Contents

O N E

The Christian's Mark

Contrary to what you might have been told, the Bible teaches that we should care about what other people think of us. We should not "repay anyone evil for evil," but "do what is right *in the eyes of everybody*" (Romans 12:17, italics added). Writing to the Philippians from prison, Paul declared that his difficult circumstances were really serving the advance of the Gospel because it had "become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ" (Philippians 1:13).

The early Christians were concerned, and rightly so, about the impressions unbelievers—"outsiders"—might carry away from a visit to their worship service (1 Corinthians 14:23–24). And, among the pastoral qualifications set forth in the New Testament, is this one: "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders" (1 Timothy 3:7). Jesus

Himself said that we are to let our light shine before others so that they can see our good works (Matthew 5:16).

This does not mean that we should trim our convictions or shape our behavior in order to curry favor with the world around us. But we should never forget that Jesus does give the world the right to decide whether we are true Christians based upon our observable love for one another. "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). How else *could* they know? They cannot peer into our hearts. But they can read our lips, see our lives, and observe the way we relate to one another. Above all else, Jesus said, this is the telling mark of a Christian.

In the next two chapters, we are going to look at some of the common charges and misperceptions often leveled against Christians by a watching world. In this chapter, however, we want to begin by looking at ourselves.

Why are Christians so often at each other's throats? Why are so many church splits centered around personalities and petty politics? Why is Christian unity so seldom preached about in Bible-believing churches? We shall answer these questions by looking at Paul's interaction with the dynamic but fractious congregation at Corinth.

In the course of his second missionary journey, the apostle Paul had a sudden change of itinerary. Instead of continuing east, as he had originally planned, he responded to his vision of a Macedonian man begging him, "Come over and help us" (see Acts 16:9). Crossing the Aegean Sea, he began to preach the Gospel on European soil. First to Philippi, then to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and finally to Corinth, Paul brought the message of Jesus Christ.

The Mess at Corinth

Corinth was a bustling seaport at the crossroads of the shipping lanes between East and West. Here Roman power met Greek culture mingled with Oriental mysticism and gnostic spirituality. In Corinth, the drinking was hard, the economy was corrupt, the sex was sizzling, and the politics was cutthroat. Everything was up for grabs. Corinth was a postmodern city before postmodern was cool.

Here in this caldron of sensuality and syncretism, a church was born; "the church of God in Corinth," Paul called it. Paul was not only the evangelist who planted this church; he was also its founding pastor. For eighteen months, he stayed with its members, sharing their joys and sorrows, their heartaches and struggles as only a pastor can share such things. How else are we to understand a verse like this: "I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you" (2 Corinthians 2:4)? Again, he wrote, "I speak as to my children. . . . Make room for us in your hearts" (2 Corinthians 6:13; 7:2).

Paul's heart was broken because he had received a report that the church in Corinth, the church he had planted and nurtured and fathered in God, was hopelessly *divided.* Paul's first letter to the Corinthians bristles with conflict. Many of the issues that troubled that New Testament congregation are with us still. Beginning at the end of First Corinthians and working our way back to the opening chapters, we can identify at least fourteen major sources of quarreling, bickering, and dissension in this church:

Chapter 16 — Chapter 16 opens with a word about *money.* Paul is taking a collection to send to the beleaguered Christians in Jerusalem, and he wants the brothers and sisters at Corinth to contribute to this missionary offering. Some people in this church had pledged to support the mission offering but had now gone back on their promise. Others were contributing begrudgingly, out of a sense of mere duty, rather than from generosity and joy. So Paul writes back to remind them that "God loves a cheerful giver" and that God Himself is the greatest giver of all, for He has blessed us with the "inexpressible gift" of His own Son (2 Corinthians 9:7, 15 ESV).

