

THE TRINITY

The Blessing Of God's Grace, Love, & Fellowship

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Scattered throughout the Bible are statements of blessing that we call benedictions. For centuries, Christian worship services ended with the leader pronouncing a blessing upon the gathered believers before they departed.

In this excerpt from Warren Wiersbe's book *Bless You*, we will take a look at one of these benedictions. This blessing of the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth is packed with insight about the God we serve. In one verse, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Paul gives us words that lift our hearts to the God who longs to bless us with His grace, His love, and His presence. *Mart De Haan*

Managing Editor: David Sper

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CODE NAME: TRINITY

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all (2 Cor. 13:14).

It's Monday, July 16, 1945. It's 5:30 in the morning. A blinding flash suddenly awakens the sleepy village of Carrizozo, New Mexico. Two minutes later there is a deafening roar. The first atomic bomb has been detonated 35 miles away, and a new age has been ushered in.

Less than a month later, on August 6, President Harry Truman announced to the nation that an atomic bomb had been dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Oddly enough, the code name for the atomic bomb

project was Trinity.

Would most people equate the Christian doctrine of the Trinity with the power of an atomic blast? Probably not. Many Christians deliberately avoid the doctrine. "We can't understand it," they argue, "and what difference does it make in our lives anyway?" Even Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them, and no man has a distinct idea of the Trinity. It is the mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus" (Edwin S. Gausted, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 1996, p.139).

Some people say, "The word *trinity* isn't even found in the Bible, so why make an issue of it?" But if the silence of the Bible is evidence of

nonexistence, then we are really in trouble, for there are many words not found in Scripture that describe things that certainly exist.

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The benediction (or blessing) of 2 Corinthians 13:14 is a trinity of trinities. When we understand what Paul wrote, it will help us to better relate to the Lord we worship and to live a better Christian life in this world.

A TRINITY OF PERSONS

The Bible reveals that there is one eternal God, with one essence, existing in three persons who are equal yet distinct: God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Note that in the preceding sentence I used the word *and*, and not a series of commas. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are not sequential, like the ranks in an army—the Father first, the Spirit last, and Jesus between them—because each one is eternal God, and no one member of the Godhead is greater than another. In the baptismal formula (Mt. 28:19), Jesus named the Father first, then the Son, and then the Spirit, and He united them with the word *and*. In this

benediction, Paul put the Son first, but that doesn't mean He is greater or more important than the Father and the Holy Spirit, because the little word *and* is still there to connect equals.

These are not three gods or different names for one God who reveals Himself in different ways at different times. The heretics say, "The one God revealed Himself as the Father in the Old Testament, as the Son in the four Gospels, and as the Spirit from the Pentecost to the end of the New Testament." Anyone who believes that hasn't read the Bible carefully.

The Trinity worked together in the creation of the universe (Gen. 1:1-2; Job 38:4; Ps. 104:30; Col. 1:16-17). While the fullness of this doctrine wasn't revealed

until centuries later, the persons of the Godhead were there from the beginning. They had been there from eternity.

While the fullness of the doctrine of the Trinity wasn't revealed until centuries later, the persons of the Godhead were there from the beginning.

Listen to the angel Gabriel explain to Mary how the miracle of the incarnation would occur: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35). Each member of the Godhead

would play a part—the Spirit, the Father, and the Son. If the Father belonged in the Old Testament and the Spirit in the Acts and Epistles, this miracle could never have happened.

Or visit the Jordan River as John the Baptist is baptizing Jesus of Nazareth: “As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased’” (Mt. 3:16-17). Once again, the Trinity is working together: the Son obeys, the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks.

When Jesus began His public ministry at Nazareth, the first words

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased’”
(Mt. 3:16-17).

He spoke were from the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on Me . . .” (61:1-2). Here is the Trinity: the Spirit and the Father (Lord) and

the Son. Peter picked up this theme when he gave his message in the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius: “. . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power” (Acts 10:38). We see the Trinity again as Peter explains the functions of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

When Jesus taught His disciples in the upper room (Jn. 13–16), His doctrine was Trinitarian. “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth” (Jn. 14:16–17). “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things” (14:26). “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, . . . He will testify about

Me” (15:26). There’s no confusion of persons here.

