

~Other Speakers S-Z: David Servant:

Not wanting to visit Corinth a third time to face the same unresolved problems, Paul determined to wait. Remember that when we read 1 Corinthians, we learned that there were factions in Corinth over favorite teachers and leaders. Although one group was loyal to Paul, others were declaring their allegiance to Peter or Apollos (1 Cor. 1:12). Thus, there was a group that was opposed to Paul. You can be sure that if there was a group that was opposed to Paul, there was a leader of that group. It seems that during Paul's second brief visit to Corinth he dealt with that opposition leader rather harshly, excommunicating him with the support of the majority, which proved to be devastating to that unnamed man. Paul now urged the Corinthian believers to forgive and comfort him, reaffirming their love.

Some have surmised that the unnamed man whom Paul encouraged the Corinthians to forgive and reinstate was the incestuous man whom Paul instructed the Corinthians to excommunicate in 1 Corinthians 5. You may recall that he was living with his stepmother in an immoral relationship, clearly marking him as a "so-called brother," that is, not a brother at all, and one that would not inherit God's kingdom (1 Cor. 5:11; 6:9-10). It is, of course, possible that the immoral man had repented, and if so, receiving him back into fellowship would have been appropriate.

Regardless of who the offender was who had been disciplined and then reinstated, take note that Paul was not recommending "universal forgiveness," something that is advocated today in some Christian circles. God's forgiveness of people is predicated upon their repentance. If it wasn't, then He would be unrighteous, approving of sin. God never approves of sin. When Christians "forgive" those who are unrepentant, they likewise show themselves to be unrighteous, approving of sin. This is the flaw in the message of "universal forgiveness" that is being propagated. The truth is, "universal forgiveness" is ungodly. Paul instructed the Corinthians to forgive the unnamed man because he was on the verge of being "overwhelmed by excessive sorrow" (2:7). He was repentant. Keep in mind that Jesus advocated excommunication for unrepentant offenders in the church (Matt. 18:15-17). He also declared: "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3).

As Paul journeyed back towards Macedonia and Achaia, he had hoped to meet Titus in Troas, which was on the opposite side of the Aegean Sea, to learn from him how the Corinthians had received his severe letter. Titus didn't show up in Troas as he had hoped, and so Paul left for Macedonia himself, in spite of the fact that a door for the gospel had been opened in Troas (2:12-13). The health of the Corinthian church was prioritized over starting a new church in Troas. It's always a good idea to prioritize preserving what has been gained before trying to gain more.

What are we to make of Paul's words that "we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life" (2:25-26)?

In ancient Rome, when a general returned from winning a battle, he would lead a victory procession through the streets of his capital city. Behind the incense bearers came the enemy captives bound in chains. To the conquerors, the incense was the smell of victory. To the defeated captives, the incense signified defeat and death. Applying Paul's analogy, Jesus is our conquering general who is leading us in His triumphant procession. We are like incense-bearers from whom wafts an aroma that testifies of life to believers and death to unbelievers. To God's enemies, we are giving off an aroma of death. When they reject our message, they seal their doom.

Even in Paul's day there were those who, to borrow his words, "peddled the word of God" (2:17), using it for personal profit. Not much has changed since then, has it?

Congratulations, by the way. You've just completed 100 out of 260 days of reading through the entire New Testament!