Chapter 15 — First Corinthians 15 is about *eschatology,* the second coming of Christ. Many Christians in our day are divided over these same issues. Should we interpret the

	millennium as a literal one-thousand-year reign of Christ on earth or as a figurative term referring to the age of the church or to God's sovereign rule over history? When will the Antichrist be revealed? How does the state of Israel relate to God's prophetic timetable? In Corinth, the arguments were about whether there would be a resurrection in the future, the nature of our glorified bodies, and baptism for the dead.
Chapter 14	Chapter 14 is about *worship wars.* What about speaking in tongues? Raucous business meetings? Women preachers? "When you come together," Paul declares, "each one of you has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (verse 26 ESV). Confusion and chaos was the order of the day.
Chapter 12	Chapter 12 is about *spiritual gifts:* healing, miracles, and prophecy.
Chapter 11	Chapter 11 is about *clothing,* specifically, feminine fashions: What should women wear to church?
Chapters 10–11	Chapter 10—and 11 too (verses 17–33)—deal with *the Lord's Supper.* This was not just a liturgical dispute over the proper eucharistic ritual. It concerned the very nature of the fellowship the believers at Corinth shared with one another around the Lord's Table. Some of the richer members were gorging themselves at a sumptuous dinner, while the poor members, including slaves, went home hungry. This disparity made a mockery of their participation in the body and blood of Christ symbolized in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper.
Chapters 8–9	Chapters 8 and 9 deal with a controverted issue of food offered to idols. At the heart of this dispute was a deeper issue: *How sensitive should Christians be to one another?* How careful should they be not to give offense?
Chapter 7	Chapter 7 takes up *family issues: divorce, marriage, sexuality, and celibacy.*

Chapter 6	Chapter 6 deals with *how Christians are to settle disputes with one another* in a litigious society. Should Christians sue one another in the secular law courts?
Chapter 5	Chapter 5 is about *sexual immorality and the need for church discipline* within the congregation.
Chapter 4	Chapter 4 refers to *pride and arrogance among leaders in the church.*
Chapter 3	Chapter 3 is about *spiritual immaturity.*
Chapter 2	Chapter 2 warns against *the danger of intellectualizing the Gospel.*
Chapter 1	Chapter 1 is about *party strife and cliques within the congregation.*

Paul wanted the church in Corinth to "be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10 ESV). But, in fact, a four-way split had developed within the church. "One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ'" (1 Corinthians 1:12). The Paul party, the Peter party, and the Apollos party had all made celebrities out of their favorite preachers. The church at Corinth was in danger of being seduced by the pagan culture around it, and ministers of the Gospel turned into glamorous heroes—"jocks in the pulpit." God had given these leaders to the church to be "servants" (3:5), but instead they had become a source of enmity and division.

The results are no different with a fourth group, the Christ party, who claimed that they were the ones who really belonged to Christ, unlike the others. But their confidence wasn't really in Christ; it was in themselves—their orthodoxy, their uprightness, their special status. With reference to this group, Paul later wrote: "If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he" (2 Corinthians 10:7). In other words, Paul said to them: "The fact that you 'belong to Christ' is wonderful. This makes grace more immeasurable; it does not make you more memorable!"

The Overarching Sin: Pride

At the heart of all these divisions was the sin of pride. In the name of purity, tradition, correctness, and spirituality, the church at Corinth became puffed up. In their pride, they sniped at each other and walked around on stilts above their Christian brothers. During the Reformation, Martin Luther reminded those who wanted to exalt him above measure: "The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name and should not call themselves Lutherans but Christians. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"

When the world looks at us, as it did at the Christians in Corinth, what does it see? Do we come across as genuine servants of Christ, those willing to put the interests of others ahead of our own? Or are we better known for our partisan competitions, personal rivalries, and cliquish exclusivism? What does Jesus think when He looks down on all of this?

What does Paul say to the warring factions in Corinth? We might expect him to say something like this: "You folks need to back the party that bears my name. I am the founding pastor of your church! These other people, followers of Peter, Apollos, and the so-called Christ party, they're all newcomers, interlopers. When the next church business meeting comes around, we need to get out all of the Pauline folk to vote the right way!" But, instead, Paul says to all of these groups: "Come down from your wisdom, your arrogance, pride, and condescension toward your brothers and sisters. Come down to the cross, where all of our human pretensions are shown to be folly, where God alone is great, and Jesus alone is Lord."

Three Questions

In this context, Paul asks three crucial questions in 1 Corinthians 1:13.

