

- **Lance Stallcop**

A Correction

In our last essay, “Greetings to the Seven Churches,” we incorrectly attributed a quotation from Titus 1:1-3 to Timothy in the conclusion.

- **Lance Stallcop**

A Response to “She Has Her Glory”

After publishing my comments on the first half of 1 Corinthians 11, I received the following communication from a dear brother who was concerned by my interpretation of that passage. Out of respect for him, and in the interest of open, good-natured discussion, I am publishing his response (by permission) below. His comments stand in contrast to the view I presented at length in the last issue, which remains unchanged. I commend them both to your judgment.

I will refrain from writing further on this subject for the time being, but I would like to invite any and all good-natured contributions and questions related to this passage. I would be happy to revisit it in more detail in future issues of the journal.

- **M. S.**

In order to examine this subject seriously, it is necessary to look at the original text and the actual meaning of the word ‘covering.’ We are unfortunately, at the mercy of the translators of this word in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16. This is probably the reason that this subject is so poorly understood and the Scriptural directive largely ignored today. To be accurate, therefore, reference has been made to the original Greek, with the help of Newberry’s *The Englishman’s Greek New Testament* and Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (One does not have to be a Greek scholar to recognize where the two relevant Greek words are used!).

The two relevant words used in these verses are ‘*katakalupto*’ (verb) meaning *to cover up or to be veiled*” and ‘*peribolaion*’ (noun) meaning *‘something thrown around’*, hence *veil, covering or mantle*.

Katakalupto’ is used in verses 5. 6 (twice), 7 and 13

Whereas ‘*peribolaion*’ is used once only in verse 15.

In verse 4, the translation is literally Every man praying or prophesying, having anything, on his head.

Most translations unhelpfully use the same English word in verse 15 as in the other four verses, in spite of the fact that a different Greek word is used there. However, if an accurate meaning of Scripture is to be conveyed, the use of a different Greek word in the original should be reflected by a different word in the English. It is significant that Paul introduces a completely different word for ‘covering’ in verse 15 from that used in the preceding verses.

It is reasonable to conclude that if he had been suggesting that her 'hair' met the requirements for a covering which the earlier verses had demanded, he would have used the same word for 'covering' in verse 15. However, Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, chose to use a completely different word.

Paul, at this point in his argument, is basing his appeal on the grounds of nature, contrasting man and woman, he first refers

- a) to the shame of a man having long hair and
- b) to the desirability of a woman having long hair.

He then draws the conclusion that a woman's hair is given as a veil in order to indicate from creation her position relative to man in modesty and submission (as denoted by a veil).

To apply an identical meaning to the two different Greek words used in the passage would remove any sense from v.6 and one can, therefore, state emphatically that the 'covering' of verse 15 cannot equate with the 'covering' of the earlier verses. To equate them would render the opening words of verse 6 nonsensical because if one were to assume that her hair in verse 15 met the requirements for the covering, demanded by the earlier verses, then the verse would have to read "For if a woman be not covered (i.e., does not have her hair) let her hair also be cut off!" How could her hair be cut off if she did not have any?

Such an interpretation would make verse 6 utterly ridiculous to any serious reader. Moreover, if her hair is the covering which is required for prayer, then men who are other than completely bald would be in violation of verses 4 and 7 when they prayed or prophesied.

Scripture is always consistent with itself.

- A Concerned Brother

A New Translation of 1 Corinthians 12

"Now, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant regarding spiritual things. You know that when you were Gentiles, you were led astray to idols who do not speak — by whatever means you were led away. Therefore, I want you to know that nobody who speaks by the Spirit of God says, 'May Jesus be cursed;' and no one is able to say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.

