

1 CORINTHIANS 16:5-12

INTRODUCTION

As Paul comes to the end of this letter to the Corinthians he makes a number of personal requests in these verses that we are looking at. Paul is not seeking to teach or even exhort the church to do anything in this section except he is to urging the church to receive Timothy (v 11). Yet we can learn a great deal here about Christian work.

1. VISION IN GOD'S WORK (v 5)

In the Lord's work there must be vision, Christians must have a vision for the future. The Christian who is motivated and dedicated to God's work will see needs that must be met and opportunities that need to be explored. There simply must be forward planning in God's work, churches must always be looking for more ways to serve the Lord, for more doors to open so that the gospel can be explained.

At the end of a three year stay in Ephesus Paul wrote this letter and probably gave it to Timothy to deliver (v 10). Paul it seems originally had planned to follow Timothy a short while later (4:19) visiting Corinth both on the way to and from Macedonia (2 Corinthians 1:15-16). But it seems he had to change his plans and decided to visit Corinth later after he had been to Macedonia. So although for some reason he had to change his plan at least he had a plan to change. Even while he was busy ministering in Ephesus he was planning the next steps in his ministry.

So every Christian church and worker must have plans and strategies, there needs to be a vision for the future and a plan that will see that vision realised. You see it is so easy in churches to be content with what has already been accomplished in the Lord's work. For example within our own church it would be easy to say that in our short history we have come along way.

We have our own Pastor and building and have established the work on a sound footing. In the goodness to God, God has added to our number and we have children's and youth works established as well as works to the older generation. It would be so easy to simply want to consolidate and there are times when God does that for consolidation is necessary.

But we must never be content to consolidate God's work we should have a vision for the future always looking and thinking about how to reach more people with the gospel and how to establish new converts in their faith and how to encourage the established saints who face the various trials of life. We must have a vision for the future and then we need plans to carry that vision through.

Of course our plans will need to be changed as we go along, for God opens doors that we did not expect and closes doors that we thought he would open, but the main thing is that there is vision and there are plans that can be altered and changed. An important question I sometimes ask myself is this; what will our church look like in 10 years time. What do I hope to see happening 10 years ahead?

It's a good question to ask for if we have never thought about it then it could be that we have no real vision and are simply getting by week by week month by month and year by year without any long term vision or plans. Of course it is one of the tasks of the leaders in the church to have vision and plans but each member also must feel able to contribute to that vision and implement those plans.

Any Christian of past generations who have accomplished anything in God's power have done so because God has given them vision and plans in order to accomplish what God wants them to accomplish. Obviously an important part of having a God given vision and plans is prayer and a

submissive heart. We need to ask God to enlarge our hearts and to implant within us right priorities and to give us wisdom so that we will have vision and wisdom to know how to make our vision a reality.

William Carey had a vision to reach the people of India so he prayed and planned and prepared so that when God opened the door he was ready to start work and because of the work of Carey the way was open for others to follow him not just to India but also to other parts of the world.

If you do not have a vision for the Lord's work then ask God to give you one and you will be surprised just how the Lord will use you in his church for the advancement of Christ's kingdom.

2. FLEXIBILITY IN GOD'S WORK (v 6-7)

While it is true that we need vision and plans in God's work it is very important that we are flexible as well. Our plans should always be subject to the Lord's will and guidance. Though Paul has a good purpose in mind and a strong personal desire to visit Corinth after going through Macedonia he still used the word "perhaps," for it all depends on the Lord permitting him to do so (vs. 6-7). Although Paul had made clear plans he did not want his plans to become inflexible, he knew that the Lord was in control and therefore could change and alter plans as he saw fit. Now it's not that Paul was indecisive but simply realistic and humble before God.

Paul knew that there were far too many things that are beyond his control but God is sovereign and in complete control and therefore Paul knew he must change his plans as God reveals his purposes to him in future days. A good example of future plans being changes is found in Acts 15:36 & 16:6-7. God changed their plans and sent them to Macedonia instead.

You know all of David Livingstone's life he wanted to be a missionary to China, but God sent him instead to Africa where he worked and died opening up that great continent to mission work. Livingstone had a great vision but he was humble enough and wise enough to follow the Lord's plan rather than his own.