1. *"Is Christ divided?"* Eugene Peterson translates this text: "Has the Messiah been chopped up in little pieces so we can each have a relic all our own?" (THE MESSAGE). You're acting, Paul says, as though Christ was

a chunk of meat, a commodity you can buy down at the butcher shop, something to be hacked and diced up and passed around like hors d'oeuvres at a party! The Greek word here is *memeristai,* which means to divide into parties or sects. We could translate Paul's question this way: Is Christ a partisan? Is Christ sectarian? The very idea, of course, is ludicrous. Christ is not divisible.

The church of the New Testament is the church of the undivided Christ. This fact alone separated Christianity from the pagan religions of the ancient Mediterranean world. Wherever one looked in Corinth, there loomed polytheism. On top of the nearby mountain stood the great temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. The cult of the Roman emperor also flourished there, as did many of the mystery religions imported from Egypt and the East. No wonder Paul could say that in the world there are many "gods" and many "lords." Yet for us, he insisted, "there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (8:6 ESV). Jesus Christ cannot be divided, because there is only one God, and Jesus is divine not in the sense of the Greek gods, whose divinity was mutable and contingent, but rather as the One who has come from "the bosom of the Father" to disclose the one eternal God who has forever known Himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Here is Paul's point: There is a direct correlation between ecclesiology and Christology, between the church and its heavenly head, Jesus Christ. And when we live in rancor, bitterness, and enmity with one another, we are sinning not only against our brother and sister, but also against Christ. This is a lesson Paul learned on the first day he became a Christian. On his way to persecute believers in Damascus, he was suddenly halted by the risen Christ, who asked him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4 ESV). He might well have responded, "I am not persecuting You. I'm on my way to arrest these miserable Christians!" But Jesus' question to Saul implies that it is not possible to hurt those who belong to Him, those who have been redeemed by His blood, without also hurting Him. "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40). This perspective elevates the question of disunity and conflict among believers to an en-

tirely new level. Would we say about Jesus what we have said about some of our colleagues, friends, and fellow church members? Would we direct our anger at Him the way we have held grudges or harbored bitter thoughts against them? How would we act at the next elders' meeting if Jesus showed up?

2. "*Was Paul crucified for you?*" Here Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that their lives in Christ are inextricably bound up with what happened one Friday afternoon in Jerusalem outside the gates of the city when Jesus was impaled on a Roman cross. Why does he mention the cross at this point? Because the cross is where all the bragging stops. Behind all the side-choosing and sloganeering—"I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," etc.—was the self-assertion and self-glorification of those who had an overweening confidence in their own virtues and abilities: the wise, the weighty, and the well-born, as Paul refers to them (1:26). The common anthropological assumptions of Greek philosophy and Hellenistic culture, not unlike those of the modern cult of self-esteem, greatly valued human assertiveness in any form as a badge of excellence, strength, and virtue. Indeed, the word *virtue* comes from the Latin *virtus,* meaning "manliness" or "worth." Physical prowess (cf. Augustine's recollection of how his pagan father Patricius used to take pride in showing off his well-formed adolescent son in the public baths), military feats, oratorical abilities, intellectual acumen, political power, monetary success, social status—all these were things to be proud of and to glory in.

But in contrast to all this, Paul held up something utterly despicable, contemptible, and valueless by any worldly standard—the cross of Christ. For two thousand years the cross has been so variously and beautifully represented in Christian iconography and symbolism that it is almost impossible for us to appreciate the sense of horror and shock that must have greeted the apostolic proclamation of a crucified Redeemer. Actually, the Latin word *crux* was regarded as an expression so crude that no polite Roman would utter it in public. In order to get around this difficulty, the Romans devised a euphemistic circumlocution, "Hang him on the unlucky tree" (*arbori infelici suspendito*), an expression that comes from Cicero. But what the world regarded as too shameful to whisper in polite company, a detestable object used for the brutal execution of the

dregs of society, Paul declared to be the proper basis for exaltation. In the cross, and the cross alone, Paul said, he would make his boast in life and death, for all time and eternity.