Now, there are many kinds of spiritual gifts, but the Spirit is the same; there are also many ways to serve, but the Lord is the same; and there are also many works to do, but the God who works everything in everyone is the same. He also gives each a manifestation of the Spirit so that they may be productive; for one is given a word of wisdom through the Spirit, but another is given a word of knowledge according to the same Spirit. To another in the same Spirit, faith, and another is given miraculous gifts of healing in the one Spirit. Another is given works of power; prophecy is given to another; to another the ability to evaluate spirits; to another a variety of languages; and to another the ability to interpret languages. All of these things are worked by one and the same Spirit, who distributes these things to each one as He wishes.

For just as the body is a single entity, but has many members — and every member of the body, although many in number, are all one body — Christ is the same; for we were also baptized into one body in one Spirit, regardless of whether we were Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — we have all been permitted to drink from the same Spirit. For the body is not made out of a single member, but out of many. If the foot says, 'Since I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,' does this mean that it is not part of the body? And if the ear says, 'Since I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,' does this mean that it is not part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where would its sense of hearing be? If all heard, where would the sense of smell be?

But now God has arranged the members — He has put each one of them in the body precisely where He wants it. If all were a single member, where would the body be? Now, then, there are many members, but a single body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor again can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And we place much greater honor on those of us who seem to be more dishonorable parts of the body. And the parts of us that are unpresentable have much greater propriety — which the more presentable among us do not need.

But God, who put the body together, gave greater honor to that part which falls short so that there would be no division in the body, but rather that the members should care for one another as members of the same body. And if one member suffers, every member will suffer with it. If one member is glorified, every member will rejoice with it.

Now, you are the body of Christ and each of you functions as a member of the body. God has placed these in His assembly: first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then works of power; then miraculous healings, helpful works, guidance, varieties of languages. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all have works of power? Do all have the gift of miraculous healing? Do all speak various languages? Do all interpret languages?

Now, strive for the greatest spiritual gifts, yet what I show you is a much better path.”

Notes:

1: “*I do not want you to be ignorant regarding spiritual things*” – There are two notes to make about this phrase:

First, the sentence structure I have used is a little different from most translations. Most follow the Greek word order:

περὶ	δὲ	τῶν	πνευματικῶν	ἀδελφοί	οὐ	θέλω	ὑμᾶς	ἀγνοεῖν
about	and		spiritual (things)	brothers	not	(I) want	you	to be ignorant

Hence, the NASB 2020, “*Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be unaware.*” The NKJV, ESV, NIV, and NRSV are all similar.

The first two words, *περὶ δὲ* (*peri de*; often translated “now concerning”), are potentially important for our understanding of the letter’s structure as a whole. Paul uses the phrase six times throughout the letter. In three cases, he seems to use this phrase to introduce a new subject or theme. He used it first in 7:1, when he noticeably turned his attention away from church discipline and began to address the questions the Corinthians had expressed concerning marriage. He used the phrase again in 8:1, when he changed themes again to focus on food offered to idols. Finally, after this appearance in 12:1, he used it in 16:1, when he introduced the theme of collecting donations to help the needy saints in Jerusalem.

However, he also used the phrase twice in an incidental way, when he clearly did not intend to introduce a new subject altogether (though in each case, the phrase marks a minor thematic shift within a larger discussion). We can find these cases in 7:25, when, within his discussion of marriage, he shifted his focus away from describing legal concepts and responsibilities and began to offer advice regarding marriage to Christians living in specific situations. Finally, in 16:12, he used the phrase to shift focus away from Timothy and onto Apollos when describing their immediate plans for the church in Corinth.

This is all relevant for our translation of this verse because we have to decide whether Paul is using this phrase to introduce a new major section of his letter, or if this is a minor thematic shift in the same discussion he began in chapter 11. How we perceive this shift will affect the way that we read this chapter – specifically, we may read chapter 12 as speaking primarily to the use and abuse of spiritual gifts, *or* Paul may be using spiritual gifts as an example to illustrate how Christians working together in a congregation should value one another, something the Corinthians had utterly failed to do, according to chapter 11. The use and abuse of spiritual gifts is relevant to this discussion, but it is not necessarily the central theme.

