

“Miracle of Faith”

1 Cor. 16:1-14

11/19/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Paul’s last chapter 16, of 1st Corinthians, deals with two central matters: ① the collection of offerings for the mission of the Jerusalem church and ② Apollos’ plans to return to that church. As we know from our study of Paul’s letter, there was a group of relatively well-to-do Gentile converts who had caused a number of problems for this church. This was the group who had boasted about their being more gifted debaters than Paul.

They probably made this claim after Paul had been invited to the Areopagus public speech forum in Athens and had an open-minded hearing by the Stoics and Epicureans on his beliefs in Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 17:16f). When Paul failed to make an impression there, these people may have judged Paul to be a lackluster leader – not up-to-par with the likes of their more accomplished debating friends.¹ So it was these opponents of Paul who had boasted of their rhetorical abilities and cultivated wisdom (which was a popular trait about which to boast in that culture) and their supposedly impressive accumulated knowledge.

It is also likely that one of them had offended Paul’s sensibilities by living with a woman who had once been married to his father (chapter 5). Perhaps one of these same individuals had taken another church member to civil court (chapter 6). Since this group had a tendency to feel that they knew more than others, perhaps their casual disregard for the ethical sensitivities of younger Christians caused Paul to focus in chapters 8-11 on the issue of eating meat that had been offered to idols in pagan worship.

This same group of individuals may have been the ones who flaunted their ability to speak in tongues – trying to convince the rest of the church that their abilities to perform that act somehow proved they had a special and secret wisdom from God – a heresy that

the later church nicknamed “Gnosticism.”² Well it was this group of proud and “sophisticated” leaders in the church who had originally claimed to be followers of Apollos. Apollos was a gifted orator and Paul had to go to great lengths in praising the gift of oration and debating but also remind them that all spiritual gifts have value only when used to build up the body of believers.

As we discussed earlier, the very premise of 1st century Stoic oration and debating was to win and persuade – the opposite, actually, of Paul’s urging them to use any gift for healing and encouraging. So this group wanted Apollos back as their leader and somewhere along they way, they had badmouthed Paul – starting still other factions to claim to be original followers of Peter (in Jerusalem) and so on.

It wouldn’t be surprising to us, then, that this group was responsible for saying the resurrection had already happened and what remained was all there was to life (as Paul addressed this issue in chapter 15). So as Paul was dictating this last segment of his letter, he had been dealing with all of these factions and problems and the way he crafted his response to the written questions (he had received from them) was exceptionally wise.

He started chapter 16 by saying, “now concerning the contribution for the saints,” and it is clear that the members of the church, (who would hear this letter read out loud in their next gathering), knew all about the offering about which he was speaking. Paul referred to his previous directions to the Galatian church (16:1) and he had instructed all of his other churches to regularly collect offerings for the original Jerusalem church. His instructions in other letters to congregations were more explicit in describing how the offerings will go to the truly poor people in Jerusalem. Paul had previously worked out his collection of aid and relief from all the churches with the leaders of the Jerusalem church.

¹ Suggested Ben Worthington’s scenario, p.p.313 ff, in *Conflict & Community in Corinth, A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* ISBN: 0-85364-622-8

² After the Greek word *gnosis* meaning “wisdom.”

We could speculate, only briefly though, that Paul had argued head-to-head with Peter and others in Jerusalem about letting Gentiles become Christians as well. I wonder whether Paul was hoping that his efforts to raise support for the poor Jewish Christians might build some paths back to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem in spite of his disagreement with them about Gentile converts. Obviously, though, Paul's primary motives were to help the poor.

By this time, it was clear that the Jews in Palestine were experiencing considerable political and economic pressure from the occupying Roman armies and politicians. There was a war brewing between Jews and Romans and the Jerusalem church was in dire straits.

Paul's reference to "the first day of every week" for the offering (in 16:2) shows that the early gatherings of Christians had already switched their Sabbath day from the Jewish Saturday to Sunday – the day the resurrection had occurred. Consider the 16:2 verse, 'Each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he (or she) may prosper, so that contributions need not be made when I come.' This needs a little explaining because our language idiom differs.

In our way of speaking, Paul was saying, 'Each of you should set aside your weekly offering, out of your profits and what you can spare, so that you're collecting these gifts ahead of time. That way, you won't have to do this all at once when I get into town – it will all be ready to pack off to Jerusalem. Besides, if you collect these each week, it will turn out to be a larger offering of support than if you just collected it once when I got there.'

Paul was very thoughtful in how he asked them to make the contributions. He asked everyone to give what they could afford. He wasn't just appealing to those who were affluent.

When Paul told them to pick representatives from their midst to take these offerings to Jerusalem, he was being cautious about a problem with criticism he had already faced. Back in chapter 9, he wrote about how some of them had criticized him for receiving compensation for being a missionary. So as he was talking about them gathering their financial contributions for delivery to the Jerusalem Christians,

he was shrewd. He told them to pick *their own representatives* for the process – those whom *they* were to certify as responsible for the task by *their* letters of recommendation. Paul was distancing himself from the process. Then, as if it was almost an afterthought, he went on in verse 4 to say, 'And oh yes, if it seems advisable that I should go along also, they will come with me.'