Unlike some of the later Gnostic teachers, and unlike all the followers of Islam to this day, the Corinthian believers did not actually deny that Jesus was put to death on the cross. But if they did not deny the cross, they certainly de-emphasized it. They had not yet realized the ethical implications of Jesus' death for every believer: To be "in Christ," to be "crucified with Christ," implies a radical transformation within the believer, a transformation based on our identification with Jesus' once-for-all victory on the cross, but also leading to an ongoing process of mortification and self-denial. This is what Paul meant in Galatians 6:14 when he declared that not only is the world to be crucified unto us, but we also are to be crucified to the world. To be crucified to the world, in this sense, means to walk in the power of the cross, to bear the fruit of the Spirit, to live in the freedom with which Christ has set us free. To realize that Jesus, not Paul or anyone else, was crucified for us means a willingness to bear the "brand marks" of Jesus—to live under the cross. This is the only thing that we have any biblical warrant to boast about.

3. *"Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"* It may seem strange that Paul would bring baptism into the argument at this point. For centuries Christians have been deeply divided about the meaning, significance, and role of baptism in the life of the church. Should we baptize infants or only adult believers? How much water should we use—do we drip, douse, or dunk? How does baptism relate to church membership? Who is authorized to baptize, ordained ministers only or laypersons as well? Entire denominations have divided over such issues in the past, and such differences are far from resolved today, even among evangelical Christians who appeal to the authority of Scripture. No wonder that years ago Donald Bridge entitled his book about baptism *The Water That Divides.*

But something else is at stake in this passage. The question here is: *In whose name have you been baptized?* In the early church, baptism signified the transfer of loyalty from one realm into another. Baptism was far more than an initiatory rite of passage; rather, it involved a decisive transition from an old way of human life to a new and different way.

Baptism was an act of radical obedience in which a specific renunciation was made and a specific promise was given. The renunciation part, the act of publicly saying "No!" became prominent in the baptismal liturgy of the early church, as we read in documents from the late second century such as Tertullian's *On Baptism* and Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition.*

From these sources we learn that baptism was often done on Easter eve, following a period of intensive preparation that included fasting, prayer, and the reading of Scripture. When at last the time for baptism itself arrived, the candidate would be called upon to renounce the Devil and all his pomp. Facing westward, the direction in which the sun went down, he would exclaim, "I renounce thee, O Satan, and all thy works!" Then he would deliberately spit three times in the direction of darkness, signifying a complete break with the powers of evil and all their former claim on his life. Next, turning toward the sunrise, he would say, "And I embrace Thee, O Lord Jesus Christ!" This would be followed by immersion three times in the name of the triune God, the receiving of a new robe, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, and participation in the Lord's Supper.

Baptism was not a private ritual to be performed in secret. It was a public confession of allegiance to Jesus Christ. Baptized Christians were often singled out for persecution and were sometimes taken directly from the sacred waters of baptism to the expected bloodbath in the arena. To be baptized in the name of Jesus was risky business. It was a public declaration that "the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). During the Reformation, Huldrych Zwingli compared baptism to the white cross that was sewn onto the uniform of the Swiss mercenary soldiers, among whom he once served as a chaplain. Wherever the soldiers moved across the battlefield, they would be identified to all who saw them by the white cross sewn onto their red uniform. This design can still be seen today on the Swiss national flag. Baptism too, Zwingli thought, was a public badge that identified one with a particular cause. Baptism marked the believer as a member of the *militia Christi,* a soldier of the Gospel, fighting under the direction of Christ the Captain.

This was true not only of individual Christians but also of the church as the called-out people of God. Paul declared that something radically

new and different had occurred within this baptized community so that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Galatians 3:28). The three pairs of opposites Paul listed in this verse stand for the fundamental cleavages of human existence: ethnicity, economic capacity, and sexuality. Race, money, and sex are primal powers in human life. No one of them is inherently evil, yet each of these spheres of human creativity has become degraded and soiled through the perversity of sin. Nationality and ethnicity have been corrupted by pride, material blessings by greed, and sexuality by lust. This has led to the chaotic pattern of exploitation and self-destruction that marks the human story from the Tower of Babel to the streets of Baghdad and Beirut.

But the good news of the Gospel is that those who have become children of God through faith in Jesus Christ have broken free from enslavement to these controlling forces. A new standard and pattern of life now distinguishes the baptized community from the environing society all around it. Here, as nowhere else, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2 ESV). As Gerhard Ebeling has said, the boundaries of baptism define "the existence of a place in the world where things are different: Jews and Gentiles share the same table; slaves and free citizens are treated equally as brothers and sisters; women are accorded a respect that is more substantial than a merely outward and sometimes two-edged 'equality.'"

