

GIVING, GREETINGS, AND GOODBYES

By Steve Zeisler

As I studied the final chapter of Paul's first Corinthian letter last week, my memory went back to an occasion many years ago when I sat outside the Rose Bowl in Pasadena watching a Fourth of July fireworks display. Together with some friends, I marveled at the beauty of the scene as one glorious display was followed by another even more beautiful. We had brought along our own sparklers which we lit and waved about, adding in a small but still significant way to the pageantry above and around us.

The fifteenth chapter of this letter, as we have seen in recent weeks, bursts upon the apostle's discourse like a fireworks display. Listen to these words again:

Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality...then will come about the saying that is written, 'O death, where is your sting?' (15:51-53; 54b).

Paul is speaking about the end of time, the return of Christ, and the amazing things that lie ahead. His words are dramatic and exciting, evoking an aura of suspense and theatre. There will be a display of power and majesty at the end the like of which has never been seen before.

UNCHANGING PATTERNS

But, having described as best he can, given the limited power of language to catch the fantastic scenes at the end, Paul closes the chapter and returns us once more to our own world, our own occupations and activities, exhorting us in these words: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord" (15:58). Now that you know what will happen when Christ returns, now that you are aware of the certainty of your future, take your sparkler, says Paul, and let it shine in your own area of responsibility.

Christians are the light of the world, "the city that is set on a hill." What little light this world has shines through the life and activities, the words and deeds of Christians. The time is coming when everyone will see the fabulous pyrotechnics at the end, but all they can see today is the sparklers which Christians hold as they live up to their calling in this life.

Chapter 16 flows naturally from this closing word in verse 15. Here in this section the apostle is specific in his directions, following the more general counsel of 15:58. Two principles surface in this chapter. As we go through this life as Christians, says Paul, some things will always be constant and unchanging; but other things will be uncertain and changeable. Some things remain the same. Patterns do not change in our approach to ministry, no matter what the circumstances. But in God's calling there are many things that are uncertain and are forever changing. God sends us off in directions which we could never have anticipated. We make plans and God changes them. There will be both the predictable and the unpredictable in our Christian walk.

Recognizing these twin truths, however, we are still to be "abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our toil is not in vain."

GIVING

With this background, then, let us consider the first paragraph of 1 Corinthians 16, an unchanging principle which concerns giving.

Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper, that no collection be made when I come. And when I arrive, whomever you may approve, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.

Giving is to be a regular, habitual responsibility for all Christians at all times, according to the apostle. Verse 2: "On the first day of every week let each one of you put aside and save, as he may prosper,..." Giving is not to be limited to a handful of believers, but rather is addressed to all Christians. Each and every believer is a steward of what God has bestowed upon him or her.

And giving should be a regular thing: each one should set something aside every week. It should not be limited to special occasions, like Christmas or Easter. When some misguided Bible student predicted the return of Christ last month, I was both amazed and amused to learn that some Christians who apparently had been negligent in these things took the opportunity to increase their giving in order to meet the deadline which they had heard about. But any thought that Christian giving should be in response to emergency or deadline is wrong. Each week, every one should make a thoughtful determination before the Lord as to his or her stewardship in the matter of giving.

And the believer should do so "as he may prosper." If we recognize that it is God who has been responsible for the degree of prosperity which we have, and if we are grateful for that, then our response ought to be proportional to what he has bestowed upon us. Jesus declared that the widow who gave two copper coins had contributed much more in proportion to the rich and prosperous who stood about congratulating themselves for their generosity. This passage does not give any absolute percentages or amounts here. Christians should give, says the apostle, as God has prospered them. My recommendation is that not only should the absolute amount of giving go up as we grow more prosperous over the years but the percentage ought to go up, too. The government operates that way. The more you make, the higher tax bracket you find yourself in. But the apostle's directions are simple: every week, having thoughtfully determined the amount, each one should give, as he may prosper.

