**Gospel ministry** 7/11/21 dkm

Read: Genesis 1:1-19, 2Corinthians 4

Text: 2Corinthians 4:1-6

Psalms:

The leaders of our country are trying to get everyone to step forward and get ‘the jab’, get vaccinated against coronavirus. One suggestion was to give people $300 if they got ‘the jab’. I heard that somewhere they were giving people $30 and a lottery ticket. Such incentives may work with vaccination, and saving people from dying of a virus, but would such an incentive work with getting people to come to church or to believe in Jesus? Some years ago a neighbour, a businessman, offered to help me get more people into our church. Not many churches offer cash incentives for people to come, although some do preach the promise of prosperity, and many have adapted the gospel message so as not to offend people. Some years ago someone set up a cafe church.

The apostle Paul used no such ‘sweeteners’ or ‘techniques’ in his preaching. He preached Jesus Christ and him crucified. He preached that all must repent of sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. He renounced all deceitful and underhanded ways of getting people through the door of the church. Moreover, he refused to accept any personal accolades or praise. He ministered as a servant of Christ and gave all praise to his Master and Lord. Preachers must not look to businessmen or politicians for help in their ministry; we have Christ and the Holy Spirit as our example and our help.

In the city of Corinth, the apostle Paul preached the gospel of Christ crucified and raised again on the third day. He preached to Jews, who had the OT, and to Gentiles who worshipped man-made gods in man-made ways. The Lord, by his Spirit, touched the hearts of many who heard this preaching, and they believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. However, after he moved on from Corinth other preachers came to this city, men preaching another gospel. A case of sexual immorality had, in the meantime, divided this church and led to other corrupt conduct. The newcomers exploited this division and joined in undermining the authority of the apostle Paul and indeed, undermining the gospel he preached. False teaching inevitably leads to corrupt or immoral behaviour, and vice versa- corrupt conduct is fertile ground for false teaching.

How is the faithful preacher of the gospel to respond to accusations regarding his integrity and the truth of the gospel he preaches? Let us see how the apostle Paul responds to accusations aimed at him by a group within the church at Corinth. We will focus on three points: ‘gospel ministry’, ‘god of this age’, and, ‘glory of Christ’.

**1. Gospel ministry**

When Paul heard about sexual immorality in the church at Corinth, about the incestuous man in particular, he called upon the church to discipline this man, to put him out of the church if necessary. He wrote a letter to his effect, and then another letter that we call 1Corinthians. Finally, he went to Corinth on what was a ‘painful visit’, and afterwards wrote a ‘tearful letter’. His pastoral persistence finally paid off and the majority disciplined this man, but not before a torrent of accusations were thrown at the apostle.

Paul was accused of vacillating with regard to a proposed visit; some thought he had given up on them or lost heart for this church (4:1). Paul was frustrated and exhausted in his ministry to the Corinthians, but he did not lose heart because the mercy of God sustained him. He ministered to the glory of God, not for his own glory. The Jews or Jewish converts who came from Jerusalem with letters of commendation were, however, looking for further commendation. Paul had no such letters from men, so they began undermining Paul’s authority, and even the gospel that he preached.

This chapter begins, ‘Therefore, since we have this ministry’ (4:1), so it is connected to the previous chapter, where Paul contrasted the ministry of condemnation and death with the ministry of the Spirit and righteousness, to which he was called. This ministry was given to him by God in his mercy, or more specifically, by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was called by Christ and was answerable to Christ, not to the people at Corinth, for his conduct, as well as the gospel he preached. He did not ride roughshod over their feelings of course, but in the end, whatever he did was ‘in the sight of God’ (4:2).

Paul declares that he had renounced all secret and shameful ways (4:2). He was neither dishonest nor devious in his ministry of the word. Paul never accepted financial support from this infant church, even though he was entitled to it. This, and the fact that he promoted a collection for the poor churches in Judea, led to his opponents accusing him being devious (12:16, 17). Moreover, his opponents seem to have accused him of adulterating the word of God (4:2). They accused him of denigrating Moses and not upholding the demands of the law. They of course, failed to give Jesus his proper place as meditator of the new covenant, and as the fulfilment of the law. Paul was preaching the truth as revealed to him by the risen Jesus. He was not watering down the demands of the law for the sake of the Gentiles; he was preaching the fulfilment of the law in Jesus Christ for both Jew and Gentile. For Paul, the word of God included the OT as well as the gospel he preached- what is our NT.

In a book titled ‘Reformed preaching’, Joel Beeke emphasises that preaching is not just from head to head, but from heart to heart- he calls this experiential preaching. A teacher simply conveys knowledge, maybe with a certain passion, but a preachers conveys knowledge that he has experienced. There can be no doubt that Paul ‘lived’ the gospel that he preached. The word that he preached affected his own heart and hence his preaching. The preacher wants to see people listening to the word of God, but he receives blessings even as he prepares his message. Beeke writes of Paul preaching ‘in the sight of God’ as if ‘he spoke while standing before the very throne of heaven’.