To be baptized in the name of the crucified and risen Christ means that we have acquired a new set of comrades. We now wear the same cross on our uniforms, and we march together under the same banner, the bloodstained banner of the Lamb. We are soldiers engaged in battle, but we must not direct our weapons against one another, but against the real Enemy who has come "to steal and kill and destroy" (John 10:10).

Bypaths to Avoid

Paul's three questions at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians point to the fact that the unity of the church is grounded in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the one and only Lord of the church: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you

baptized in the name of Paul?" (verse 13). The answer to all these questions is a resounding no! Jesus Christ is indivisible. His atoning sacrifice alone procures our justification and right standing before God. We are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the one God we know and worship through His self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Paul's emphasis on the oneness of the church is complemented by John's description that the spiritual oneness of believers on earth is grounded in the eternal unity of the Father and the Son (John 17:11, 21). "May they be one, Holy Father," Jesus prayed, "just as We are one" (author's paraphrase). The Trinitarian basis of Christian unity is reflected in all the orthodox creeds and confessions of the apostolic faith as well as historic patterns of prayer and worship in the early church.

All of this is great theology, but the fact remains that disgruntled believers in Corinth, and many Christians today, live as though it had no bearing on their actual conduct and relationships to one another. How can we bear the mark of a Christian when all too often those watching us observe not love and mutual concern but raucous discord and disunity? What is the way to true Christian unity?

Before giving a positive answer to this question, we want to mention three bypaths which, though tempting to many in our day, will not lead to the kind of unity we need, the kind of unity for which Jesus prayed and for which Paul yearned. The way to true Christian unity cannot be purchased at the expense of (1) moral purity, (2) theological integrity, (3) or genuine diversity.

The way to true Christian unity cannot be purchased *at the expense of moral purity.* Throughout history, the Christian church has ever lived in tension between the poles of identity and adaptability. When we focus too strongly on identity and forget adaptability, we become a "holy huddle" unmindful of the world and our mission to carry the good news of Christ to the "uttermost" limit of every culture and every people group on earth. On the other hand, when the church gravitates one-sidedly toward the pole of adaptability, it can easily lose its identity in the trends and fashions of its surrounding environment. This was precisely the problem at Corinth, and Paul, quoting from Isaiah 52, called on those

believers to separate themselves from the immoral practices they had indulged in before they met Christ (2 Corinthians 6:17).

The Corinthian temptation still faces the church today. In recent years, many denominations have been torn apart by the debate over homosexuality. In the name of love and unity, some church leaders have put aside the clear teaching of Scripture on this issue, and some churches have moved to bless same-sex unions and ordain openly gay clergy. While we should all remember that homosexuals are among those persons for whom Jesus died, and that there is no place for bigotry against any person made in the image of God, we are not at liberty to set aside biblical standards for holy living and sexual purity. Stanley Grenz has written a helpful book on this subject with a title that expresses just the right response to persons engaged in or tempted toward a gay lifestyle: *Welcoming but Not Affirming* (Westminster John Knox).

The way to true Christian unity cannot be purchased *at the expense of theological integrity.* Some advocates of the mainline ecumenical movement have little patience for theological discussion and frank dialogue over doctrinal differences among the various Christian groups. They reason like this: "In a world beset by pressing social needs, racial conflict, famine, war, and a global ecological crisis, we cannot afford to dredge up the old debates that have divided Christians in the past. Let's forget about our theological differences, or at least put them on hold, so we can work together toward common goals."

While this appeal is attractive at a superficial level, it misses entirely an essential commitment of the Christian message: Truth matters. In John 17 Jesus prayed to the heavenly Father that His disciples would be one, and also that they would be sanctified through the truth (John 17:17, 22). The first premise of any honest dialogue among Christians of different denominations or theological commitments must be that any unity not based on truth is a unity not worth having. Admittedly, this conviction flies in the face of postmodernist notions of truth and the reigning ideology of theological pluralism that dominates the declining world of mainline Protestant enterprises. But it cannot be dodged if we are to be faithful to the apostolic mandate to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). On this point evangelicals can offer a hearty amen!

to the words of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger: "Our quarreling ancestors were in reality much closer to each other when in all their disputes they still knew that they could only be servants of one truth which must be acknowledged as being as great and as pure as it has been intended for us by God."