Thirdly, says Paul, disbursement should be done in responsible fashion. Those who were chosen to collect and carry the money to Jerusalem must be from the community in Corinth. There should be letters to identify them; perhaps the apostle himself would accompany them. Here, Paul is stressing accountability because of the temptation which sometimes arises where money is concerned. We have seen much abuse in this area in recent years here in the United States.

Lastly, Paul shares his concern that his coming to Corinth might motivate some to give out of wrong motives. He was, after all, an apostle, and a dynamic teacher, so people might give because of these factors, seeking to influence him, or perhaps give out of an emotional response. Paul wants to avoid this. Here he is advocating that Christians grow in their sense of appreciation and love for what God has done for them, and that each one give thoughtfully, consistently, without coercion or emotion, as God has prospered. There should be no tear-jerking appeals, no threats, power plays or stern lecturing or thundering from the pulpit.

Before the Lord, make up your minds ahead of time, and pray and think your way through what you should give to the needs of the church and the saints. Allow God, and not the manipulative appeals of men, to lead you do do this, as he has prospered you. This is the New Testament pattern of giving for all generations of Christians.

SERVING

In verses 15-18, Paul gives his counsel in another unchanging pattern of Christian behavior.

Now I urge you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints), that you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors. And I

rejoice over the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus; because they have supplied what was lacking on your part. For they have refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

The three men whom Paul names here were from among the body at Corinth. They had visited the apostle at Ephesus, from where he wrote this letter. As representatives of the church in Corinth, they had come to refresh his spirit, and they had succeeded in doing so, according to Paul. He focuses on Stephanas and his household, saying, that they "had devoted themselves for ministry to the saints [therefore] you also be in subjection to such men and to everyone who helps in the work and labors."

Stephanas and his family were the first converts in Paul's ministry in lower Macedonia and Greece, and their response was to immediately begin serving others, devoting themselves in ministry to the saints. Such individuals, says Paul, should be respected as leaders among the church at Corinth because their leadership was a natural outflow of their service.

It is an unvarying principle in the Christian life that service to others is what gives a man or woman the right to speak and to be an example to others. Paul makes no mention of wealth, social standing, personality, degrees, or to any natural ability or attribute. The only qualification is servant-heartedness; a heart given over to God in service to others. Those who have had a lifestyle of such service, who year in and year out seek ways to build up others and meet their needs, should be respected and followed.

The church in Corinth was a competitive, arrogant company of believers who made light of certain wrongful activities among themselves and even among those who were considered leaders. But here the apostle identifies the faithful ones who actually were qualified to be in positions of leadership, i.e. those who consistently exhibited the qualities of servanthood and service among the saints.

MINISTRY AT HOME

We find another unchanging pattern of Christian behavior in verses 19 and 20:

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Prisca greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Christians should be genuinely concerned for each other's well-being and should manifest that concern by the warmth of their greetings (most of us have substituted warm hugs for holy kisses) one to another. You can follow the adventures of that wonderful couple Aquila and Prisca all through the letters of Paul. They are always found ministering together as husband and wife. What an example to our generation of a married couple given together in marriage and in ministry! They had taught the eloquent and gifted Apollos of the things of Christ when he was at a stage where he was lacking in his knowledge of the gospel. But the point I want to focus on is the fact that their home was always open. Paul lived and worked with them in Corinth. In Ephesus, they had a house church in their home. In Rome, they had another home church. They consistently invited others to come among them and see them interact in their own home. God works in unique ways in godly homes, among godly families. This is how change is wrought in society. It is not accomplished by massive, staged meetings addressed by captivating and eloquent speakers, but is brought about as mature Christian men and women invite non-Christians into their homes and give them opportunity to see a believing home go about the business of Christianity.

