

Rightly Dividing The Letters of Paul

By **John H. Essex**

PAUL'S nine letters to the seven churches fall naturally into three distinct groups, which present to us three different phases of this present administration of grace. The three groups are:

The **Preparatory** Epistles. (Romans; 1 & 2 Corinthians Galatians).

The **Perfection** Epistles. (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians).

The **Promise** Epistles. (1 & 2 Thessalonians).

Each of the groups is characterized by one of the sublime trinity of graces, which Paul himself brings to our notice in 1 Cor. 13:13, namely, faith, love and hope (expectation). Just as the greatest of these graces is love, because when faith is lost in sight and when hope is merged into reality, love will still remain; so the epistles which are characterized by this grace are the most lofty of the Apostle's writings.

To understand fully the Pauline letters; it is necessary to "rightly divide" or "correctly partition" them into their respective groups, and to recognize the *time-element* in each group.

These time-elements are most important, for while each group contains references to *all* phases of the present economy, each has its own *dominant* theme, which is *past* in the first group, *present* in the second, and *future* in the third.

For instance, the dominant theme of the first group is "*Christ Crucified*" (see especially 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2), and the position of the believer is one of association with Him *in death*, of being crucified *with* Him. (Rm. 6:3-8). The characteristic of this group is *faith*, by which the believer is justified, and freed from the *condemnation* of sin.

But the crucifixion of Christ is past, and our being crucified with Him is past, too, and so, in the second group we find that the dominant theme has changed. The word "crucify" is never mentioned in the perfection letters, although previously Paul had been determined not to perceive anything among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. Now the main theme becomes "*Christ Glorified*" or Christ seated in the heavenlies at God's right hand, and given a Name that is above every name. The believer is presented, not as being dead with him, but as being "roused with Him" and "living with Him". (Col. 3:1; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:13). The characteristic of this group is *love*, by which the saint is freed from the *power* of sin. This is our present experience.

But we look forward, to the coming of the Lord for His church, and we find this in the third group, where the dominant theme is "*Christ Completed*", and in which the believer is united with his Lord. The characteristic of the Thessalonian epistles is *hope*, or *expectation*, and in these the child of God realises his longing to be freed from the *presence* of sin by his being in the presence of Christ.

The position of the believer in Paul's writings is beautifully presented to us in summary form in two verses of Colossians, chapter 3.

We read:

"If then you were roused together with Christ, be seeking that which is above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Be disposed to that which is above, not to that on the earth"-(and now the summary begins)-"*for you died*" (that is the position of the believer in the first group of epistles, and Paul speaks of it as past, i.e; "you died", not "you are dead", as the King James version renders it, for now we are alive)-"*For you died, and your life has been hid together with Christ in God*" (that is our present position, as portrayed by the perfection epistles). "*Whenever Christ, our life, should be manifested, then you, also, will be manifested together with Him in glory.*" This is the theme of the promise epistles, and is still future.

How far future none can tell. May it not be long!

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