In Jesus’ death on the cross, all the persons of the Godhead were involved. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences!” (Heb. 9:14).

All the persons of the Godhead were involved in Jesus’ death on the cross (Heb. 9:14) and in His resurrection (Acts 2:32-33).

Peter announced at Pentecost that the Godhead was also involved in Christ’s

resurrection: “God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, He has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear” (Acts 2:32-33).

Every sinner who has ever trusted Jesus Christ has experienced the saving work of the Trinity. Paul’s hymn in Ephesians 1:3-14 extols the triune God: the Father for electing us (vv. 3-6), the Son for dying for us (vv.7-12), and the Spirit for sealing us (vv.13-14). Paul condenses the truth of this hymn in 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Galatians 4:4-6, and Titus 3:4-6. Peter condenses the salvation work of the Trinity into one verse: “God’s elect, . . . chosen according to the foreknowledge of God

the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by His blood” (1 Pet. 1:1-2).

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The skeptics and scoffers try to use mathematics to refute the truth of the Trinity: “One God + one God + one God = three Gods.” But the persons of the Godhead exist in a dynamic relationship, so the correct “formula” is $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$. “No fact more directly establishes

the uniqueness of the Christian view of God than that of the Trinity,” wrote Dr. Carl F. H. Henry (*Notes on the Doctrine of God*, 1948, p.114). Orthodox Jews

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—Dr. Carl F. H. Henry

believe in one God, as do orthodox Christians, but orthodox Jews do not believe in the deity of Jesus the Son or the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit. They are not Trinitarian.

Obviously, there is much in the doctrine of

the Trinity that is beyond human comprehension and explanation. In his magnificent treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine wrote, “God is greater and truer in our thoughts than in our words; He is greater and truer in reality than in our thoughts.”

In spite of what Thomas Jefferson believed, there are truths known in the heart that cannot easily be defined in the mind or expressed by the lips. Theology often ends in silence and worship.

Christians worship the Triune God. Any other kind of worship is not Christian. The late Dr. James S. Stewart of Edinburgh wrote, “What [the critics] are needing most is to stop discussing and get down on their knees. That is the only attitude in which the ultimate truths of religion

are ever discerned”
(*The Strong Name*,
1940, p.253).

A TRINITY OF PRIVILEGES

Nowhere in the Bible is there a book or a section of a book devoted to explaining the doctrine of the Trinity. Just as the truth of the deity of Jesus gradually dawned upon His disciples, climaxing in Peter’s declaration of faith (Mt. 16:16), so the truth of the Trinity grew out of the personal spiritual experiences of the first Christians. As daily they worshiped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; walked with Jesus; and depended on the Spirit, this marvelous truth took hold of them. James S. Stewart explains, “It began when men made this discovery—that

they could not say all they meant by the word ‘God’ until they had said ‘Father, Son, and Spirit’” (*The Strong Name*, 1940, p.251).

Once this truth gripped the disciples, the Scriptures took on new meaning, their ministry took on new power, and their personal Christian walk took on new depth.

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Christian historians point out that the church itself had to recover these truths in order to experience renewal and revival. The Reformation recovered

the truth of God's grace in justification by faith, not by merit or good works. When academics almost froze the heart of the church, various pietistic movements restored the importance of loving God personally and enjoying His presence intimately. In recent years, the ministry of the Holy Spirit has been foremost, and we've learned to depend on His wisdom and power. The life of the Christian must be Trinitarian, or we will be living beneath our

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Now, let's consider some of those privileges.

THE GRACE OF THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

The early believers knew that their salvation was wholly by grace, for there was no other way to be saved. But they also learned that they had to *live* by grace, for without Jesus, they could do nothing (Jn. 15:5). As the four Gospels and the apostolic letters circulated among the churches, the believers discovered the riches of God's grace; as they served and suffered, they experienced that grace personally. The Scriptures were "the word of His grace" (Acts 20:32). And the "Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10:29) taught them divine truth and enabled them to obey it.