There is much brokenness, sorrow and heartache in our society. A high percentage of children grow up in violent, despair-filled, loveless homes. They have never seen a healthy marriage, a place of refuge, or experienced the joy of Christ's presence in a Christian home. Aquila and Prisca ministered always in their home. The Lord may yet take away all our buildings and our meeting rooms, leaving us with only our homes as places of ministry. If he did so, I feel we would be losing very little. No matter where I have traveled, either in this country or overseas, whenever I enter a Christian home I know that I am at the center of what God is doing in every generation. I am very thankful that God has blessed us in this church with many marriages and

homes which fit this description.

As we are abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that our labor is not in vain, we ought to have high regard for these three principles which never change. They ought to be true of us as they were true of believers in the first century. We should be thoughtful, consistent givers, giving as God has prospered us. There is no room for emotion or pressure tactics in this area. Second, let us never forget that it is service that qualifies us for leadership. Jesus said that the one who would be great among us is the servant of all. No human attribute or ability qualifies us for Christian leadership. And third, the most profound arena for displaying Christianity is the home. The homes of people who know and love Christ are where changed lives and discipleship take place.

OPEN TO CHANGE

Now let us look at the things that are not constant, the things that are always open to change. As Christians, how can we know where we are supposed to be, when we should move and change, whom should be with, etc.? Of course, no matter where your home is, God should be present there. But how can we know where home is supposed to be? Granted, leadership is always based on service, but whom should we serve? God is very creative in all of these areas, as we will see in this section where Paul talks about his travel plans. Verse 5:

But I shall come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I shall stay with you, or even spend the winter, that you may send me on my way wherever I go. For I do not wish to see you now just in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits. But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid; for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am. Let no one therefore despise him. But send him on his way in peace, so that he may come to me; for I expect him with the brethren. But concerning Apollos our brother, I encouraged him greatly to come to you with the brethren; and it was not at all his desire to come now, but he will come when he has opportunity. Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

As he was reading this passage once, Ray Stedman stopped and said, "How gloriously indefinite this is!" The apostle might come and stay with the Corinthians, perhaps even remaining on through the winter. If Timothy should arrive there, says Paul, be sensitive toward him because he himself is rather sensitive. Paul had leaned a little on Apollos to encourage him to go to Corinth, but Apollos had decided that he would visit when he was ready and not before. Nothing was set in concrete, as it were. All of their plans were subject to change. The apostles were always on the go, ever ready to change their plans and move as the Spirit led them. Because of the way in which our church has been led, we tend to view change as a problem. We are less willing than we ought to be for God to reassign people and send them off on adventures.

THREE DIFFERENT LEADERS

The three men who are mentioned in this section, Timothy, Paul and Apollos, had very different personalities. Timothy was a gifted young man whose problem was lack of courage in doing what he had been called to do. He had a lot to offer, but he didn't seem to be aware of that fact. He held back and seemed to need bucking up all the time. Paul asks that the Corinthians listen to Timothy, encourage him, and give him a gift that will both meet his needs and be an encouragement to him.

Paul himself, on the other hand, was a dynamic, committed leader. He was so caught up in the ministry of the gospel that his own life mattered little to him. But his dynamism made him difficult to be around at times. His gifts were so forceful that he did not pay much attention to leaving a good impression wherever he went.

Physically, Paul was not much to look at, we learn from another source. He was short, bow-legged, bald, and he had a large nose. Contrast the apostle with Timothy. Verse 9: "a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries," says Paul. The devil had launched an attack upon him, suggesting to

him that there was much ministry there in Ephesus, so he dug in and readied for the battle. Timothy, on the other hand, seemed always to be battling with himself and how he felt about himself. While many seem to base their decisions to leave on how much spiritual warfare they encounter, this was Paul's indicator that he ought to hang in there.

The third man in this trio, Apollos, is noted mainly for his eloquence and oratorical skills. He was a spellbinding speaker who won people to Christ even before he had a full understanding of the gospel. He knew of John the Baptist's message concerning the coming Messiah, and he used even this limited information to create a wide following. When he was introduced to the full revelation, he went on to be a very effective minister of the gospel.