I tend to believe that this is a continuation of the previous discussion. Paul seems to refer back to the Corinthians’ factionalism and disregard for one another when, later in chapter 12, he spoke of the eye rejecting the hand and the head rejecting the feet. This is exactly what the Corinthians had done when they excluded one another from the Lord’s Supper, and now Paul wanted to show them a better way. Therefore, I have translated the sentence in a way that transitions softly from chapter 11, rather than making a hard division between the two.

The second point to discuss in this verse has to do with the phrase “*spiritual things*.” Most other translations render this as “*spiritual gifts*” (NASB 2020, NKJV, ESV, NRSV) or “*gifts of the Spirit*” (NIV). My translation is more literal, as *τῶν πνευματικῶν* (*ton pneumatikon*) literally means “the spiritual.” I prefer not to assume that Paul intended spiritual gifts (in the sense of miraculous gifts) here for two reasons: 1) Paul uses a specific word to refer to miraculous gifts several times throughout this passage, and 2) not all of the activities and principles discussed in this chapter necessarily have to do with miraculous abilities. Miraculous gifts are certainly present throughout the chapter, but that does not mean that Paul’s teachings here are limited to the application of miraculous powers. Instead, I think it better to read “spiritual things” as a greater theme, of which “spiritual gifts” are a subset.

7: “*He also gives each a manifestation of the Spirit so that they may be productive*” – Most translations indicate that the manifestations of the Spirit have been given to serve the “common good” (NASB 2020, ESV, NIV, NRSV) in some way or another. My translation is closely related to this interpretation, though there is a minor difference. The word in question is *συμφέρον* (*sumferon*), which

is defined as “(1) to bring together into a heap, *bring together*; 2) to be advantageous, *help, confer a benefit, be profitable/useful*.”³ So far, I agree with every other translation. Where I might differ has to do with *whose* profit the manifestations of the Spirit accomplish. The NASB 2020, NKJV, ESV, NIV, and NRSV all conclude that the manifestation of the Spirit is meant to benefit every member of the body, but I would argue from the context that Paul is speaking of *God’s* purpose here. He gives each a manifestation of the Spirit for *His* profit – to accomplish *His* goals in humanity. Ultimately, this will accomplish the greater good for every member of the body, but it is God who determines the plan. He has given every member of the body the tools necessary to be profitable – to bring His people one step closer to glorification.

8: “*A word of wisdom.... a word of knowledge*” – Most translations render these as definite nouns, “*the word of wisdom... the word of knowledge*” (NASB 2020, NKJV) or, “*the utterance of wisdom... the utterance of knowledge*” (ESV, NRSV). The Greek is actually indefinite, hence the NIV, “*a message of wisdom... a message of knowledge.*”

Whether we read these gifts of God as definite or indefinite ideas may have a significant affect on how we understand this verse and this passage. If we read them definitely, we may conceive of these gifts as representing a special, supernatural wisdom or knowledge. If we read them indefinitely, then we are allowed to recognize the work of God’s Spirit in *every* word of wisdom or knowledge that one of God’s servants speaks. Both grammatically and contextually, I think the second possibility is more likely. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand how the Spirit of God was working in every single one of them, not only those who had been blessed with a supernatural ability.

23: “*The parts of us that are unpresentable have much greater propriety*” – There seem to be two lines of thought regarding the meaning of this phrase. The first lines up with how I have translated – where the weaker members of the body are enabled, through the strength of the body as a whole, to function in a way that they would not be able to function on their own. This seems to be the thought behind the NASB 2020, “*Our less presentable parts become much more presentable;*” as well as the NRSV, “*Our less respectable members are treated with greater respect.*”

The second, conversely, suggests that the body as a whole covers up or compensates for the weakness of its members, hence the NIV, “*The parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty*” (see also NKJV and ESV).

