

Sunday Evening 18th May 2014, Kenneth Gray. 2 Corinthians 1: 12-2: 4 “Holiness and sincerity”



We think of Paul's letters as eternal but each was written within a particular context. In addition to what we refer to as 1st & 2nd Corinthians he wrote other messages to the church in Corinth. He was responsible for bringing theology to Corinth for two years - a significant proportion of his ministry. Even with Paul as its pastor the Corinthian church had its problems and found it hard to be effective.

Corinth was not a comfortable place to live if you were a Christian. It was a city full of debauchery, vice and deceit and new converts to the Way found it hard to shake off their old bad habits.

The Corinthian brethren were thinking that Paul was unreliable because he hadn't come to Corinth. But the nature of life is that sometimes one's plans are thwarted. Here Paul tries to explain why he hasn't come. The church in Corinth is sinful and suffers from conflict and bad relationships. No doubt they have been saying to one another "Let's wait until Paul comes and he'll help us sort out all our problems." It's a typically human strategy to wait for someone else to solve our difficulties for us rather than do it for ourselves.

In the first 4 verses here Paul's conscience is clear, no matter what the Corinthian brethren think. "...we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace."

Kenneth commented that as our own General Assembly draws to a close we can all reflect on how much worldliness we have witnessed this week as opposed to the godliness we might have hoped for among the speakers.

Paul reminds the church that worldliness must not dominate the thinking and actions of the brethren. Holiness and sincerity should always characterise the behaviour and speech of God's people. Sometimes we let people down by our carelessness or selfishness; at other times God intervenes to divert us from our intended purpose. It's regrettable perhaps that God doesn't intervene more often and prevent us making more mistakes in life!

Paul had promised to visit the Corinthians twice because he knew they would benefit but he was prevented from going.

He reminds them that God's promises are always fulfilled: "*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God.*" Thus our glory, confidence and boast must always be in Christ - not in the church itself. Only Jesus should be exalted by what we do and how we worship.

"He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." Kenneth commented that the concept of paying a 'deposit' is probably less familiar nowadays than it used to be but it still signifies an important guarantee of something yet to come.

Paul tells them that the Holy Spirit dwelling within them was a guarantee of what was to come. The Holy Spirit is able to guide, guard, change and advise them - they do not need Paul. The Holy Spirit is the guarantee of God's grace exercised in the lives of his people. The Holy Spirit is in us and is greater than the Evil One who is in the world.

This message from Paul is a reminder that it is a mistake to put all one's confidence in people rather than in Jesus. A preacher can be an excellent and eloquent orator and have an engaging and entertaining style of talking but that doesn't necessarily mean he will be speaking Biblical Truth. Then Paul goes to the heart of the matter - he did not go to them because they were not yet ready to listen.

This resonates with those of us who are parents. There's no point in lecturing our children and cataloguing their misdemeanours until they are prepared to listen.

Kenneth wondered whether God, looking at the churches in Scotland and across the world as they pray for revival, is maybe thinking 'You're not ready, your hearts are too hard'.

The challenge for each of us tonight is ask ourselves "Is there a blockage in my life? Am I not listening? Am I not open to God?" If this is so let us pray that God will soften our hearts towards him and one another.