Finally, true Christian unity cannot be purchased *at the expense of genuine diversity.* Paul makes this abundantly clear in 1 Corinthians 12, where he describes the unity of the church in terms of the interdependence and mutuality of the various members of the body. God has so created the body and tempered together its members that there should be no internal disconnect or division within the organism, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other (12:24–25). There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one God and one Redeemer. But there are "many" gifts, many places to serve, many "diversities of operations," as the King James Version puts it (12:6).

Unity is not uniformity. To try to impose an artificial oneness on the genuine diversity we find in the body of Christ is to be blind to the many-faceted, many-colored wisdom of God.

The Way to True Unity

In 1 Corinthians Paul presents the way to true Christian unity in terms of three of the greatest words of the Christian faith: Gospel, love, and grace.

First, the way of the Gospel. Near the end of this letter, Paul summarized what he has been saying to the distraught believers in Corinth:

> Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preach to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as the first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:1–4)

Many implications of the Gospel are not spelled out in these short verses, but they do contain the heart of the Gospel, without which there can be no true or lasting unity. The Gospel is so simple that small children can understand it, and yet it is so profound that the wisest theologians will never be able to explain it in all of its mystery and depth.

Several years ago, a group of Bible scholars drafted a statement, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration," which was endorsed by several hundred Christian leaders. That document sets forth the perspective we want to advance in this book as well:

> The Bible declares that all who truly trust in Christ and his Gospel are sons and daughters of God through grace, and hence are our brothers and sisters in Christ. . . . Christians are commanded to love each other despite differences of race, gender, privilege, and social, political, and economic background (John 13:34–35; Gal. 3:28–29), and to be of one mind wherever possible (John 17:20–21; Phil. 2:2; Rom. 14:1–15:13). We know that divisions among Christians hinder our witness in the world, and we desire greater mutual understanding and truth-speaking in love. . . . As evangelicals united in the Gospel, we promise to watch over and care for one another, to pray for and forgive one another, and to reach out in love and truth to God's people everywhere, for we are one family, one in the Holy Spirit, and one in Christ.[1]

Second, the way of love. It is not accidental that 1 Corinthians 13, the great love chapter of the Bible, comes right in between two of the most rambunctious chapters in this letter. In chapter 12, Paul had reminded the Corinthians that the body was meant to work together in harmony. It is not as a discombobulated monstrosity with legs sprouting from ears, eyes peering up from toes, and elbows growing out of the neck. Chapter 14 has shown what happens when showmanship and pride replace humility and love in the worship of God—decency and order go out the window. Right in between these two jarring lessons Paul placed his beautiful hymn about love.

In his famous exposition of this chapter, Henry Drummond referred to love as "the greatest thing in the world." First Corinthians 13 was read

by Prime Minister Tony Blair at the funeral of Princess Diana at Westminster Abbey, and it is a favorite text for graduation ceremonies and weddings as well. But love, as Paul has described it, is neither romantic sentimentalism nor one of the Greek virtues doused with a thin Christian veneer. Love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and it manifests itself in practical ways, often with uncomfortable consequences.

For example, what does Paul mean when he says that love "is not rude . . . self-seeking, . . . easily angered, [nor] keeps [a] record of wrongs" (13:5)? We are inclined to make light of a bad temper, to dismiss it as a quirk of the personality, a family trait perhaps, nothing to be taken too seriously. But how much damage has been done within families and congregations by bitter words spoken in anger, when tempers flare and words unbecoming of Christ stream forth from inside us?

We must admit at this point that some of our great heroes of the faith have not been perfect models. For example, should Calvin have referred to the Anabaptists as "fanatics," "deluded," "scatterbrains," "asses," "scoundrels," and "mad dogs"? Was it right for Luther to refer to Pope Paul III as "His Hellishness," and to call other religious opponents spit, snot, puss, feces, urine, stench, scab, smallpox, ulcers, and syphilis?