I find the first interpretation more likely, due to the fact that the Greek word for “propriety,” *εὐσχρημοσύνην* (euskhemosunen) is a direct antonym for “unpresentable,” *ἀσχήμονα* (askhemona). These parts are given the very attribute that they naturally lack.

- M. S.

Members of the Body

Comments on 1 Corinthians 12

Although this chapter has much to say about miraculous spiritual gifts, it has much more to say about the proper function of a congregation as the body of Christ. Chapter 11 showed us how the factions in Corinth had blindly and callously rejected members of Christ’s own body from fellowship at His table. They had made themselves judges of their brethren, rather than recognizing that they were only parts of a whole. For this reason, it seems, Paul turned his attention to the body of Christ as a practical concept. We need to understand the important role that every member plays before we can truly value one another and function together the way that we should.

Miraculous spiritual gifts were important to the congregation in Corinth; the discussions in chapters 12-14 make it clear that the different gifts had become a source of pride and conceit between factions in their number. As the apostle who established this congregation, Paul would have been responsible for introducing these miraculous gifts to each of the members who enjoyed them. He knew that there were prophets among them, as well as those who could speak various languages, or could heal someone with nothing more than a touch. Each of these gifts is impressive in its own right, but Paul used this space in his letter to warn those who were gifted in these and other ways against arrogance. God had given them these gifts for a reason, and they needed to learn how to use these amazing gifts in line with God’s purpose.

³ Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and Frederick William Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000). 960. Logos

Even more than that, however, Paul emphasizes the fact that the congregation of Christ is *one* body. We *must* recognize the fact that each one of us is only a part of the whole, and every gift that we have is only a fraction of what is necessary to accomplish the work of Christ on the earth. Only when we truly understand our place in the body can we work together constructively.

1-3

These verses can be a little bit difficult to understand, but as we unravel them, we will see that they reveal something of the Holy Spirit's work. God had spoken to them by His Spirit, which is so much more than the idols of the Greek religions could ever do. They are completely mute, but God is not; He has spoken by His Spirit, so we can know His thoughts. Many of the Christians in Corinth had previously been "led away" to these idols who could not speak – there are many ways that they could have been persuaded to worship mute statues, but they had never heard them speak. For this reason, those Christians' devotion toward God was so much stronger because they had, in many ways, heard Him speak! God had done what an idol could not – He had certified His own word and delivered it by His own Spirit.

What does it mean to "speak by the Spirit of God?" Does this mean that no prophet – no one who was speaking by direct revelation from the Spirit of God – could physically blaspheme against Christ? This may be what Paul had in mind. We might think of the prophet Balaam, who wanted to curse God's people, but found that he could not when he was prophesying (see Numbers 22-24). He could also be suggesting a *logical* impossibility. No one can enjoy the blessings of God's Holy Spirit while denying His Son, since they both came from the same source. If we deny the Son, we cannot have the Spirit.

The same is true in reverse. No one can praise Christ without relying on the Spirit. The Spirit has revealed to us what, exactly, Christ accomplished on our behalf, and it was the Spirit's power that had convinced the Corinthians of Christ's divinity. We cannot accept Christ without the Spirit, nor can we accept the Spirit without Christ. The two are one, and they both work to accomplish the same mission.

4-7

This common purpose unites the Spirit with Christ, and both with the Father. Through their cooperative work, we have each been given gifts according to our own abilities, but every gift that is given is a component of the greater work that God is doing in His creation. We may enjoy different gifts, and we may serve in different capacities, but we all serve the same Lord. He leads us, and we are His servants.

This principle tells us why some of the Corinthians were entrusted with miraculous spiritual gifts. These gifts were not designed to elevate individuals above the rest, but to serve the purpose that the whole body pursued together. Each individual gift served a greater design. The Corinthians who received miraculous gifts were not an especially spiritually minded group of Christians who deserved better blessings than the others. Rather, they were chosen to fill a needed role in the early church. No miraculous gift was frivolous, nor were they used mindlessly. They represented a responsibility to work, to use God's gifts for the benefit of His people.

