
Apostolic Priorities

Corinthians

The Church at Corinth was plagued with almost every conceivable problem. Note this brief outline of difficulties in I Corinthians:

Division (Chs. 1-4).

Immorality (Ch. 5).

Lawsuits (Ch. 6).

Marriage problems (Ch. 7).

Idolatry and weak brethren (Ch. 8).

Relationship to preachers (Ch. 9).

Danger of falling away (Ch. 10).

Position of women and Lord's Supper (Ch. 11).

Spiritual gifts (Chs. 12-14).

Resurrection (Ch. 15).

To simply name a serious problem does not do justice to the hailstorm of difficulty experienced by those who have it. In this brief outline we have touched upon a variety of issues so sensitive and so emotional that Paul feared complete rebellion when the letter was read to those who were directly involved in the difficulty.

His fears are revealed in the Second Corinthian letter:

For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you . . . (II Cor. 2:4).

. . . we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life (II Cor. 1:8).

He had no rest in his spirit until Titus returned from delivering the First Corinthian Letter with the happy news that it had been well received (II Cor. 2:13ff.).

But now let us address ourselves to the matter of apostolic priority. Their example is extremely important, for the Apostles were men whom Jesus guided into all truth (Jn. 16:13) and their emphasis upon love is in complete agreement with the priorities of Jesus. Please read again the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. After innumrating a variety of spiritual gifts, love is set forth as a "more excellent way" (I Cor. 12:31). The emphasis is less than subtle! Love is more important than tongues, prophecy, faith or knowledge. It is more important than anything and it is more important than everything. It is indispensable, invincible and eternal.

The Pastoral Epistles

When Paul uttered his tearful farewell to the elders of the church at Ephesus, he predicted that grievous wolves would enter in among them, not sparing the flock. He further warned that from their own number some would arise to speak perverse things (Acts 20:29-30).

By the time the pastoral epistles of I and II Timothy and Titus were written, these dire predictions had evidently come to pass. Timothy was left at Ephesus to charge some that they teach no other doctrine. He was to remember that the ultimate aim of all God's commandments was love. He was warned against futile and useless arguments and was by precept and example to show men how they ought to behave in the house of God.

The purpose of these letters was to preclude arguments, not generate them. Yet our approach to the Scriptures causes us, of all things, to have some of our hottest disputes over these very letters which teach against disputing.

Christianity regards attitudes as more important than issues. The matter of mercy, for example, was considered by Jesus to be a weightier part of the law (Matt. 23:23). We may never agree on

every aspect of such issues as elders, deacons, deaconesses and evangelists, but we can concur on love.

It is doubtful that everyone will ever hold an identical position regarding the work of women in the church, but we can all establish the same identical priority of love. It may not be necessary for certain women in modern times to take a vow never to marry as instructed in I Timothy 5, but it is absolutely essential that we love, for if we fail to love we have rendered futile and vain our every Christian endeavor.

As strange as it may seem the problem of argumentation which we face in our modern evangelical world seems to be the very problem faced in Ephesus. Regardless of the problems, however, the apostolic priorities remained the same. *The end (or goal) of the commandment is love out of a pure heart and faith unfeigned* (I Tim. 1:5). If we miss this we have missed it all; if we miss this, it would do no good to give our body to be burned or even bestow all our goods to feed the poor (I Cor. 13:1).

Charles Schwab, financial wizard of the 1920's, was supposed to have paid \$25,000 for eight words of advice. They were: "Do things in the order of their importance." The significance of these words in Christianity cannot be overestimated. The quagmire of theological controversy in our modern world is to a large extent a result of differing priorities. Virtually everyone believes in the Holy Spirit, but some assign to Him a greater priority. One denomination gives priority to "holiness" and another to "grace." One exalts the "Lord's Supper" and another "baptism." There are literally hundreds of priorities in the Christian world. But Jesus placed His priority upon love and His Apostles did the same. Timothy was given inspired instructions on a wide variety of issues, all of which were important to the progress of the church, but love had to come first. Other issues would of necessity be secondary and subservient.

Now from this perspective, read the pastoral epistles and note the emphasis against argumentation. I Timothy 1:3-7, for example:

As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine, neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do. Now the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling:

desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm.

Those addicted to argumentation and debate have little time or energy left for anything else. Their priority is not to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick or to engage in the pure religion of caring for those in need. They want to argue.