In the early years of the expansion of

the church, there were theological conflicts over law and grace, and some of those conflicts are still with us. The legalistic Jewish believers emphasized obeying the demands of the law, while the Gentile believers rejoiced in the freedom of obedience in the grace of Christ. The law of Moses is a heavy yoke to bear (Acts 15:10), but the yoke of Christ is “easy” and “light” (Mt. 11:28-30). That’s grace! The law was a guardian or “babysitter,” but God’s grace treats us like mature children who can draw upon their rich inheritance (Gal. 4:1-7). The precepts of the law were mere shadows, but by grace we have the living reality in Christ (Col. 2:16-17). The law is a mirror that reveals the sinner’s defilement (Jas. 1:22-25), but the mirror

cannot wash it away. Christians today look into the mirror of the Word,

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a glorious mirror that reveals the face of Jesus Christ and transforms us into His glory (2 Cor. 3:7-18). Law condemns—grace transforms!

There’s nothing sinful about establishing standards and setting goals; but the minute we try to meet the standards and attain the goals *in our own strength*, we have moved from grace to law—and we will fail. Paul’s testimony should

also be our testimony:
“But by the grace of God
I am what I am, and
His grace to me was not
without effect” (1 Cor.
15:10). The life controlled
by grace brings great
glory to the Lord because
nobody can explain it.

Simply because grace
is free doesn't mean that
grace is cheap. Grace is
costly. “For you know the
grace of our Lord Jesus
Christ, that though He
was rich, yet for your
sakes He became poor,
so that you through His
poverty might become
rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). The
only way we can be rich
in grace is to be poor in
ourselves and to trust in
God to help us.

It costs us nothing to
add the word *grace* to our
theological vocabulary,
but it costs us dearly
to practice grace in
everyday life. It cost Jesus
everything to bring God's

grace to us, and it should
cost us to bring that grace
to others. “Cheap grace
is the deadly enemy of
our church,” wrote the
martyred theologian
Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
“Cheap grace is grace
without discipleship”
(*The Cost of Discipleship*,
1963, pp.45,47).

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—*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

THE LOVE OF GOD

It's difficult to maintain
a life of love because
we live in a world that's
heavily controlled by
competition and greatly

polluted by violent words and deeds. We have no problem loving those who love us, but to love those who hate us and hate our Jesus Christ is quite another matter. We think that the easiest way to live is to avoid our enemies and enjoy our Christian brothers and sisters, but Jesus tells us that even the tax collectors and pagans can

We think that the easiest way to live is to avoid our enemies and enjoy our Christian brothers and sisters, but Jesus tells us that even the tax collectors and pagans can do that.

do that. He expects us to love our enemies, pray for them, and do good to them (Mt. 5:43-48). In this way we imitate the Father, who daily gives free sunshine to all kinds of people all over the world and then adds the rain with it. Most people take these loving gifts for granted and don't even say thanks. If the Lord sent us an annual bill for these blessings, we would go broke trying to pay it.

When you and I were born into this world, we were selfish and demanding, because, as infants, crying was the only way we could communicate our discomfort and needs. We had to let everybody know when we were hungry, uncomfortable, bored, and tired, and our caregivers came to our rescue. But as we grew up, our parents and

siblings let us know that such childish behavior was unacceptable. We had to learn to feed ourselves, to walk, to speak, to dress ourselves, to pick up our toys, and to keep ourselves out of trouble. Whenever we lapsed into childish attitudes and actions, we were warned and perhaps disciplined and told to grow up.

When our lives are motivated more and more by the love of God,

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it's evidence that we're maturing spiritually. "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (Rom. 5:5), and that love changes our attitudes and actions. The fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal. 5:22). We don't manufacture love. We yield to the Holy Spirit, obey God's Word by faith, and let the Spirit work in and through us. Often the Lord brings unlovable people into our lives, perhaps people who even profess to be Christians, and we have to get along with them. But this is one of the Lord's ways of cultivating His love in our hearts. It's hard to love people who make life difficult for us, but these people can help us grow in grace and become stronger in faith and love.