Paul had a deep conviction that God sees all his motives and actions (1:23), and that everything he has done will become apparent on the Day of Judgment (5:10). He appeals to ‘every man’s conscience’ not just to emotions. He had a Spirit-illuminated conscience, and he prayed that the conscience of his hearer would be similarly illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

As Paul defends himself and his ministry against these accusations he is, in fact, describing the ministry of the newcomers at Corinth, men ‘peddling the word of God’ (2:17), men looking for the praise of men (3:1). They were displaying the characteristics of Satan in their craftiness. They were the ones seeking to hide the truth from their hearers. They were the ones keeping the veil over the eyes of their hearers, the veil that is taken away in Christ (3:14). Paul was endeavouring to lift that veil as he preached the truth of the gospel, knowing that ultimately only the Holy Spirit can do this.

Paul also knew that the hearts of some would remain veiled. All are born in sin and as such are blind to the truth. God in his grace opens the eyes of many who hear the gospel, but some remain blind. Some prefer darkness to light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). We, like the apostle, sadly acknowledge that there are ‘those who are perishing’ (4:3), but we do not know who they are so we must press on, like the apostle, urging each one to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you have not yet repented and believed then I urge you to do so now, before it is too late. I urge you in the name of Jesus Christ, get off the broad road that leads to destruction and onto the narrow road that leads to life (Mat 7:13, 14).

**2. God of this age**

When Jesus told the Jews who believed in him, ‘If the Son sets you free you shall be free indeed’, they objected saying, ‘Abraham is our father’ (John 8:36, 39). They also clung to Moses and the law. Paul was facing the same ‘blindness’ in the false teachers at Corinth. Jesus told the ‘blind’ Jews that they were of their ‘father the devil’. Paul similarly refers to the devil, or the ’god of this age’, as blinding the minds of those who do not believe, and hence are perishing (4:3, 4).

The battle going on in the church at Corinth was a battle for the minds and hearts of the people- a spiritual battle. Jesus won this battle through the cross and resurrection- which is why Paul preached Christ crucified and risen. But on earth in Paul’s day, and still in our day, this battle is still playing out. Christ has won the victory and we preach his victory in the gospel, which is why the devil hates such preaching. Preach Moses, preach the law, preach rituals, preach a social gospel, preach a prosperity gospel, and Satan is happy, but preach Christ and him crucified and he hates it and stirs up his agents to oppose you.

Satan does all he can, as allowed by God, to stop the light of the gospel shining into your heart (4:4). He does not want you to hear the truth; he does not want you to see the light of Christ’s glory. On the Damascus road Paul saw that light in a physical way, but it was the spiritual reality that he preached. He didn’t conduct tours to a monument set up on the road when he had this vision! His eyes were blinded but his heart was illuminated by this encounter with the risen Jesus, ‘who is the image of God’ (4:4). Satan hated this truth of Jesus being the Son and the image of God, and so did his agents who had come to Corinth with another gospel. The ministry of condemnation and death did not worry ‘the god of this age’, but the ministry of righteousness and the glory of Jesus Christ was literally the death of Satan and his followers.

**3. Glory of Christ**

On the Damascus road Paul saw something more glorious than the radiant face of Moses- he saw the face of the risen Jesus, ‘the radiance of God’s glory and exact representation of his being’ (Heb 1:3)- or, as he writes here, ‘who is the image of God’. Paul did not see the incarnate Christ as the other apostles did, but he did see the risen Christ in his heavenly glory. That light, and especially the voice that he heard, penetrated to the depths of his veiled heart. The veil was lifted and he saw Christ as the fulfilment and end of the law. He was a changed man, a new creation in Christ Jesus (5:17). After being filled with the Holy Spirit he went forth to preach the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Lord of glory.

With the false teachers in mind, Paul again assures the Corinthians that he did not preach himself but Jesus Christ as Lord (4:5). Too many preachers think of themselves as lord, or preach the ideas of men rather than the truth of the Bible. How many took on the theory of evolution in their preaching? How many are taking on a similar teaching, namely man-made climate change? Paul preached Jesus and Him crucified; he preached Christ as Lord, and so must we!

Yet, like Jesus himself, Paul had a servant heart. He was first and foremost a bondservant of Christ, but was also servant to the church for the sake of Jesus. Let there be no Peter or Paul party in the church, and certainly no party of heretics preaching themselves and /or another gospel.

In words that read like a doxology, Paul concludes, ‘For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness’ (4:6). The gospel Paul preached was from God, and for the glory of God. ‘For of Him, through Him, and to him are all things, to whom be glory forever, Amen’ (Rom 11:36). This gospel focussed on Christ, not on Paul or any other man or woman.

In Christ the light of the glory of God came into this world, a glory that outshone the glory of Moses. Paul takes us back to the very beginning, to the creation of this world when God said, ‘let there be light and there was light’ (Gen 1:3). Just as God sent light into the physical world to dispel the darkness and the chaos on the face of the deep, so he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, the Light to dispel the darkness and chaos present in sinful human hearts; the darkness of ignorance, guilt and fear is dispelled. He himself has shone into our hearts to give ‘the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’- what Paul later calls ‘a new creation’ (5:17).

Even as Paul preached the knowledge of Christ as the wisdom and power of God, Paul never forgot the glory of the risen Christ. The knowledge given to him included the promise of Christ’s return, to him again seeing the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. That promise was not only for Paul; it is God’s promise to you who believe. If God has shone the light of the glorious gospel into your heart, you can be assured of seeing the risen Jesus in all his glory. ‘Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is’ (1John 3:2). Is this what you believe?