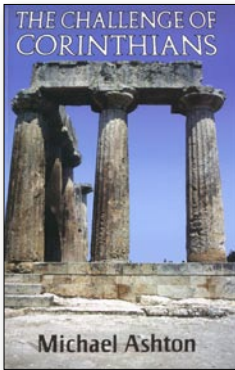


Bible letters for today (2)

John Nicholls



The Challenge of Corinthians, Michael Ashton.

248 pages. Illustrated with pictures, maps, charts and tables.

Price: £10 plus postage and packing.

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WE CONTINUE our review of Brother Michael Ashton's book on the two letters to Corinth by considering his treatment of 1 Corinthians 12–16 and 2 Corinthians.

The Spirit gift problem

Chapters 12–14 of 1 Corinthians are Paul's reply to the question put to him about the Spirit gifts, and Brother Ashton's exposition of these chapters is both lucid and coherent. With the challenge of the Pentecostal movement today, it is not surprising that we have in our Brotherhood a number of excellent expositions of the New Testament teaching on the Spirit and the Spirit gifts, and the interested reader may like to refer to them.¹

The particular merit of Brother Ashton's exposition is that it is part of a study of the whole book, and so the reader comes to appreciate the context more fully. And so the verse that reads, "no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy [Spirit]" (1 Cor. 12:3), which, wrested from its context, would appear to support Pentecostal ideas, is expounded in its first-century background of pagan persecution of our first-century brothers and sisters.

Not all the believers had Spirit gifts, and Paul stresses that the gifts were given for the building up of all the ecclesia, and that they had a limited application and importance. Brother Ashton cites the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness by the Spirit-endowed Bezaleel and Aholiab and their co-workers as an earlier example of a temporary outpouring of Spirit gifts, and to this,

of course, could be added the instance of Elijah and Elisha.

Another helpful feature of this exposition is found in chapter 16, "The Teaching of Pentecost", which shows how the bestowal of the Spirit at Pentecost fulfilled Jesus' promise to the twelve of the 'Comforter'. These gifts reinforced the teaching of the apostles, just as the works of healing by our Lord supported his teaching. Brother Ashton argues cogently that the "promise" spoken of by Peter in Acts 2:33,39 includes the hope of the resurrection and immortality that applies initially to the Lord Jesus and then to all faithful believers.

In Corinth the gift of tongues was being used almost exclusively, and the other spirit gifts hardly at all, and it seems that there were displays of unintelligible ecstatic speech that were a pretence at having the gift of tongues. In certain evangelical circles the same pretence of having the gift of tongues takes place today. Much of 1 Corinthians 14 is devoted by Paul to guiding the ecclesia over the problem. His main advice was that they should "covet earnestly the best gifts", especially prophecy, which would edify and benefit the ecclesia as a whole (12:31; 14:5).

On page 130 Brother Ashton makes a useful summary of Paul's practical advice on controlling Spirit gifts, and on the same page he begins his comments on why Paul did not allow the sisters to take part "in the new arrangement that allowed the involvement of no more than two or three with a specific spirit-gift". Paul's reasoning that the sisters should keep silence in the ecclesial meetings is, like his reasoning on the issue of head-coverings, based on foundation teachings in Genesis 3, not on any fleeting custom of man's devising.

Probably most Christadelphians are aware that the wonderful passage on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is written in the context of the unruly behaviour of the ecclesia over the way they exercised the Spirit gifts, particularly tongues. Once again, the

1. See, for example, 'Spirit' in the New Testament by Edward Whittaker and Reg Carr (available from the Testimony); *The Spirit: A General Exposition on New Testament Usage* by Aleck Crawford; *The Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit Gifts* by Graham Pearce; *God's Spirit in Work and Word* by Fred Pearce.

fact that the book under review expounds all of 1 Corinthians makes this one of the clearest and most compelling explanations of 1 Corinthians 13 we have in the Brotherhood. There is so much here that the reviewer would like to quote, but just one paragraph must suffice:

“What if he [Paul] gave all he possessed to feed the poor, which in modern times we call ‘charity’? He said that this too, unless it is motivated by love, is of no profit. These are harsh words, and they challenge a widespread belief that good works are above all else the mark of Christian discipleship. The act of giving, the apostle says, brings no lasting benefit unless it is accompanied by love. As we have seen, this is not love bred only by fellow-feeling or by compassion, but from a sincere desire to share what God has given, particularly the word of salvation” (p.136).

The resurrection issue

The last of the questions Paul deals with is resurrection, in chapter 15, which we rightly love to quote in our talks and lectures. The language is so clear and compelling that we are grateful to the Corinthian ecclesia for causing Paul to write 1 Corinthians 15 so that the doctrine of resurrection could be spelt out so clearly. Brother Ashton’s exposition, however, helps us to appreciate better the parts that we do not quote very often, such as verses 35-49. He begins by talking of the two strands of proof for the resurrection of Jesus (the Scriptures and personal witness), and then concludes, from the questions that the Corinthians had asked Paul, that Greek ideas about the immortality of the soul had not been totally eradicated from the ecclesia. A splendid section follows, entitled “The Lesson of Israel’s Calendar”, and a lovely section entitled “Each in His Own ‘Troop’ [‘order’ in the AV]”.