Christian love isn't a temporary shallow "fuzzy

feeling” towards people; it’s a determined and sacrificial act of the will.

It’s hard to love people who make life difficult for us, but these people can help us grow in grace and become stronger in faith and love.

Love doesn’t just feel; it goes to work. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son” (Jn. 3:16). “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (Jn. 15:13). Jesus didn’t just feel sorry for us; He did what was necessary to save us.

Depending on “religious feelings” can

lead us astray. As we leave the worship service, we love everybody, and then we discover that somebody has sculptured the front fender of our car in the parking lot.

As I took my seat on a commuter plane, I smiled at the young father sitting behind me with two children. As the plane took off, one of the children began to scream, and the other one threw up. I didn’t feel like smiling, but I knew I’d better let God’s love take over.

God is our loving Father, and the world we live in is our Father’s world. He is in control, but He doesn’t necessarily arrange things to keep us comfortable or to make life easier. Sometimes He permits just the opposite to occur, and we find ourselves nervous and upset and

looking for somebody to blame instead of somebody to love. We

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start groaning instead of growing, and another opportunity is lost for glorifying the Father.

Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone loves Me, he will obey My teaching. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. . . .

As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love" (Jn. 14:23;15:9). "Keep yourselves in God's love," admonishes Jude 21. This doesn't mean that we must work hard to merit God's love, but that we should obey Him from the heart and by our obedience experience His love in a deeper way.

Remember that Christian love is an act of the will. Just as parents and children grow in their love for each other, so the Father wants to have a closer relationship with us. He wants us to come nearer and go deeper. Christians know that God is their Father, but we don't always allow Him to be a Father to us.

I recall times when my wife and I planned special days for our children, but they had their own plans, and we

let them have their way. Then they would find out what they had missed and regretted it. God wants to be a Father to us (2 Cor. 6:14–7:1), but we have our own plans and miss opportunities for deeper love.

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THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Father loves us so much that He sent His Son to die for us, and the Son loves us so much that He willingly laid

down His life for our sins on the cross. But the Holy Spirit loves us so much that *He is willing to live in us and be our helper*. Jesus was away from heaven for about 33 years, but the Spirit has been dwelling in the church here on earth for centuries. I'm not suggesting that the Spirit loves us more than the Father and the Son do, but I do thank the Spirit for His longsuffering with me and for His forgiveness when I have grieved Him. I want to "keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25) and allow Him to work out God's will in my life. Living with me takes love!

The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to glorify the Son. "He will bring glory to Me," said Jesus, "by taking from what is Mine and making it known to you" (Jn.

16:14). As He reveals Jesus to us in the Word, we love the Savior more and grow in our obedience to Him and thereby glorify Him. The Holy Spirit doesn't work in spite of us or instead of us; He works in us and through us, and we must be fit vessels for Him to fill and use.

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The Greek word translated “fellowship” (*koinonia*) has become

popular among believers in recent years. I hear of *koinonia* Sunday school classes, youth groups, camps and retreats, and even coffee bars. The word simply means, “to have in common,” but this “having in common” means much more than being the same age or enjoying the same blend of coffee. No matter what your age or gender, your income or education, your hobbies or political views, if you know Jesus as your Savior and Lord, you and I can enjoy fellowship because the Spirit is living within us. We have Jesus in common, and the Spirit witnesses to that fact. If the basis of our fellowship is something other than Jesus as revealed by the Spirit in the Word—perhaps a pet doctrine, a favorite translation, a gifted

teacher, a denominational distinctive—then it is not true *koinonia*.

