

“That There May Be Equality ...”

“For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according as a man hath, not according as he hath not. For I say not this that others may be eased and ye distressed, but by equality; your abundance being a supply at this present time for their want, that their abundance may also become a supply for your want; that there may be equality; as it is written, He that gathered much had nothing over; and he that gathered little had no lack” (2 Cor. 8:13-15).

Well do I remember the first time these verses really “stuck in my mind”. It was in the mid to late 1950s and I was struggling with the brotherhood issue of the “sponsoring church”. When World War II ended and our troops came home; they brought with them vivid images of the utter destruction the conquered nations of Germany, Italy, and their allies had sustained. Their hearts ached for those whom they had defeated. But there were some who had a sorrow for a greater need that overshadowed the physical carnage they had seen. Spiritually-minded young men and women saw a greater need; a need for the gospel in those war torn nations. So, a great swelling of interest arose to carry the gospel to those nations and with it an enlarged system brethren had resorted to in lesser scales in past years: a church who received, controlled, and spent funds received from many brethren to facilitate a work all were equally to. Large congregations in various cities became the sponsoring church the work in either Italy, Germany, France, or other European countries. Churches received support from multiple churches, hired preachers, facilitated the work, and soon preachers were preaching all over Europe. This sort of work was not without opposition, but the brethren forged on, ignoring or steamrolling over those who opposed their efforts. After all, “the end justified the means.”

The issues came to a head when James W. Nichols introduced to the Highland Street church in Abilene, Texas his plan for a national radio program which he called the “Herald of Truth”. Soon the program became a reality and hundreds (thousands?) of churches began sending their money to Highland who secured air time on hundreds of radio stations and so, certainly unintentionally, they began the process that would bring about the greatest division our Lord's church suffered in the twentieth century. Opposition arose, pulpits were aflame, religious journals were filled with articles both defending and opposing the Highland efforts. Ultimately the opposing attitudes led to debates among the first of which were the two Harper-Tant debates. E. R. Harper was the preacher for the Highland church; Yater Tant was the editor of the Gospel Guardian; a journal which had been chief in opposing the sponsoring church issue. The first debate was held here in Lufkin, Texas and six months or so later it was repeated in Abilene, Texas. The year in the 1955 or 1956 era.

I will never forget the telling moment (to me) of the debate when bro. Tant read the passage and showed that churches with abundance gave to churches in want; then he showed that the sponsoring church arrangement reversed God's order: Highland had hundreds of members and was an affluent, wealthy church, but they maintained their program by receiving their funds from hundreds and hundreds of small, weak

congregations. According to bro. Tant's reasoning, Highland should have been sending to those weak churches, not them sending to Highland.

But, some see 2 Corinthians 8 differently than bro. Tant's application of a church with abundance sending to a church in want. They see the comparison of equality and inequality as not being between Corinth and Jerusalem; but rather a comparison between Corinth and Macedonian churches; that rather than Corinth being the church with abundance and Jerusalem the church in need; it was Corinth that was the church with abundance and the Macedonian churches the ones in need. Some, to deflect the force of bro. Tant's (and Paul's) argument, argued that actually Macedonian churches were worse off than Jerusalem! They observed that it was written that Jerusalem saints were only called "poor" (Rom. 15:26), while Macedonians were in "deep poverty" (2 Cor. 8:2). They did not take into consideration that while Jerusalem saints were called "poor," that word "poor" which described Jerusalem is the same word which described the widow whom Jesus greatly commended (Lk. 21:3). It is true that while Macedonians were in "deep poverty" they still had ability to give; yet the "poor" widow had nothing for she gave everything she had.

We grant that prior to Paul's illustration of "equality" he had been discussing the Macedonian churches, yet the underlying subject which caused all these comments was the need of the saints in Jerusalem. Corinth sent nothing to the Macedonians nor did Macedonians send aught to Corinth so Corinth's abundance was not a supply for the needs of the Macedonians. The comparison is between Corinth (with abundance) and Jerusalem (with need). And, while the saints in Jerusalem are not expressly mentioned in the early section of chapter 8; it is certainly there in the apostle's mind as well as in the balance of the chapter.

To conclude the matter, consider what was the apostle's purpose in quoting Exodus 16:18? "As it is written, He that gathered much had nothing over; and he that gathered little had no lack" (2 Cor. 8:15). Why does Paul quote this verse? Is it to prove that Corinth filled up Macedonia's lack or that Corinth filled up Jerusalem's lack?

Jim McDonald