

Strength Through Weakness
viii. Distinctive Discipleship
2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1

Jesus is both Saviour and Lord. Paul addresses this in the passage before us. The temptation faced by the Corinthians, and all subsequent believers is to evade what Dietrich Bonhoeffer rightly calls “the cost of discipleship”. True belief, is never mere passive acknowledgement of the truth, it involves active engagement: “Only the one who believes obeys, only the one who obeys, believes “.

The context is one of idolatry. Paul exhorts the Corinthians, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (v 14). He is not suggesting that we become sectarian and withdraw from society. 1 Cor 5:9-11 makes that quite clear, “... in that case you would have to leave this world”. The challenge was two fold. False teachers, wolves parading as sheep, were leading the church astray. And young converts were being tempted to revert to their former pagan worship practices. Hence the plea, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers”. The context is not marriage as some suggest. Paul explicitly encourages believers to remain married to unbelievers in 1 Cor 7:12-15.

Paul is no pious prude. He encourages social interaction in the marketplace, and partaking in meals with unbelievers, “eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience” (1 Cor 10:25-27), bearing in mind the sensitivities of the so called “weaker brother”. The five rhetorical questions (vv14-16) with their implied answer “Nothing! Never!”, remind us that there can be no truck with Belial (Satan) and idols. However, the Corinthians appear to be getting along quite nicely in their community. Leaders of the church participate in pagan festivals and feasts. Their faith apparently did not create any significant social and moral change in their behaviour and lives. Moreover, syncretism was normal. People could pick and choose from a smorgasbord of deities to worship. The more gods the merrier, as long as they served the needs of the worshipper. Trouble arose when members of the church selfishly sought their own social good and then justified it theologically unconcerned about the effect it might have on others. Accordingly Paul reiterates his plea of 1 Cor 10:14, “Therefore my dear friends, flee from idolatry.”

There is a stark contrast between the churches of Thessalonica and Corinth, founded within months of each other by Paul. The Thessalonians experienced the sting of opposition as “our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction... [and they] turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess 1:4,9). The Corinthians preferred to keep their options open, seeking social acceptance at the expense of the gospel and distinctive discipleship. Let that be a lesson to us!

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