How do we “keep in step with the Spirit” and experience this deeper fellowship? For one thing, we must cooperate with the Spirit in His main ministry, which is glorifying Jesus Christ. Jesus came to glorify the Father, and the Spirit came to glorify the Son. The Spirit seeks no glory for Himself, nor should we. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:20-21). Life is what we are alive to, and Christians are alive to Christ because they are alive in Christ.

Glorifying Jesus Christ

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Spirit wrote the Word to reveal Jesus, and as we learn the Word and obey it, we see Jesus and become more like Him (2 Cor. 3:18). If we ignore the Bible, the book the Spirit wrote for us, we grieve the Spirit and miss the help He wants to give us. “But his delight is in

the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:2).

The Spirit not only glorifies the Lord and teaches us the Bible, but He is also working with Jesus in building the church on the earth. Whenever sinners turn to Jesus and are saved, the Spirit baptizes them into the body of Christ and gives them gifts for serving Christ and building up His body (1 Cor. 12:1-13). If I separate myself from God’s people and fail to use my spiritual gifts to minister to the church, I am grieving the Holy Spirit. To “keep in step with the Spirit” means witnessing to the lost and ministering to the saints to the glory of God, and for this we need the Holy Spirit (Jn. 15:26-27). Let’s not so emphasize the spectacular gifts of the

Spirit that we forget the practical graces of the Spirit, what Paul called “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23).

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As God’s children, we are a privileged people, but with every privilege, there also comes danger.

A TRINITY OF PERILS

Let's turn our attention to some New Testament churches and discover how they "fell" from the blessing of God because they ignored their privileges.

THE GALATIAN CHURCHES: FALLING FROM GRACE (Gal. 5:4)

The Judaizers (legalistic teachers) who hounded Paul had invaded the churches he founded in Galatia and had begun to lead the new believers astray. The Christians were moving away from the gospel as they tried to mix God's grace through Jesus Christ with the law of Moses, and this was causing all kinds of problems. "You who are trying to be justified by

law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4). These Gentile believers had never worn the yoke of the Jewish law, yet here they were, stepping out of Christian freedom into legalistic slavery (v.1). They had all the wealth of Christ at their disposal and were now abandoning it to go into debt to the law of Moses (vv.2-6). They had

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been “running a good race” but were now going in the wrong direction (vv.7-12).

The Christian life must be a balanced life. We aren’t saved by keeping the law, but neither are we lawless in the way we live. We aren’t saved by good works, but our salvation leads to good works that are evidence that we know Jesus. It’s

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a dangerous thing to get out of balance. Some churches take grace to an extreme and turn liberty into license. “They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4). “They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny Him” (Ti. 1:16). The Galatian churches went to the other extreme: They so emphasized law that they forgot the grace of God. They had fallen out of the sphere of grace and were in bondage to a religious system that made them slaves.

Paul pointed out that under the law of Moses the people were treated like children. They were under rules and regulations and subjected to “babysitters” who enforced those rules. But

in Jesus Christ, we have an adult standing with God and the privilege of drawing upon His wealth (Gal. 4:1-7). The Spirit lives within us and gives us the direction and

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dynamic we need to live for Christ. It's a basic theological truth that law brings out the worst in us while grace brings out the best in us. The old nature knows no law, but the new nature needs no law. The motivation for obedience comes from God, who "has poured out His love into our

hearts by the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 5:5).

When churches fall from grace, the pulpit becomes harsh and demanding, and those who preach threaten instead of "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15). When we magnify the law, we demand the impossible, because "the law made nothing perfect" (Heb. 7:19). When we magnify the grace of Jesus Christ, we encourage holy living, for it's only by grace that we serve Jesus Christ. "But by the grace of God I am what I am," wrote Paul (1 Cor. 15:10), and that's the testimony of every true Christian who walks in the Spirit. God's holy law reveals His righteousness and His will for us, and God's wonderful grace provides what we need to obey Him and live a holy life.

THE EPHESIAN CHURCH: FALLING FROM LOVE (Rev. 2:1-7)

If we had visited the congregation at Ephesus and worshiped with them, we would have admired everything they were doing. The members were hard workers and were always busy. They didn't tolerate false doctrine, and when they detected heretics, they dealt with them. In spite of opposition and difficulties, they kept right on going and never considered quitting. In every way, the church at Ephesus appeared to be a successful church.

“Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7), and when the Lord looked at the hearts of the Ephesian believers, He saw that they were not filled with

God's love. The verdict was, “You have forsaken your first love” (Rev. 2:4), and the word translated *forsaken* also means “to neglect” and even “to divorce.” The honeymoon was over (Jer. 2:1-2), and the Ephesians' love for Christ and for one another had cooled. The

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Lord isn't necessarily pleased with us just because we are busy serving in the church, and we can't evaluate a congregation just by its outward activities. If our

service and sacrifices are not motivated by love, the Lord can't accept and bless them.

"Remember the height from which you have fallen!" the Lord warned them (Rev. 2:5). The church members thought they were "on top of everything," but they were wrong. Paul had founded the church and taught them the Word, and Timothy had taken over when Paul left. Tradition tells us that the apostle John also ministered in Ephesus. The church had received three inspired letters from Paul—Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and 2 Timothy—and Paul had privately exhorted the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:13-38). What a privileged church it was! In the Ephesian epistle, Paul had pointed out the heights of the Christian

life that we enjoy as we sit enthroned with Christ in the heavenly places, but now the Ephesians had fallen from those heights because their love for Christ had grown cold.

Great privileges are no guarantee of great devotion to Jesus. When the Lord Jesus restored Peter to discipleship (Jn. 21), He didn't ask about his theology or his ministry methods. Three times Jesus asked, "Do you love Me?" (vv.15-

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reward.***

17). If the servant doesn't love the Master, then the service will not please the Master or receive His blessing and reward. "For Christ's love compels us," wrote Paul (2 Cor. 5:14), and that's the only motivation the Lord will accept. The Lord looks on the heart and wants to see it filled with love, "honeymoon love," that grows deeper and deeper as the years go by. In his Ephesian epistle, Paul urged the believers to do "the will of God from your heart" (6:6). The prophet Jonah finally obeyed God and preached God's message in Nineveh, but he didn't do it from his heart. In fact, he hated the people he preached to and was angry with the Lord for showing them compassion (Jon. 4).

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It's a wonderful thing for a local church family and staff to be busy for the Lord, but no amount of religious activity can substitute for our love for Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ. Martha was busy serving Jesus, but it was Mary whom Jesus commended, because she took time to show her love for Him by listening to His words (Lk. 10:38-42). Jesus still asks us as He asked Peter, "Do you love Me?"

THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH: FALLING FROM THE SPIRIT'S FELLOWSHIP

Whenever one of my students said, "We need to be more like the churches in the New Testament," I would ask, "Which one would you want to be like?" The class would then discuss some of the problems in these churches.

The believers in Rome were divided over diets and holy days, and the members of the churches in Galatia were "biting and devouring each other" (Gal. 5:15). Two women in Philippi disagreed over something and created a serious problem (Phil. 4:2-3). The Colossian church was mixed up in Jewish legalism and Oriental mysticism and asceticism, and some of the saints in Thessalonica had quit

their jobs and expected the church to care for them as they eagerly awaited the Lord's return.

And then there was Corinth. The congregation was split four ways (1 Cor. 1:11-12), and some of the believers were using their spiritual gifts to show off instead of to serve the church.

Rivalry and confusion characterized the Corinthians' worship services, and people even got drunk at the church's "love feasts."

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people even got drunk at the church's "love feasts." The members were suing one another in the public courts, and if that weren't enough, one church member was openly committing fornication with his stepmother—and some believers were proud that their church leaders were "so loving and tolerant."