To give you some idea of the magnitude of this problem at Ephesus note that the men were commanded to not argue in their prayers:

I will therefore that men pray everywhere . . . without wrath and doubting . . . (I Tim. 2:8).

The word translated "doubting" in the King James Version is *dialogismou* which is rendered by some as "disputing." These men apparently felt so strongly about certain issues that they carried on their disputes even during their prayers. They found it so important to prove themselves right that they would weave their strongest arguments into the fabric of their supplications to the heavenly Father. This is identically the mentality which perpetuates division today and it is specifically forbidden in the Word of God.

The priority of love is further seen in the qualifications of church leaders as they are recorded in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. Those who are leaders in the church of God must be men who promote unity and peace. They must not be self-willed

Not soon angry

No brawler

No striker

Orderly

Gentle

Not contentious.

In addition to these they were to have demonstrated their ability to maintain order and prevent division by the rearing of children who were not accused of riot or unruly.

The whole tenor of the pastoral letters revolves around the spirit of unity. Jesus prayed that those who believed in Him would be united and the Apostles were faithful in their endeavor to help answer that prayer. Slaves were to submit to their masters, children to their parents, wives to their husbands. Those who rebelled were in danger of blaspheming the doctrine of God (I Tim. 6:1).

Men who "doted over questions" and strove about words were

perverse and corrupt (I Tim. 6:5). Their divisive spirit was in direct opposition to the desire of Jesus for unity among believers.

I Timothy 6:20 makes reference to "profane and vain babblings and the oppositions of science falsely so called." This is not a diatribe against atheists who taught the theory of evolution, it was a warning against religious "know it alls." There were men, both then and now, who have a predetermined answer for every theological question. The smug, self-satisfaction of such men makes it wiser to avoid, rather than confront them.

Ephesians

Remember that Timothy was at Ephesus when he received Paul's letter (I Tim. 1:3), therefore our observations from the pastoral epistles will be strengthened and enhanced by an analysis of the Ephesian letter. The theme of this letter is *unity*! Jesus came to earth for the avowed purpose of uniting all of the divergent factions of heaven and earth, and love was an indispensable ingredient to His work (Eph. 1:10).

Note these many references to love in the book of Ephesians:

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| Eph. 1:4 | We are to be holy and without blame before Him in <i>love</i> . |
| Eph. 1:15 | Paul heard of their <i>love</i> toward all saints. |
| Eph. 2:4 | God's <i>love</i> is great toward us. |
| Eph. 3:17 | They were rooted and grounded in <i>love</i> . |
| Eph. 3:19 | They needed to know the <i>love</i> of Christ which passeth knowledge. |
| Eph. 4:2 | They were to forebear one another in <i>love</i> . |
| Eph. 4:15 | They were to speak the truth in <i>love</i> . |
| Eph. 4:16 | The church was to build up itself in <i>love</i> . |
| Eph. 5:2 | They were to walk in <i>love</i> as Christ <i>loved</i> us. |
| Eph. 5:25 | Husbands <i>love</i> your wives as Christ <i>loved</i> the church. |
| Eph. 5:28 | Men are to <i>love</i> their wives as they <i>love</i> their own bodies. |
| Eph. 5:33 | Everyone to <i>love</i> his wife as he <i>loves</i> himself. |
| Eph. 6:23 | Peace . . . and <i>love</i> from God and the Lord Jesus. |
| Eph. 6:24 | Grace to them that <i>love</i> the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. |

It is both interesting and significant to remember that some thirty years after the Ephesian letter was written, the Lord

condemned the congregation at Ephesus because they had departed from their first love (Rev. 2:4).

The main priority in Corinthians, the pastoral epistles and Ephesians was the main priority of the law and the prophets, and the main priority of everyone, everywhere, who conforms to the will of God — love!

As we seek to establish priorities of our own, it might be well to ask:

If priority number one is to love God,

If priority number two is to love our neighbor,

What is priority number three?

For those of us who desire to speak the oracles of God, it is best to refrain from "editing" or "improving upon" the words of Jesus. There is no priority number three.

Questions for Discussion — Lesson 9

1. List the problems at Corinth which are present in our own day.
2. Explain how love can solve all of these problems.
3. What was the nature of the false teaching which Timothy was to oppose at Ephesus?
4. How did the elders at Ephesus relate to the problem there (see also Acts 20:17-38)?
5. Where did Timothy get his authority? Is the same authority available to us?
6. How is Christianity like a marriage?
7. What happens when a church abandons its first love?