8-11

Some of the Corinthians had been given a certain level of discernment and wisdom, while others were blessed with knowledge. Some had impressive faith, others had the ability to heal wounds and diseases. Still others had the ability to demonstrate God's power through some impressive sign, while others had been entrusted with some part of the word of God as it was revealed to them directly. Some had the ability to understand the internal struggles and motivations in others' spirits, and others could speak and understand foreign languages that they had never studied. These gifts covered a broad variety of situations; if we think in terms of modern technology and professions, the Spirit had commissioned philosophers, scientists, medical doctors, leaders, counselors, and translators in the city of Corinth. Individually, they might have little to do with one another, but in the Spirit their efforts and abilities had been brought together to serve a single mission. We each only fulfill a small part of our congregations' work, but God has designed the body in a way that all of our focused, individual efforts will mesh together to create a comprehensive community that meets all of its own spiritual needs.

12-14

All throughout 1 Corinthians so far, Paul has emphasized the unity of the body – we must recognize that we are all the same in respect to our salvation and our worship toward God. None of us has any advantage over another. However, this unity does

not mean that we are identical. This is a principle that we see clearly in the natural world. Each of us has a body, and we know that our bodies have various parts that are designed for different functions. My finger cannot do what my ear can do, nor my ear what my legs can do, nor my legs what my eyes can do. However, the difference does not mean that there is not a common identity that defines every part of my body. My body is bound together by joints and sinews and other connections that make every part dependent on the whole.

Thus, Paul develops the concept of the church as the body of Christ by pointing out that Christ Himself is this way. When he says, “Christ is the same,” he is identifying Jesus so strongly with the local congregation that he can simply refer to that community as “Christ.” Just as our natural bodies are made up of many members with different purposes, so is Christ’s body. We should not look at our congregation expecting to see a homogenous group of identical Christians because this is not God’s design. Rather, Christ’s body has many members with different functions.

We have all been baptized into one body – that is, we have all been reborn in the image of Christ – and we all are led by one Spirit. Being permitted to “drink from the same Spirit” does not necessarily refer to miraculous gifts, but to the common leadership of the Spirit that guides us into all kinds of good works (Galatians 5:22-26). During the first century, Christians were given supernatural abilities to accomplish the work that God had commissioned for them. Those gifts helped to reveal and prove His word, and to equip the church for its work before it had full instructions in the form of the New Testament. The same overseer has appointed us to good works today, and He has likewise equipped us to accomplish them, even if He no longer gives us miraculous abilities.

15-22

The various functions that members of the body provide work together to make up the body’s capabilities. We need to have feet, hands, ears, and eyes in order to accomplish all that our bodies can do, and Christ’s body is no different. There must be a member capable of fulfilling every task that is a component of the congregation’s work. If any member is missing, then the body is crippled, and will experience difficulty in undertaking any great work. Therefore, the parts of the body which *seem* to be weaker are necessary.

Think of it in these terms: If I wanted to go out to do some physical labor, my whole body will have to work together to maintain its productivity as well as its health throughout the project. There will be members of my body which have a more prominent role in this project. My hands and feet will probably come in direct contact with the project, while my arms and legs will work to ensure that my hands and feet are where they need to be. My eyes will see what needs to be done and coordinate with my arms and legs to ensure that they can do their jobs properly. My ears and my mouth will facilitate communication with my coworkers, which will help to organize my body’s efforts to accomplish the task as efficiently as possible.

But there will also be members of my body that are hidden, and whose contributions are not immediately evident during the project. Consider my circulatory system, with my heart and arteries working tirelessly to provide good, nutrient-rich blood to my limbs as they work. Or my lungs, which provide the oxygen carried by my blood. Or my digestive system, which ensures that the whole body is nourished by what I eat. The fact that these members of my body do not come into direct contact with the work I’m doing does not diminish their contribution. The fact that these systems are working constantly, whether my limbs are working or not, does not diminish their necessity for the work. Without them, my arms could do nothing. My legs would be lifeless. My eyes would not see, and I could neither hear nor speak. Even though their role is not prominent or easily visible, every one of them is necessary.