While Jesus did refer to the scribes and Pharisees as "hypocrites" and "blind guides," who among us can presume to wear His sandals and peer into the hearts of others to make such judgments? The model of Christ we are explicitly told to take as our example is that of Jesus, the suffering servant, who "when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Only twice in Paul's letters did he speak explicitly of the believer's love for God (Romans 8:28; 2 Thessalonians 3:5 ESV), although much that he said presupposes Jesus' statement about the first and greatest of the commandments. But Paul's emphasis was on the Christian's love for his fellow human beings. At one point, he goes so far as to say, "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' " (Galatians 5:14).

Why did Paul call the selfless love of neighbor the fulfilling of the whole law? Not because it is superior to the worship and adoration of God, but rather because it is the proof of it. As Calvin correctly noted,

"God is invisible; but he represents himself to us in the brethren and in their persons demands what is due to himself. Love to men springs only from the fear and love of God."

During the debates of the Reformation, the relationship of faith, love, and good works became a matter of dispute. Did not the doctrine of justification by faith alone eliminate any place for good works in the life of the believer? Luther, Calvin, and those who followed them insisted that the fruit of justification is *faith active in love.* A living faith expresses itself in works of love, in service to the neighbor. Believers who have been made right with God by faith no longer labor under the compulsion of the law or the self-centered need to serve others as a means of enhancing their own status before God. The medieval schema of salvation declared that it was necessary for faith to be "formed by love" (*fides caritate formata*) to be effective for salvation. But Luther insisted that we are justified by faith *alone,* not by faith mingled and fortified by the loving deeds we have done for others. Thus while our love for others does not make us righteous, when one has been declared righteous by faith alone, godly love is the result.

Such love is directed in the first instance not toward God in hope of attaining some merit toward salvation, but toward one's neighbor, for "the Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbor." Luther urged Christians to perform good works out of spontaneous love in obedience to God for the sake of others. To put it in other words, justification by faith alone frees me to love my neighbor disinterestedly, for his or her own sake, as my sister or brother, not as the calculated means to my own desired ends.

Since we no longer have to carry around the intolerable burden of self-justification, we are free "to be Christs unto one another," as Luther put it, to expend ourselves on behalf of one another, even as Christ also loved us and gave Himself for us.

Significantly, Paul does not say that God's law is summed up in the command to love our fellow Christians, but rather our neighbors. Who is our neighbor? In the light of Jesus' self-giving on the cross, we who belong to Him and bear His mark before a watching world no longer have the luxury to define our neighbors exclusively as our fellow Christians,

fellow evangelicals, fellow Americans, the families in our subdivision, the members of our race, or those who agree with us politically. Our neighbors also include the loveless, the least, the unlikely.

By following Jesus, we learn to see the world through the eyes of the Savior's love. This enables us to see and relate to others not in terms of their own personal idiosyncrasies, or their sin and greediness, but in the way of Christ, who expended Himself even for those who rejected Him. The great Welsh preacher D. M. Lloyd-Jones has given an unsurpassed exposition of what it means to fulfill the law of love in service to our neighbors:

> We see them now, no longer as hateful people who are trying to rob us of our rights, or trying to beat us in the race for money, or position or fame; we see them, as we see ourselves, as the victims of sin and of Satan, as the dupes of "the God of this world," as fellow-creatures who are under the wrath of God and hell-bound. We have an entirely new view of them. We see them to be exactly as we are ourselves, and we are both in a terrible predicament. And we can do nothing; but both of us together must run to Christ and avail ourselves of his wonderful grace. We begin to enjoy it together and we want to share it together. That is how it works. It is the only way whereby we can ever do unto others as we would that they should do unto us. It is when we are really loving our neighbors as ourselves because we have been delivered from the thralldom of self, that we begin to enjoy "the glorious liberty of the children of God."[2]

Third, the way of grace. Genuine Christian unity is not something we can impose or contrive on our own. It is something given, received, and recognized by grace alone. The word *grace* is found some 150 times in the New Testament alone, and the theme of God's free, unmerited favor is woven into the fabric of Holy Scripture from Genesis to Revelation: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (Revelation 22:21 KJV). And yet the doctrine of grace itself has provoked some of the fiercest debates in the history of the church.