The future does not always pan out as we hope, we cannot possibly imagine every situation that could arise no matter how clear a vision we may have. God is in control of our future and it is his plan that ultimately matters but it is our job to be flexible. For example one church may plan to preach a clear gospel message every Sunday evening and invite sinners to come and hear. However they soon find that no one comes but that they do have some unbelievers beginning to attend the morning service.

Now that church would be inflexible if they continued to preach gospel messages on Sunday evenings because that was their original plan. No they would need to alter their plan and preach the gospel clearly on a morning when the unbelievers are present. Likewise churches can run meetings to reach a particular age range.

At first the meeting is used greatly by the Lord but as the years go by it seems that the meeting is no longer meeting the needs that once it did. What should a church do? It should close the meeting of course but sadly on most occasions churches would carry on with the meeting. It takes a brave church to stop the meeting and start something else that will be more effective in reaching that age range.

Sadly many churches are not flexible enough when it comes to stopping meetings and starting new ones. Often they start new ones while maintaining old ones and the end result is exhaustion for the members of the church. Inflexibility can be a great barrier to God's work and flexibility is not a sign of weakness but of humility.

3. THOROUGHNESS IN GOD'S WORK (vs. 7-8)

Doing the Lord's work in the Lord's way involves doing it thoroughly. If Paul was to accomplish anything worthwhile during his stay at Corinth he knew that he would have to give them more than just a passing visit, he therefore hoped to spend time with them as the Lord permits. He knew that God's work must be done thoroughly and that casualness has no part to play in God's work.

He wanted his work to last and that involved spending time with them. Now as a church we must attempt to do everything thoroughly. For example in the great commission we are told to make disciples not converts. That involves spending time with people teaching them, it is a demanding process and it cannot be done quickly carelessly or superficially.

Paul had spent 18 months establishing and pastoring the church at Corinth he knew that the letter that he is writing would only begin to help solve the serious problems that the church was having. Therefore if possible he wanted to spend the winter at Corinth (v 6). You see Paul wanted to teach every Christian everything he could at every opportunity he had so that they might become mature and established in the faith.

He wanted to be thorough in God's work but thoroughness does not just depend on the time spent but on the quality of that time spent.

Therefore let me ask you do you do the work that you are involved in within the church thoroughly? What about the work among the older generation. Is that a work that we prepare well for and work at improving? Is that a work that we think about often and pray about and seek the Lord's will concerning how best to do it? What about the children's and young people's work.

Do we plan well, prepare well and give ourselves wholeheartedly to it. What about coming to church and the Bible Study? Do we prepare ourselves to hear God's word and to pray? Do we thoroughly give ourselves to the worship of God or do we do the tasks that we do without any real prayer, plans or preparation. Even the unseen jobs like cleaning the church and the practical jobs around the building should be done thoroughly because it is the Lord's work that you are doing. God's work involves time, planning, prayer and effort and really if God's work is worth doing at all then it is worth doing thoroughly.

It was because of Paul's concern for thoroughness that he was going to wait in Ephesus until Pentecost before coming to Corinth because there was much work yet to be done (v 9). There is far too much work done for the Lord that is done in a haphazard way or is not completed because the people or person who is suppose to do it has moved on to do something else perhaps something that seems more exciting.

Well God wants us to be faithful and thorough in whatever task he has given us to do, he is the one who opens doors for us to be used by Him but he wants us to give ourselves thoroughly to that work and to remain faithful in it until he moves us on to do something else for him, like Paul stayed in Ephesus until it was time to go to Corinth.

You know sometimes it is possible to take on so much work in the Lord's work that nothing is done thoroughly because we are simply too busy. Sometimes and this is hard but we need to say no so that we can give ourselves to doing God's work thoroughly.

4. OPPOSITION IN GOD'S WORK (v 9)

There is always opposition to be faced in God's work. To be honest there is no true church and no true ministry where opposition does not exist. For our enemy the devil will make sure that if we are doing God's work then he will get others to oppose it because the devil opposes it.

This was true in Paul's work at Ephesus but opposition did not intimidate Paul because Paul knew that opposition meant that he was doing a worthwhile work for God. Notice how a door of effective work being opened up always leads to opposition. Paul knew that the opposition at Ephesus could cause damage to God's cause, which is why he was going to stay on until the time of Pentecost.

He wanted to help the church face the opposition and encourage the believers to continue in the work in spite of opposition.