The same is true of the congregation when the body of Christ devotes itself to a project, such as an evangelistic outreach. Some members will take a prominent role in that work, while others will not play such an obvious role. A limited number of brethren will do the actual preaching. Some others may work to obtain the facilities and resources necessary to accomplish the work. Still others may have prepared themselves to build relationships with new converts – encouraging their growth through personal conversations, studies, and friendship. Meals may be prepared, pamphlets and flyers formatted, printed, and mailed, and any number of additional tasks that will help accomplish the body’s goals. Every member who takes on these tasks directly is working as the legs, feet, arms, hands, eyes, ears, and mouth of the congregation, engaging directly with the work at hand to ensure that everything is in place as it should be.

But these are not the only tasks that matter. The health of the congregation itself is necessary for this work to be accomplished, and every member must be provided with the spiritual nourishment and encouragement that can only come from within the

body. Without the interdependent networks of, accountability, study, and encouragement that we build together and maintain as a congregation, the members will not have the strength to go on, and the work will fail. Perhaps the body will even be injured in the process! Thus, the little things, or the things that are done constantly, are necessary as the congregation does its work. Our regular assemblies and all the effort that goes into them is necessary. The friendships that we have with each other are necessary. The encouraging phone calls, opportunities to study together and spend time together, and every other part of our normal relationship as a body will be all the more necessary when our members go to work. Without those connections, the members' strength will fail, and the body will fall apart.

23-26

God, in His wisdom, has built the body to be aware of the necessity of every one of its parts. Just because my hand can accomplish some great task does not and *cannot* elevate my hand over the rest of my body. My hand is only capable because it is part of the body. Without the body, the strength and nourishment in my hand will disappear, and it will wither away into nothing.

The same principle applies to the body of Christ. When an evangelist succeeds in leading a lost soul to Christ, he does not do so independently of the body. The successes of the body belong to the body as a whole, not to the member who is merely serving as an appendage of that body. This fact is what leads to Paul's statement in verse 26 – when the body is working properly, the injuries and honors that a member of the body experiences belong to the body, not to the individual members themselves. We should all be so dedicated to the purpose given to us by Christ that any success in any part of the work is cause for all of us to rejoice, while any setback or failure hurts us all.

27-31

The miraculous gifts of the early church provided an apparent hierarchy – the apostles, prophets, and teachers seem to have had the more visible role in the church. However, it was evident to Paul and to all of his readers that God had not chosen to give these gifts to everyone. There were some among the Corinthians who could not possess any miraculous gift, yet they were still important members of the body. The Holy Spirit had not given everyone the same assignment, so to speak. That is because the Spirit has a view toward the whole work of the church, not just prophecy, teaching, or miracles. Every member is necessary, so every member must be in place. It is good to desire the best gifts, to desire to be a part of the most exciting works, but the success of the body is much greater than personal glory. This is the much better path.

- M. S.

What Does It Mean to Be Saved?

The gospel is, above all else, a message of salvation. When Peter preached for the first time after Jesus had ascended, the bulk of his message was summed up in the words, "Be saved from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40, NKJV). We focus our own efforts today on salvation; we want to be saved ourselves, and insofar as we have learned to embody God's love for others, we devote ourselves to them so that we might "by all means save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22, NKJV). How often, though, do we stop to think about what God is saving and what He is saving it from? When we enter into a covenant with Him through Christ, is our salvation complete, or is there more to come?

