

C. Paul's Benediction

1. Also consistent with many of his letters, Paul began his first canonical Corinthian epistle with the compound benediction of *grace* and *peace* (1:3). Because this is a common Pauline blessing it can appear rote and trivial, but nothing could be further from the truth. Grace and peace are pregnant terms and embody hugely important concepts within the Scripture's gospel doctrine.

- a. *Grace* is often defined as "God's unmerited favor." Like most general definitions, this one isn't incorrect so far as it goes but it is overly broad and leaves much unsaid. In the first place, grace is not an inherently theological concept although it is a *relational* one: It always refers to the volitional, uncoerced disposition of one individual toward another, most often that of a superior (in whatever respect) toward an inferior. Thus it can express a person's pity or compassion toward his less fortunate fellow man (Exodus 3:21). It can also operate between more or less equal persons, as in the relationship between Jacob and Esau (Genesis 32:3-5) or the dynamic of the attraction of a man to a woman (Esther 2:17).

From the theological standpoint, the concept of grace as it develops through the Old Testament does convey the notion of God's undeserved favor toward human beings. So Noah found "grace" in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8), as did Lot in the instance of his deliverance from Sodom (Genesis 19:18-19). *But it's crucial to recognize that this early biblical concept of grace is not synonymous with its salvific New Testament counterpart.* Numerous times the Old Testament records Yahweh's grace toward individuals and groups, and in certain instances this disposition presaged what was to come in Christ, but it isn't identical to it. *God's grace would not be fully revealed and realized except in the person and work of Jesus Christ* (cf. Jeremiah 31:1-7 with Zechariah 4:1-10 and John 1:14-17).

God's condescending mercy and provision in Christ is the grace Paul was asking God for on behalf of the Corinthians. They had become recipients of His grace in salvation when He brought them to newness of life in His Son, but the continual provision of grace was necessary for their well-being and progress.

- b. In the same way, *peace* is a relational concept and ultimately a gospel one. It is creational in that it pertains to a state enjoyed by created entities, but a state which has God as its author and reference point; peace derives from Him and depends upon Him. This was true in the first instance with the first creation and it is true in regard to the new creation. The Hebrew noun rendered "peace" is *shalom*, and it speaks of a state of creational flourishing and delight resulting from the created order's harmonious interrelation and interaction. Two observations follow:
- 1) Peace is not a purely personal and internal thing, as when people refer to a state of inner peace. *Shalom* implicates a particular creature, but with respect to the created order of which he is a part. It thus speaks to a thing (or person's) relationship with other created things.

- 2) And precisely because shalom implicates inter-creational relationships, it speaks of the divine-human one. God created man as image-son to be the interface between Him and His creation – to exercise His rule and stewardship over it in His name and authority and on His behalf. Therefore, a shalomic state within the created order – even between human beings – reflects and presupposes the same shalomic relationship between men and God. Shalom – *peace* – is the state in which all things are as they ought to be in their nature, function and mutual relationships.

The fall brought alienation, isolation and fragmentation to every level of the creation. The fall vandalized shalom, which implies that the restoration of shalom demanded the overthrow of the curse and the renewal and recovery of the created order's relationship with God and with itself.

Thus, peace is a gospel reality just as grace is: The grace of God was fully and forever realized in Jesus Christ and the outcome is creational peace. And just as the grace Paul sought for the Corinthians spoke to the need for God's ongoing provision for them, so it was with his petition for peace: Reconciled to the triune God in Christ, the Corinthians now enjoyed peace with God (Romans 5:1-2), but the *fact* of that peace didn't insure either the *sense* of it or its *appropriation* and *application* in practice. The saints of God enjoy peace with Him through Jesus Christ, but sadly that reality often doesn't manifest itself in good consciences, either in relation to Him or to one another. So it was with the Corinthians:

The body of Christ at Corinth, which was part of the new creational community obliged to manifest to the watching world the truth of shalom – that is, the truth of God's restoration in Christ of His fractured, vandalized creation, was marked by its opposite: fragmentation, division, and discord.