One of the most important of these debates took place more than

three hundred years after the death of the apostle Paul. This involved a terrific struggle between Augustine, one of the greatest theologians who ever lived, and Pelagius, a British monk and moral reformer who stressed the ability of human beings to make themselves pleasing to God by obeying the law. Later, Christians referred to Augustine as *doctor gratiae,* "the teacher of grace," because his influence was so great in this area.

Augustine's theology of grace grew out of his own experience of utter impotence and helplessness before God. In his famous autobiography, *The Confessions,* Augustine described his struggle and failure to live a life pleasing to God:

> No restraint was imposed by the exchange of mind with mind. . . . Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me . . . sweeping me through the precipitous rocks of desire to submerge me in a whirlpool of vice. . . . I was tossed about and split, scattered and boiled dry in my fornications. And you were silent. . . . I attribute to your grace and mercy that you have melted my sins away like ice.[3]

In his search for peace, Augustine tried many religions and schools of thoughts. For several years he was a follower of Manichaeanism, a fatalistic religion based on radical dualism: light and darkness, good and evil locked together forever in a great cosmic battle. Then he became a skeptic, a philosophy that denied the possibility of absolute truth. His conversion to Christ occurred as he was sitting in a garden reading a passage from Romans 13. In that moment he realized that his self-striving was useless and would never lead him to God. By God's grace he resolved to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ." Then immediately, he said, "the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shadows of doubt fled away."

Augustine rediscovered what Paul had proclaimed: Apart from the grace of Christ we are hopelessly lost and can do nothing to save ourselves. Yet this emphasis runs counter to the prevailing spirit of the age in which we live. That spirit is well expressed in the following verse,

entitled "Determination," found inscribed on a box of tea at the grocery store:

> Gifts count for nothing; will alone is great;
> All things give way before it, soon or late. . . .
> Each well-born soul must win what it deserves. . . .
> The fortunate is he whose earnest purpose never swerves,
> Whose slightest action or inaction serves
> The one great aim.
> Why, even Death stands still,
> And waits an hour sometimes for such a will.

This is what the culture of self-reliance has taught us all. Gifts count for nothing. What does count is your will, your determination. You can make it on your own. Grace is for weaklings. You need no Savior to die for you, because you can save yourself by what you do and how you live. Just dig in deeper and try harder! William Ernest Henley's famous poem "Invictus" expresses the same idea in its exaltation of "my unconquerable soul." The would-be conqueror declares, "I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul."

Much of the problem at Corinth stemmed from the fact that this kind of philosophy of life had made inroads into the Christian community there. Paul writes to remind them that self-salvation is an impossibility. Life itself is a gift. Moment by moment we are sustained by God's gracious providence. Everything we are and have is the result of our dependence on God's mercy. He brings these thoughts together in one verse: 1 Corinthians 4:7. This verse was also a favorite text of Augustine in his struggles with Pelagius. It consists of three questions: (1) Who makes you different from anyone else? (2) What do you have that you did not receive? (3) And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

When they reflect on it, all Christians know that God did not save them because they are better, or smarter, or nicer looking than anyone else. In the Old Testament, God reminded the children of Israel that He had not chosen them because they were large in number, or mighty

in battle, or rich in resources. No, they were at the very bottom of the "most-favored-nation" list. Why, then, did God choose Israel? Because He loved them—just because! And what can any of us claim to have, to possess, that we have not received as a gift? The honest answer has to be . . . nothing, nothing at all. The air we breathe, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, our families, our jobs, our friends, our faith: All of this has come to us as a gift from our gracious God (cf. James 1:17). Because this is true, there is no basis for boasting in the Christian life, no room for one-upmanship in the family of God. In the realm of grace, we lose all our bragging rights. Here we can only glory, as Paul said, "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 6:14).

Most evangelicals have grown up with the language of grace and the music of grace, but sometimes our hearts have grown hardened to the true reality of grace. We suffer from grace-inflation. God's love and mercy no longer amaze, astound, and shatter. But once we understand who God is and what He has done for us in Jesus Christ, we will see that God's grace is an active, life-changing reality. The more we see our own unworthiness, the more astounded we are at God's gracious favor and mercy toward us. And the more we realize that our life purpose must be to glorify God, to please Him in every way, the more others will notice the results of God's transforming grace in our lives. When this happens, the world will see in us the mark of the Christian.