Now we need to learn the lesson that opposition is part and parcel of God's work. Sometimes that opposition comes from outside the church and that is what we should expect. However it is always harder to handle and more discouraging when the opposition comes from within God's church sometimes from Christians who should know better. But opposition should never intimidate us but should in fact encourage us for it shows that we are doing the Lord's work in his way. Opposition is a sign that God has opened up for us a door of opportunity to serve him effectively.

Also opposition is also a sign that the people that we are serving need us and to give up the work that we are involved in because of opposition would be to leave the people vulnerable to the attacks of the Evil one. We need to face the facts if we are going to be involved in the Lord's work at any level within the church then you will face opposition of some sort.

If you don't want to face opposition then don't be involved in God's work. But remember failure to be involved in God's work is sin for we are all called to be his servants and to serve him in our churches and in our world.

5. TEAM WORK IN GOD'S WORK (vs. 10-12)

It is important to remember that no one is to work alone in the church, or in God's work. God places us in churches so that we will work together because we need one another. Paul was certainly a team worker. Paul always worked closely with others he was never one for working alone.

Paul had sent Timothy to Corinth perhaps with this letter in his hand and he was concerned that Timothy might be ignored or mistreated (v 10). The Corinthian's were proud self sufficient and strong willed and could have rejected Timothy and his authority. So Paul pleads with the church that they will not give Timothy any reason to fear, Paul desires that the church will treat Timothy properly.

Timothy was God's servant and a respected fellow worker of Paul's, he was doing the Lord's work just as Paul was therefore the church at Corinth must treat him with respect and as a servant of the Lord and not hinder the work by mistreating him. Paul considered Timothy a valued member of the team, equal to him and doing the same work as him.

Therefore he should be given the same respect that Paul should have received. He should be accepted like Paul and the church were to help him and provide for him so that he is able to return to Paul (v 11), for Paul was looking forward to seeing Timothy and the other brothers that he sent out again.

Paul was not jealous of his fellow workers, what was important to him was that God's work was progressing; he closely associated himself with other Christians. Even at Corinth with all its problems he constantly used the term "brothers."

A true church is a church where there is clear teamwork where brothers and sisters work together for the progress of God's work. We must learn to acknowledge other people's gifts and works and never be jealous when God blesses their work in the church while it seems that our work is

struggling. Remember there is no such thing as your work or my work or our work it is all the Lord's work and we are his servants.

So rejoice when God blesses the young people's work or the children's work or the older people's work. Don't become jealous of others in the church, realise that we need one another and don't feel inferior. You are as important to this church as anyone else and you are as valuable as anyone else. No one's work is more valuable than anyone else's; it is all God's work.

That is not the same as saying that some work is more important in churches than others but no work is more valuable than others. Do you feel part of the team within the church? Do you feel wanted and valued? If not then perhaps it is the fault of the church that has made you feel unwelcome.

Perhaps it is your fault because you are competing against others all the time instead of learning to work with others and see everyone as part of God's team called the church. Paul knew he needed others and others needed him, therefore every true church that is doing God's work is a church that is united and is dependant on one another as they work together as a team doing God's work.

It is this sense of teamwork that causes Paul to encourage Apollos to join Timothy at Corinth. It seems that Apollos did not sense the Lord's leading to go to Corinth (v 12) for he obviously still felt he had a job to do at Ephesus. But if the Lord gave him the opportunity to go in the future then Apollos would willingly go.

If his gifts could be used to help Timothy and the church at Corinth then he would go but for now Apollos was convinced that he needed to help the work of God at Ephesus. Apollos was not concerned about himself it was where he was needed that mattered, he was part of a team and if going to work at Corinth is what the Lord wanted then he would do so in the future if the Lord opened the door. Is that how we see our gifts and our part in God's church. We are all part of a team, and we all have gifts to be used as God leads and guides us.

Therefore each one of us must be willing to do our part in God's work and to use our gifts for his glory, to follow His leading and be available to go where ever God wants us to work for Him. For now God has brought us to this church to do his work here. This is where we must serve as part of His team, but we must always be willing to go elsewhere to serve God should He lead us in that direction.

The important thing is not our ministry but the church's ministry, it's not our church but the Lord's church therefore let us serve Him and one another in this church until he leads us to serve him elsewhere.

Remember the important thing is that God's work is being done whoever does it does not matter.

Amen