2. Paul's plea for God's grace and peace was consistently uniform for all the churches, but it had a particular relevance and poignancy when it came to the Corinthian church. If any congregation needed the Lord's gracious bestowment and ministration of peace, it was the body at Corinth. In pleading for the churches with this benediction, it is notable that Paul ascribed the divine grace and peace to the *Father* and *Son*, but not the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:2; 1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 3). *In fact, never does this particular benediction include a reference to the Spirit.* This raises the obvious question as to the reason for this omission; did Paul see no connection between the Holy Spirit and God's grace and peace? Surely this wasn't the case.

The answer seems to lie in the specific relation the Spirit bears to the ministration of grace and peace as gospel verities. While every component of God's dealings with His creation – both in creation and re-creation – is trinitarian, the Spirit's involvement in the work of salvation is administrative. That is, the Spirit is God's active power in creation and re-creation; His work is to bring to fruition what the Father has purposed and the Son has secured. In this sense, grace and peace are *from* the Father and Jesus Christ.

D. Paul's Commendation

Paul began his address to the Corinthians by identifying them to themselves. He reaffirmed to them their identity as the saints of God, and then followed that identification by reminding them of the present and future endowments, privileges and blessings that belong to God's "holy ones."

1. Paul summarized the Corinthians' spiritual endowments as the ministration of the *grace of God* which He had bestowed upon them *in Christ Jesus* (1:4). Thus, while rightly acknowledging these endowments as the bona fide possession of the Corinthian believers, Paul gave the thanks and praise for them to God Himself.

- Clearly God's foundational bestowment to them was *life* in the Lord Jesus (with all that entails and implies), but Paul moved past that to the endowments that flowed from their union with Him. These endowments came to the Corinthians by virtue of their sharing *in Christ Jesus*, but *through* His indwelling Spirit.
- Moreover, Paul presented them as *permanent* and *effectual*, pertaining to the future as much as to the present: In the Spirit's hands, this diverse grace of God poured out on the Corinthians would secure them in the present life and carry them forward unto the day of their glorification as they entered fully into the perfection of the Lord Jesus (1:5-9). *God's grace would not fail – even in the case of the dysfunctional and disobedient Corinthian church – precisely because it depended for its final triumph upon His faithfulness and not theirs* (ref. vv. 8-9).

In this regard they were in league with each and every one of God's "holy ones" from the time of the fall – men whose triumph and inheritance in glory was realized, not by them or through them, but *in spite* of them. For the Corinthians as for the patriarchs, Moses, David, etc., their future glory was assured because it did not depend on him who wills or him who runs, but God who has mercy (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:7-14).

a. As it pertained to the present, God's grace in His Son had enriched the Corinthians in their *speech* and *knowledge*. In this way it provided tangible evidence of the truth and power of the gospel and of its fruitfulness in them. But these particular endowments provided this testimony specifically because they were *spiritual* – of the Spirit – rather than natural: Paul wasn't acknowledging the Corinthians as having accumulated a vast reservoir of religious knowledge along with the skills to ably communicate it; *in themselves, those things say nothing about the grace of God and its effectual work in the souls of men*. Paul was referring to insight and understanding that transcend those of the natural man.

- 1) The noun translated "knowledge" is *gnosis*, which refers not to the accumulation of data and facts, but to insight and understanding. (So the mystery religion *Gnosticism* which purported to give its initiates access to esoteric insight unavailable to the rest of mankind.) Natural knowledge consists in the gathering and cataloging of information; *the knowledge Paul was referring to is the discernment of the **meaning** of information*.

Specifically, Paul was recognizing the Corinthians' *gospel* discernment – their divinely-imparted insight into the truth of God as revealed and affirmed in Jesus Christ. In a word, he was acknowledging their possession of the mind of Christ as a gift of God's grace (2:12-16).

- 2) The same dynamic applies to Paul's commendation of their speech. Paul's term is *logos*, which concerns the content and meaning of speech, not the act of speaking or the mechanics of it. It refers to the communication of truth rather than linguistics or oratory. (Thus Jesus as the incarnate Logos – the One who communicates to men the truth and meaning of God).

Understood in this way, speech and knowledge imply one another: Knowledge manifests itself in speech; speech communicates knowledge. Together they work to attest the truth as disclosed by the Spirit (cf. 2:1-13). And so, *when Paul referred to the Corinthians as being enriched in speech and knowledge, he was acknowledging them as vessels of the truth of the gospel of God in Jesus Christ: a community in whom the testimony concerning Christ had born its fruit of life and power – a community having all spiritual riches and obligated by them* (vv. 5-6).

