**THE ACTS OF THE SINFUL NATURE**

***19The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20idolatry and witchcraft; hatred,*** ***discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition,*** ***dissensions, factions 21and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.***

**Galatians 5:19-21 (NIV)**

Paul is now going to spell out specifically why the sinful nature and the Spirit stand in such opposition to each other. This first list describes the world in which the Galatians once lived (5:19-21) and in which their pagan neighbours still live. These are the ‘evident acts’ of those who live according to the sinful nature. The second list (5:22,23) describes what people will look like who live by following the leading of the Spirit.

Lists like these appear throughout Paul’s writings although no two lists are the same. As in other cases, the present lists are adapted to the situation in Galatia. The lists are not intended to be exhaustive. By adding *‘and the like’* (5:24) Paul is saying the lists are representative.

Even though the two lists describe unbelievers and believers, Paul intends them to describe the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of the Galatians themselves. These ‘acts of the sinful nature’ are the very things ‘*that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified’* (5:24) and so are no longer an option for those who ‘*live by the Spirit*’ (5:13,16).

Paul uses a word here translated ‘acts’ (‘*acts of the sinful nature’*) that he has used earlier for the ‘works’ of the Law (2:16 [3X]; 3:2,5,11). By word association, this would remind the Galatians that both categories of ‘work’ (religious observance and sins of the flesh) belong to the past for those who are in Christ and who now live in the Spirit. These works (acts, deeds) express the ‘desires of the flesh’ against which the Spirit stands in unrelenting opposition.

The fifteen items fall into four categories: (1) illicit sex – 3 items (2) illicit worship – 2 items (3) breakdown in relationships – 8 items (4) excesses – 2 items.

What is striking in comparing this list to others in Paul’s letters is what is missing: especially covetousness or greed, which appear in most of the other lists, and the related sins of violence (murder) and the various sins of the tongue (which is the category with the largest number when all the lists are collated). This suggests that whatever ‘biting and devouring one another’ meant (5:14), it most likely did not include various forms of verbal abuse.

Taking the categories in Paul’s order:

(1) sexual sins

These come first, just as they did in Paul’s similar listings in 1 Corinthians 5:10,11 and 1 Corinthians 6:9,10. This group of sins were not necessarily considered wrong by the pagan world. The first, ‘*sexual immorality*,’ is the general noun derived from the word ‘prostitute’ and was a ‘catch-all’ word for various kinds of ‘unsanctioned sexual relations.’ The next, ‘*impurity*,’ was regularly used by Paul in connection with sexual impurity. The third, ‘*debauchery*,’ was used by pagan Greeks for sexual conduct that exceeded all bounds of decency or at the least, what a group considered socially unacceptable. It is quite likely that the Galatian believers, though Gentiles, had earlier been associated with the Jewish synagogue (as was common in Pauline churches) and would have adopted a ‘Jewish/Christian’ attitude toward these sins. This means Paul is beginning with sins he knows will have been abandoned by the Galatians.

(2) idolatry and witchcraft

Pagan Greeks would never have used the term ‘idol’ for their gods. But to Jews and Christians, idolatry was consistently understood to be breaking the second commandment, which goes beyond the first (no other deities) to the creation of ‘images’ that represent these deities. This was forbidden because God had created human beings to be His image-bearers on earth. But while primarily a breaking of the second commandment, ‘idolatry,’ by Paul’s time also included devotion to any deity other than God and Christ. The addition of ‘*witchcraft’* only occurs here in Paul’s vice lists, where its use in conjunction with ‘idolatry’ reflects the fascination with ‘magic’ that was so pervasive in the Greco-Roman world,

(3) breakdown in inter-personal relationships

This grouping shifts to the plural for all but the second and third words. This means that while the first two sets described a single phenomenon, this and the final set put emphasis on individual, recurring acts.

The first is ‘*hatred*’ (literally: ‘hatreds’) referring to individual acts of hatred toward another. This is the core word that opens the doorway to those that follow. The next four, ‘*discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition’* all flow out of ‘*hatred*.’ Zeroing in on the first and last, ‘*discord’* relates to ‘engagement in rivalry, especially over a ‘position’ taken in a matter’ (BDAG). ‘*Selfish ambition’* is a plural noun derived from the word translated ‘*discord’* but has a broader range of possible meanings. In 2 Corinthians 12:20 the same word is translated ‘*factions*.’ In Philippians 1:17 and 2:3 it is translated ‘*selfish ambition’* which is probably the meaning here – selfish ambitions (plural) that lead to community in-fighting. This is highlighted where it is followed by two words that explicitly refer to selfish ambition gone awry: ‘*dissensions’* and *‘factions.****’***The last word is ‘envy’ (again: plural).

(4) excesses

The final two are again plural: ‘*drunkenness’* and *‘orgies.’* They would be more easily seen by the Galatians for what they were. Paul may have included them to help the church see where their own failings fitted into a larger picture of ‘acts of the sinful nature.’

This list is in no sense exhaustive. Paul adds ‘*and the like’* to make that very clear. It describes basic human behaviour, human acts, which are very visible and identifiable – ‘works’ that people do who live in keeping with their basic fallenness and that of the world around them.

‘*I warn you, as I did before, that* *those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God’* (5:21b). For Paul ‘inheriting’ or ‘not inheriting’ the final eschatological glory is predicated on whether or not one is a ‘Spirit person,’ having become so through faith in Christ. The ‘acts of the sinful nature’ don’t describe, for Paul, the behaviour of believers but of non-believers. It isn’t that believers couldn’t do these things. He is writing to a church where these ‘acts’ were happening. His concern is with ‘*those who live like this,’* those who continue in this behaviour. Paul is warning them not to live as non-believers but as believers (1 Corinthians 6:9,10; Ephesians 5:5) who are facing God’s wrath (Colossians 3:6).

Paul’s emphasis is positive. He is not emphasising the destiny of the ungodly but the positive implication of believers inheriting the kingdom – especially since ‘inheritance’ has played such a commanding role in the argument of 3:6 – 4:7. As earlier (4:6,7), ‘inheritance’ belongs to those who, by the Spirit, give evidence that they are God’s rightful heirs. Because such an inheritance is here implied for those who live by the Spirit, Paul will conclude with a list of the ‘fruit’ of this new life.

Without direct referencing these studies have drawn, sometimes heavily, on:

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