How very different are these men! Each of them was called by God into his service, and all were ready to go wherever they were called to minister, although some perhaps were more ready and willing to face adventure than others. Occasionally they differed as to the details of their ministry. Paul could not talk Apollos into going to Corinth, for instance. Apollos was sure of his own calling so he declined, saying he would visit later. We should say that none of the changes that are in view here came about because of sin. These are good men, each one of them about their Father's business. Timothy's fearfulness did not disqualify him, nor did Paul's energy, nor did Apollos' decision to resist Paul's advice. They did not see eye to eye, and yet the Lord was honored in their decisions. Even weather conditions played a role in their planning, as we see in verse 6. Traveling in winter was difficult. We know that later on in his ministry Paul was shipwrecked in winter as he was traveling to Rome. It is the Lord who was the creative presence in all of their planning. He was forever stirring things, changing plans, opening and closing doors and moving them about.

We are in a period of some change here at Peninsula Bible Church, and I feel that we probably resist change more than we should. Last week our music minister Greg Schafer said goodbye to us. From what I know of the church to which God is sending him, it could not be a better situation for him. Greg spent three years in training here, and he prayed precisely for the opening which God has presented to him. He is fitted for the church to which God has called him and we ought to rejoice for how far he has brought us in music, and that God has fit him for the next place. Dick Patterson, our missions minister, has left our full-time employ. This is a tougher one because it is not absolutely clear to him what the next step is going to be. But the fact that all of us do not see eye to eye as to where we should be in ministry, as Paul and Apollos did not, and the fact that the next step is not readily apparent, should not faze us.

THE WORK OF THE LORD

The Lord was the creative presence who sent his servants out in different directions in the first century, as we have seen from Paul's writings. He granted opportunity, opened doors, brought about opposition, and even allowed disagreement among these three men. It is no different today. We stand with our sparklers in our hands, our responsibility to be abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that it is not in vain.

Some things always are true. Giving is not an option. An open home for the Lord is an unvarying responsibility. Leadership is always based on servant-heartedness. And then some other things are always changing. Our plans for ministry, where we will live, when we will travel, etc., are among the things that God will change just when we think we know what we should do. Visiting with us this week is Eli Fangidae, a pastor from the island of Timor in Indonesia. Whenever he visits us to bring us up to date on what is happening in his ministry, almost invariably he ends up ministering to someone or some group among us. He has a wonderful pastoral gift and is a great blessing to many here. And he comes because there is an open door for ministry here.

At our elders' meeting last week, Gary And Amy Marchetti shared with us about their Eastern Europe meeting this past summer. We had a very exciting time together listening to a gifted man share about his ministry. Although Gary is an American born and raised, he really is European in his outlook and ministry and is gifted and fitted to minister there. We talked about what had happened there this year, and about plans for ministry there next year, who would go and when, etc.

Then Eli shared about eastern Indonesia, pointing out from a map the various islands where he ministers.

Again, we talked about past and future ministry. What would God do next? we wondered. We don't know, but whatever it is, it will be all right. We have no idea of who will go, or where will some of our people be sent, but that's OK. It ought not seem strange to us when God moves his servants about the place following a time of ministry with us.

Some things do not change, but some things do, and we need to be open to what God is doing among us. In all things, however, we are to let our light shine. We know that one day, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,...we shall be changed." The Lord will return in triumph and every eye shall see him. This day is coming, and we look forward to it. Meanwhile, until that day dawns, we are to be a light to the world around us right where he has placed us.

The apostle concludes by saying, "Maranatha"---"come, Lord Jesus." He is praying for this day about which he has written so much. In the meantime, we are to abound in the Lord's work:

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Cor.16:13)

God grant that this is what we will be found doing as we await our Lord's return.

Catalog No. 4082
1 Cor.16:1-24
24th Message
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October 9, 1988

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