- b. But the grace of God that implicates and obligates the present ultimately sets its face toward the future and bears its fruit unto the day of Christ Jesus. God's grace had enriched the Corinthians in knowledge and speech and lavished upon them every other good gift of the Spirit (that is, spiritual endowments given for the building up of the body; 12:1ff). But it had also established them in hope. *The grace of God gave them every provision for their present lives and obligations, but it equally sealed and secured them for the future day of glory* (1:7-9).

In spite of all Paul knew to be going on in Corinth – things he would presently address, he could still declare to them that the hope God had engraved on their hearts would not prove vain: The Lord who had confirmed them would do so until the end (cf. vv. 6, 8) and present them blameless to His Father at His coming; He who began His good work was going to complete it (Philippians 1:6).

Paul regarded the Corinthians with the eyes of faith; Christ's Spirit in him enabled him to see what is unseen and to judge them and their future based upon God's purpose, pronouncement and power, not temporal circumstances. Like those he was commending, the grace of God had enriched Paul in knowledge and speech: He discerned what escapes the natural mind and spoke accordingly (ref. 2 Corinthians 4:1-18). The natural mind can only judge on the basis of what appears to the senses and experience. But the mind of the Spirit judges based on the truth of God as it is in Jesus Christ (2:14-16). *Paul could speak to the Corinthians with what appeared as foolish confidence because he believed God rather than them.*

But the Corinthians were to regard themselves with the same eyes of faith. They needed to redirect their fleshly preoccupation with their present "glory" to the glory – *and the judgment* – to come in the day of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:9-10).

2. Paul had a very specific reason for introducing his epistle the way he did. At first glance it may appear that he was simply following social convention in acknowledging the Corinthians with a complement. A more reasonable explanation is that he was trying to disarm the Corinthians in order to make them more receptive to what he had to say. Paul knew that at least some of them were at odds with him and he had every reason to expect a certain amount of resistance to his letter.

But Paul was neither a flatterer nor a manipulator. It would have been completely out of character for him to commend the Corinthians in order to win them over to himself. He did, however, have a conscious reason for his commendation and that reason did pertain to his letter and the outcome he hoped to realize from it. Paul wanted the Corinthians to give heed to his words and act upon his instruction, but in order that things would be put right in the church and God and His gospel would be honored and attested in truth.

Paul didn't issue his commendation to flatter or manipulate the Corinthians, but to confront, challenge and redirect them regarding the disconnect between who they were as the saints of God and how they were ordering their lives as individuals and as a body.

- a. In commending the Corinthians Paul was affirming the very things they affirmed of themselves and took great pride in. They congratulated themselves that they were a body marked by unexcelled knowledge, wisdom and every spiritual gift and grace (4:7-10). By their own estimation, the Corinthians possessed the fullness of God's gifts and spiritual provision and Paul wanted them to know that he agreed with their self-assessment, though unto a different conclusion.
- b. Paul acknowledged that God had abundantly blessed the Corinthians with every spiritual gift and grace; they lacked nothing in that regard. But his reason for commending them wasn't to praise them, but to convict them. *Paul's letter was going to drive them to the painful realization that their unexcelled giftedness was the occasion for their shame and repentance, not their pride and self-satisfaction.*

God had not slighted or deprived them in any way; to the contrary, He lavished His grace upon them, joining them to His Son (1:9) and giving them every gift in Him. The Corinthians were depriving themselves by abusing and undermining His gifts. Their failure and guilt were entirely their own, and their guilt was all the greater because, of whom much is given, much is required.

The Corinthians were God's saints; He'd set them apart and taken them to Himself and confirmed their consecration by endowing them with every gift of His grace. Their knowledge – their insight into gospel realities – afforded them confident hope for their future and their speech enabled them to support and edify one another in the present against the coming day of glory.

But the Corinthians had seized God's gifts and transformed them into mammon: *They were treating them as their own, consecrated to their own service and benefit.* They had lost sight of the true nature of the kingdom of God and were living as if it were just another manifestation of the kingdoms of this world – kingdoms governed by the procedure of the king in which the greatest gives no grace and the master declines to serve (Matthew 20:17-28; cf. Luke 22:14-27).