In verses 5-9, he let them know his coming travel plans. He was writing this in the Spring and he was staying up in the city of Ephesus.³ He *wanted* to go directly to Corinth and stay with them through the Spring until Pentecost, then travel to Macedonia, but his plans were changed (as we read about them in 2nd Corinthians 2:12).

Instead of his original plan, Paul ended up going to Macedonia, then to Corinth, then back through Macedonia to Jerusalem with the delegation and the accumulated offerings from all the churches. What changed Paul's plans was more trouble in the Corinthian church which involved a brief and disastrous visit to the congregation where he was embarrassed – probably by this group of trouble-making leaders.

After mentioning his coming travel plans, not yet knowing until later the extent of the negativity that was in that church, he mentioned how Timothy was on his way to them. Because Timothy would likely be treated with some disrespect, as he was Paul's assistant, he advised them to respect Tim for his hard work and to treat him peacefully. And then, very cleverly in verse 12, he got around to mentioning Apollos. Perhaps he wanted all of them to hear what he had to say about the mission collection for the Jerusalem church and Timothy's arrival *before* they got their question answered about Apollos' arrival.

Some of them had apparently written and asked when they could have Apollos return. For them to have asked implies that Apollos must have been working with or near Paul in Ephesus after he had made an impressive visit to them (that was described in Acts 18:24-28).

In verse 12, Paul said he had "urged" Apollos to visit the church but he didn't know if Apollos wanted

³ Worthington, p.316.

to go back there or not. Clearly, Paul was trying to show a positive relationship between him and Apollos but he was also trying to show that Apollos not being there yet had nothing to do with Paul forbidding it.

Just before Paul closed out his letter with commendations, greetings and praises for several church leaders by name, he capped off this section with a blessing and benediction. Verse 13: 'Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.' All in all, a warm closing that echoed the major point of his chapter 13 poem on love: whatever you're doing – may it be done in love.

In reflecting back on Paul's handling of this church, we can't help but notice how diplomatic he was in his letter. Throughout this lengthy speech (that was dictated into a letter and then to be read aloud in their worship gathering), Paul always refused to mention his opponents by name. Instead of confronting them personally, he always addressed the issues and constantly encouraged them to resist their turf battles and remember why they had come together in the first place. In all of Paul's rhetoric, . . . in all of his many arguments and reasonings through the numerous troubles about which they had written, he kept to his strategy of encouraging them to unite. He was relentless in encouraging them to combine their diverse talents for the good of the whole church – for the body of Christ.

Paul did make it back to the church in Corinth for a second time with them but as we said, it turned out to be a disaster. He was totally humiliated by his experiences upon his return and he quickly retreated to Ephesus and wrote a severe letter of reprimand (found in 2nd Cor. 10-13). Titus carried that letter to Corinth but soon returned with good news of their return to loyalty. Paul then wrote a 3rd happier letter (found in 2nd Cor. 1-9).

The last time Paul saw them was during a third and final visit to his old church (in 56-57 CE). It was during this third stay with them that he wrote his letter to the Galatians.

Paul finally wrote the mature and very theologically organized letter to the Romans and made plans to visit Rome on his way to Spain. Even those plans were changed because when Paul went to

Jerusalem, he was unexpectedly arrested, imprisoned at Caesarea and finally executed in Rome under Nero in the early 60s.

In Paul's final months of life, reflecting back over his experiences in churches he had started, he undoubtedly remembered the little house-church in that "Big Apple" capital city of Corinth as the most troubled. With all of their distortions of belief and bickering (with which he had to help them) and with those in-your-face affluent and sophisticated critics, who constantly challenged his style and competency, Paul probably remembered that group as 'the church from hell.' But despite all of the heartache and controversy, he still looked back and remembered the several individuals in the core group of that church who held it all together.

In the final nine verses of the closing of the letter, he specifically mentioned Stephanas (and his household – the first converts to the faith), Fortunatus and Achaicus, and the couple Aquila and Priscia (with whom he had made tents to pay the rent). We know almost nothing of these people but in and through it all, they were the core that kept things going – even when Paul felt like quitting and he just could not go on another day.

What are you going to remember of your church, here, in the years ahead when you look back? You'll have the various leaders, through the years, who had their own unique abilities and talents. You'll remember the one who walked around the neighborhood and talked to everyone on the block – whose gift was the gift of a warm presence. You'll remember the one who had the bear for the children's sermons.

You'll remember Lindy's years of faithfulness in providing music, JoAnne's rallying of our children. The warm hospitality of the Jet Club, the Maryvalers, the outings and the community gatherings at our rummage sales and Christmas Eve services. It's the unity of all of our diverse abilities that somehow, in even and uneven times, have sustained this community of worship, learning and healing through these years.

The miracle of faith that happens at this church is one that comes about only because of God's Spirit within each of us. Like in that fledgling congregation at Corinth, our community is here because God is

here. God is here because God is in you. Because you already trust God to give you what you truly need, you will give in support of the ministry in which we are all involved.

So out of the miracle of faith that God has placed within you, please hand in your estimate of giving cards as the offering plates are passed once again. As you do so, know that the result will show the power of God's presence in your life today. ■