What was the cause of such shameful behavior on the part of these professed believers

When you start thinking like the world, you soon start living like the world, a tragedy that is occurring in churches today.

in Jesus Christ? Paul pointed out the cause in the first two chapters of his first letter: They were depending on "the wisdom of the world" and not on the wisdom that comes from God as the Spirit teaches the Word. When you start thinking like the world, you soon start living like the world—a tragedy that is occurring in churches today. Instead of building the ministry on the gold, silver, and costly stones found in God's Word (Prov. 2:1-6; 3:13-18; 8:10-11,17-21), the Corinthians were using wood, hay, or straw, cheap materials that could easily be found anywhere. If you want gold, silver, and costly stones—the enduring wealth of God's wisdom—you have to dig for them. God help those church leaders who are too lazy

to seek the Lord and dig into His Word but settle for whatever they can “pick up” out in the world!

The Corinthians were not rightly related to the Holy Spirit; they were not making “every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). Paul called them “worldly—mere infants in Christ” (1 Cor. 3:1-3). The Greek word translated *worldly* in the NIV means “made of flesh.” (The KJV uses the word *carnal*.) The Christians in Corinth were living by the standards and appetites of the old life and were not walking in the Spirit. They were feeding on the world’s trash and not growing in the Lord. They needed to obey the Holy Spirit, who is referred to more than 50 times in the two Corinthian letters.

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The Corinthian Christians were “enriched in every way” in the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 1:5), but they were sadly deficient in demonstrating the graces of the Spirit, such as love and peace and self-control. They simply were not spiritual Christians. They lived to please their own

appetites, and they lived just like the lost people in the world.

When their church leaders came together, they didn't search the Scriptures or pray for spiritual wisdom. Instead, they shared the cheap ideas they borrowed from the world and made decisions that catered to satisfying the old sinful nature. Their worship services didn't glorify the Lord because there was no evidence that the Spirit was at work.

I once heard A. W. Tozer say, "If God were to take the Holy Spirit out of this world, most of what the church is doing would go right on and nobody would know the difference." What an indictment—yet I believe it is true. Unwilling to pay the price to be maturing spiritual believers, many church members depend

on worldly wisdom and fleshly energy to attempt to accomplish the work of the Lord, and it will

Unwilling to pay the price to be maturing spiritual believers, many church members depend on worldly wisdom and fleshly energy to attempt to accomplish the work of the Lord, and it will not work.

not work. Scottish author George MacDonald wrote, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably or succeed more miserably." A church that is successful in the eyes of men may be a

failure in the eyes of God. If you doubt that, read Revelation 2–3.

If we expect the Holy Spirit to work in and through our churches, we must seek above all else to glorify Jesus Christ, for that is one reason the Spirit was sent (Jn. 16:14). The Corinthians argued over who was the greatest—Paul, Peter, or Apollos—and a “super-spiritual” group rejected all human leadership and claimed to follow only Christ. They probably caused more trouble than the other three groups combined!

Thomas Merton wrote, “The most dangerous man in the world is the contemplative who is guided by nobody. He trusts his own visions. He obeys the attraction of an interior voice but will not listen to other men. He identifies the will of God

with anything that makes him feel, within his own heart, a big, warm, sweet interior glow Such a man can wreck a whole city . . . or even a nation” (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1961, pp.194-95).

No matter how large or affluent a ministry may be, if the leaders are not searching the Scriptures for God’s wisdom, praying for God’s guidance and power, and seeking to glorify God’s Son, their work is in vain, for the Spirit is not in control.

For the word *contemplative* in Merton's quote, substitute the word pastor, board chairman, missionary, committee member, or parachurch executive, and it still applies. No matter how large or affluent a ministry may be, if the leaders are not searching the Scriptures for God's wisdom, praying for God's guidance and power, and seeking to glorify God's Son, their work is in vain, for the Spirit is not in control. At the judgment seat of Christ, the wood, hay, and straw will only burn up.

St. Patrick said, "I bind unto myself today the strong Name of the Trinity." It is a strong name, and it is a name we can trust.

John Newton wrote:
May the grace
of Christ our Savior,
And the Father's

boundless love,
With the
Holy Spirit's favor,
Rest upon us
from above.
Thus may we
abide in union
With each other
and the Lord,
And possess,
in sweet communion,
Joys which earth
cannot afford.



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