**Godly sorrow** dkm Feb 2022

What happened in the church at Corinth can, and does, happen in churches today. Churches that overlook matters of immorality or corruption or controlling behaviour, suffer until such matters are dealt with. Reformed churches can be so focussed on matters of doctrine that they overlook matters of conduct. But if Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians teaches us anything, it is that conduct must be in accord with doctrine.

The conduct of the sexual offender in the church at Corinth was not in accord with his profession of faith in Jesus Christ. But instead of looking themselves, some members of this church started questioning Paul’s conduct. He had to defend himself because, if the charges being brought against him were true, the gospel that he preached would be brought into question. It is significant that Paul’s own colleagues supported him. If his own colleagues brought accusations against him it would have been a different matter. Sadly, some pastors do not even listen to the church (Mat 18:17).

Paul was worried about what he had written in his ‘harsh letter’ to the Corinthians. He wrote with prayer and tears, seeking godly sorrow from the believers in Corinth. Their reaction upon hearing the letter would be either godly sorrow or worldly sorrow. The first leads to repentance, reconciliation, and salvation, the second to hardening, to lack of reconciliation and to death of relationships (2Cor 7:10).

So how did the believers in Corinth respond when Titus read Paul’s letter to the church? Paul assumed that it shocked and hurt them, but only for a while. What Titus saw was godly sorrow, sorrow that lead to repentance. How amazing! How wonderful! God by his Spirit blessed the reading of Paul’s letter such that hearts were changed. Hard hearts were softened unto repentance before the Lord, and to sorrow at the way they had accused Paul either directly, or indirectly by their silence.

Repentance and forgiveness are like gold, hard to find but most precious when it comes to our relationships. We hear a lot about love but little about repentance and forgiveness, yet these are fundamental to our faith. It is no good saying, ‘God loves me’ and, ‘I love God’ if you have not repented of your sin and accepted God’s forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ. We continue to pray, ‘Forgive us our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us’.

The apostle Paul had been falsely accused by people in the church and, tragically, the majority did nothing to support him. He wrote to defend himself, urging the majority to speak out in his defence (2Cor 5:12, 7:2). Paul rejoiced that they had acted to discipline the main offender, and were grieved that they had not done so earlier. They felt sorry that they had caused their beloved apostle so much hurt and pain.

Discipline in the church must always be done in love, and in the hope that the offender will repent and reform his or her ways. Paul told them to forgive and comfort the offender after punishing him. The whole church, including Paul, suffered as a result of his sin. Now that discipline had been exercised and received with repentance, relationships could be restored. Although Paul was torn as he wrote his harsh letter, he was now glad to accept their repentance, forgive them and move on, caring for one another and serving the Lord in and through this church.