Chapter 20 of the book expounds, quite straightforwardly, verse 35 and beyond. He uses Galatians 6:7,8 and John 12:23-25 to underpin his exposition, saying that ‘sowing’ in 1 Corinthians 15:42-44 is talking about the kind of life we live now, in our mortal state, and not the placing of the body in the grave at death. And so ‘reaping’ refers to the change of state of the body to everlasting life, “in glory” and “in power”. This chapter has many useful points in it, and it is of consuming interest to us because we all want, above everything else, to attain to the Kingdom and to have our vile bodies fashioned like the glorious body of our Master.

The second letter

After some helpful words based on the last chapter (16) of the first letter, Brother Ashton turns to the second letter. As we saw in the first part of this review, this was almost certainly the *fourth* letter written by the apostle, and it followed a painful visit that took place after the writing of 1 Corinthians.

Brother Ashton sets out the circumstances surrounding the sending of this ‘second’ letter, and divides it into three parts:

- 1 his defence of his conduct towards the ecclesia (chs. 1–7);
- 2 the collection for the poor ecclesias in Judea (chs. 8,9);
- 3 his defence against those who have personally opposed him (chs. 10–13).

Page 171 has some useful comments about the translations of the letter, for who has not found the AV unintelligible in places? Page 172 has a helpful table that sets out the order of events in the Apostle Paul’s dealings with the Corinth ecclesia.

Who were the adversaries of Paul who stirred up the ecclesia and caused Paul the anguish of heart that is apparent in 2 Corinthians? In chapter 23 the author makes the case that they were Judaising brethren, claiming strong connections with the apostles in Jerusalem. But the news that Titus brought to Paul, that the Corinthians wanted to restore the good relationship Paul had with them and that they still regarded him highly, prompted the thankful tone of the first section of 2 Corinthians. This is Paul’s defence of his conduct towards the ecclesia.

The middle section of the letter concerns the collection for the poor saints, which at first sight seems out of keeping with the principal themes of the letter. But, as Brother Ashton writes:

“The only way Paul’s critics could make any progress was by concentrating attention on the needs of Corinth and ignoring the wider responsibilities of fellowship. When problems arise in ecclesias today, it is often because the focus has turned completely inward, and in such circumstances molehills soon become mountains.

“The antidote in cases like this is to be active in fellowship, and this was the great object of the Judean Collection that Paul organised wherever he travelled. Details of the great collection are therefore central to this second epistle . . . and not a strange digression as some commentators see it” (p. 178).

Paul then concludes the letter with what is described as “a passionate defence of his position and authority”.

Brother Ashton’s exposition of 2 Corinthians needs to be read to appreciate the thread of these three sections, and in doing so the reader will be treated to some fine background and Scripture study. Most speaking brethren who have based a Sunday morning talk on 2 Corinthians will have found that there is usually a theme which can be developed into a helpful exhortation. And so such themes as “comfort in tribulation”, “triumphal processions”, “letters of commendation”, “fading glory”, “an earthly tent and a heavenly house” and “the problem of mis-mating” are all delightfully expounded within the context of the whole letter.

When he comes to the middle section about the collection for the poor Jewish ecclesias, Brother Ashton goes outside 2 Corinthians and gives the wider picture, including the information that there is in Acts 20. This adds to the interest of the exposition. One short quotation gives a flavour of this part:

“But why was it so important for him to reach Jerusalem in time for Pentecost? Under the Law, it was the practice during the feast to provide ‘two wave loaves . . . baked with leaven’ (Leviticus 23:17). True believers would

see the significance of these as representing the Jewish and Gentile parts of the one loaf in Christ. There could be no more appropriate time for Paul and the other brethren to present the gift collected from among the Gentiles to succour their Jewish brethren” (p. 224).

Even in the final section of the letter, where Paul is defending his apostleship, there is much exhortational material. Jeremiah 9:23,24, used in the first letter, is used again to remind us of the eternal principle that human wisdom, riches and might are nothing in comparison to our understanding of the lovingkindness, judgement and righteousness of our God. Paul again goes back to Genesis 2, this time to justify his role as the friend of the bridegroom, anxious to present his bride to him as a chaste virgin. There are wise words about the third heaven, and Paul’s thorn in the flesh.

In conclusion, then, this book is highly commended to the Brotherhood. All those who desire to see the ecclesias united in their love for our Lord Jesus Christ and for each other should read it and benefit from the labours of the author. He has faithfully expounded these sometimes difficult letters, and has been able to comfort us with “the comfort wherewith [he himself has been] comforted of God” (2 Cor. 1:4).

(Concluded)

Using our abilities in the service of the Truth

Lessons from Matthew 25

Carlo Barbaresi

In Matthew 25 our Lord Jesus showed us by means of parables how we may use spiritual and natural resources to overcome the flesh and occupy ourselves in the work which our heavenly Father has given us to do.

THE PARABLES of the Ten Virgins and the Talents in Matthew 25 relate back to the wise servant that Jesus spoke of in 24:45-47: “Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods”.

The Parable of the Virgins

The virgins typify the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2; cf. Rev. 19:7,8). They are waiting to meet the bridegroom, which links with Matthew 24:44: “Therefore be ye also ready: for in such an hour as ye think not the Son of man cometh” (cf. Lk. 12:35-38).

In the parable the virgins have lamps, and vessels with their lamps to contain oil. The oil represents the Spirit Word. How important therefore are the daily readings, that we might imbibe the Word! But more is required than this. In the parable all the virgins had oil in their lamps, but the wise ones had oil in their vessels also.