

"MISINTERPRETATION OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

(David Garland)

Since Paul reacts to what the Corinthians are saying, it seems imperative to try to reconstruct what they were thinking so as to understand better his responses. The method used, mirror-reading—reading what Paul says as in some measure mirroring what the Corinthians have said—is fraught with the danger of making mistakes, as the reasoning is necessarily circular (see Barclay 1987). When such reading is carried out injudiciously, the text can become the servant of preconceived impressions. The interpreter can read too much into what Paul says, read in his or her own biases, and misread Paul's argumentation in a particular passage. Too often in the interpretation of this letter mirror-reading has been used incautiously and overconfidently. The forces shaping the Corinthians' thoughts and actions have been attributed to a particular theological aberration rooted in Gnosticism, Jewish wisdom theology, or an "over-realized eschatology." One [single] theological misconception, however, is unlikely to explain the sundry problems Paul addresses in the letter. If Paul thought that a misrepresentation of the gospel he first preached to them lay behind their problems, then, Pickett (1997: 44-45) reasonably asks, "Why did he not provide them with a more explicitly theological corrective as he does, for example, in Galatians?" It is far more likely that the influences on them were more amorphous and that their behavior was swayed by culturally ingrained habits from their pagan past and by values instilled by a popularized secular ethics. It is imaginable that some of the prominent members thought "in a Stoicizing manner;" having been given a token education in this philosophy in their youth (Paige 1992). This body of opinions would have endorsed exalting the individual wise person at the expense of the community and would have permitted the wise to do whatever was right in his own judgment (Paige 1992: 189, 190).

The prominence of the references to the Spirit in this letter suggests that the Corinthians have misinterpreted their experience of the Spirit in some way. They may have understood the Spirit to be the inrush of heavenly power into their lives that granted them a new status and conferred upon them knowledge and great spiritual gifts. It could have fed their pride so that it grew to dangerous levels. They became "puffed up" and "arrogant" and fancied themselves to be "spiritual ones" (3:1; cf. 2:13, 15; 9:11; 12:1; 14:37), "mature" (2:6), and "wise" (3:18; 4:10). Spiritual gifts apparently were compared and some were judged more or less spiritual and more or less valuable according to the same criteria employed in secular culture. Certain gifts were championed over others, and certain persons displaying those gifts were championed over others (3:21; 4:6-7). Paul cannot deny their spiritual experiences (2:4),



nor does he want to denigrate them. But he will not address them as spiritual ones; they instead are fleshly (3:1), too much caught up in this world and its values. Everything occurring at Corinth proved his case: the power factions, the shocking case of incest, suing one another in pagan courts in order to get advantage over the other. Barclay (1992: 71) also reasons that "the more the Corinthians understood their faith as a special endowment of knowledge and a special acquisition of spiritual skills, the less they would expect to embrace hostility: any intimations of conflict would be resolved or minimized."

Another problem that seems to have stunted their spiritual growth was their apparent misunderstanding of the end times and the last judgment. Some label the problem "over-realized eschatology" (Thiselton 1977-78) that took literally Paul's assertion "Behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2) and created an overheated, spiritualistic illusion that they were already living in the kingdom come as if the day of the Lord had arrived (cf. 2 Thess. 2:2). I think that "over-realized eschatology" has been overplayed by interpreters. The Corinthians' problems are more attributable to a lack of a clear eschatological vision of the defeat of the powers of this age and the final judgment of God looming on the horizon. They did not view this world as decisively evil and consequently were ready to make compromises with it. Barclay (1992: 71) opines, "The apocalyptic notes in Paul's theology which harmonized so well with the Thessalonians' experience failed to resonate with the Corinthians."