The scriptures speak of salvation in at least three contexts:

1. Salvation of the soul – Through Jesus' sacrifice, God forgives us for the sins we have committed in the past. We were formerly His enemies, but, through Jesus' blood, we have been reconciled to our Creator.
2. Salvation of the mind and spirit – When we enter into a covenant with God, we commit ourselves to a higher purpose than we had before. Our minds and spirits were ruled by sinful desires, but now we have been given something constructive to work on for the rest of our lives.
3. Salvation of the body – In the day of judgment, God will raise up our bodies into a new, spiritual existence. From then on, we will live entirely free from death – the consequence of sin.

There are several passages that show how these elements of human salvation work together. Consider Romans 5:6-11 (NKJV; emphasis mine):

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.”

There is a great deal to unpack from these verses, but it is enough to notice that Paul speaks of our salvation as taking place in two stages:

1. We are “now” justified through Jesus’ blood and reconciled to God through Jesus’ death. When we pursued our own goals in life, we made ourselves enemies of God and servants of Satan. Jesus’ sacrifice has given us the opportunity to be forgiven for our past enmity and start a new life oriented toward God’s purpose in creation.
2. On the basis of our reconciliation, we *will be* saved from wrath by the life we will receive from Jesus Christ. Even though we have already been forgiven (if we are in a covenant with Him), we have not yet been saved from death, judgment, and suffering. Our justification has freed us from our sins, but we are not yet saved from the corrupted world around us, or even from the physical consequences of our own sins.

Consider 2 Timothy 1:8-12 (NKJV; emphasis mine):

“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.”

And Titus 3:1-8 (NKJV; emphasis mine):

“Remind them to be subject to rulers and authorities, to obey, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing all humility to all men. For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

“This is a faithful saying, and these things I want you to affirm constantly, that those who have believed in God should be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable to men.”

In both passages, Paul encourages a young protégé to live life according to a Christian ethic because “God has saved us.” What is interesting is that both passages also express Paul’s hope – on the basis that he has already been saved – that he will experience God’s final salvation in “that Day,” when his hope of eternal life will be realized. Paul seems to be using the term “saved” similarly to how he used the terms “justified” and “reconciled” in Romans 5, but there is a slightly different nuance in this context. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul explains that, by saving us from our past sins, God has given us a new calling in life. By giving us a productive course to follow, He has rescued us from the existential futility of our lives. In Him, our lives will mean something, and our work will make a difference in human history. This sense of purpose is what gave Paul the strength to suffer terrible things while he was alive.

Titus 3 is even more direct about this mental and spiritual salvation from futility. Paul describes the mental state of those who live without purpose – whose lives are driven by “various lusts and pleasures.” Without Christ, we would have no assurance that our lives would accomplish anything in the grand scheme of things. In Him, and through the Spirit of God, we have what we need to educate our minds and use the remainder of our lives constructively and profitably for all humanity.

Other passages, such as Romans 6:1-14, show us that this constructive change in our minds is an ongoing effort. We have been saved from our sins, but the process of identifying the “various lusts and pleasures” that have guided our lives in the past, eliminating them, and replacing them with positive and productive habits is a work that will occupy the rest of our lives (see also Romans 12:1-2 and Colossians 3:1-17). Perhaps this is why Paul, in another place, writes of those who “are being saved” (12

Corinthians 2:14-17). As long as we serve God and continue to learn from His word, He is continuing to rescue our minds and spirits from the corruption of sin.

All of these passages can help us appreciate what God is doing in our lives. If we have entered into a covenant with Him, we have *been saved*, so that we can have peace of mind regarding our eternal destiny. As we continue to learn and grow, we are *being saved* from the futile thoughts that have ruled our lives. Finally, when we are raised again, we *will be saved* from death and from the judgment and the wrath of God.

- M. S.

The End of Volume I

This issue marks the end of our first volume, and with it twelve months of effort. It has not always been easy to keep up with the schedule we have set for ourselves. Thank you for reading and thank you for your patience. We hope this journal has helped to challenge you and encourage you, and we invite you to join us in volume II.

- M. S.

Please direct all contributions to editor@christianprospect.com.

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