

TAKE MY YOKE

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1. I am lowly

‘Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’¹

In this study, we shall take the familiar words of Christ about taking His yoke, and show how Paul, acting in ‘presbytery’ mode, laid the yoke of Christ upon the Corinthian church. The two books of Corinthians are a marvellous illustration of how believers are to be yoked to the fellowship and administration of the body of Christ.

Having himself accepted the yoke and found *rest*, Paul employed the meekness and lowliness of Christ in ‘laying his hands’ upon the *rest-less* church. The word ‘yoke’ appears only once in Paul’s two books. ‘Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers.’² However, the associated words from Jesus’ admonition, ‘gentle’ and

1. Matt 11:29 2. 2 Cor 6:14

1. I am meek and lowly

'lowly', when added to references to Paul's weakness, gentleness, carefulness and humility, give us a long list of Scriptures related to our subject. Paul wrote to, and approached, the church in meekness and lowliness.³ We'll discuss this point quite extensively. He came in the same demeanour as Christ: 'Behold your King is coming ... *lowly* and riding on a donkey'.⁴ He came *knocking* upon the church door, as Christ did to the church of Laodicea, desiring to 'sup' with them in true communion.⁵ In fact, Paul represented the hand of Christ (cf knocking) in the aspect of presbytery, addressing the church and its 'star' (*angelos*) administration. His mode for recovering the Corinthian church provides us with the model for recovering the seven-fold church of today. His two letters form a kind of 'workbook' for yoking carnal believers to the *koinonia* of the body of Christ.

Labour to enter that rest

A yoke is an instrument of work, not of rest. However, we soon realise that all the power is in the yoke, with Christ on one side and us on the other. The power is in the yoke, and not in ourselves. Hence we find rest when we are fitted to our proper place by the hand of Christ. We are told in Hebrews to 'labour to enter that rest'.⁶ So the heavy labour of entering rest, ie of finding the yoke, gives way to the rest of working to accomplish only what was prepared beforehand - the works which were finished before the world began.⁷ One kind of labour ends, and the yoke defines a different kind of labour.

3. 2 Cor 10:1 4. Zech 9:9 5. Rev 3:20 KJV 6. Heb 4:11 7. Heb 4:11 KJV, Eph 2:10; Heb 4:3. 2 Cor 10:15

Overview of our subject

Our subject draws upon both books of Corinthians, with aspects too many to cover in a single study. The backdrop to our meditation includes all the aspects listed below:

- the cross as the weapon for destroying worldly wisdom, as well as the key to the meekness of wisdom from above;

- the cross as the wisdom and power of God;

- the cross as a stumbling block (Gr. *skandalon*, a bent-stick trap) or snare that offends the flesh, captures all carnal craftiness and leads us to the obedience of Christ;

- the weakness of God which is stronger than men, meaning that there is an entire mode of victorious administration that is defined as 'the weakness of God';

- the foolishness of God, which is that purpose of God to express Himself in and through flesh, specifically by the foolishness of preaching;

- the alternative to weakness and foolishness: the way that the cross may be emptied of its power;

- a revision of our essential calling: God chooses the 'foolish', the 'weak', the 'lowly', the 'despised' and those who 'are not'; the foolish find wisdom, the weak find strength, the lowly are exalted in the name (named), the despised inherit and those who 'are not' are raised with Christ⁸;

- the essential life of the Godhead: revising the connection between the cross, the yoke, the principle of the seed, the dying and living of Jesus, and laying down our lives one for another;

- the self-centred use of law to defend or assert one's rights; leading to envy, partiality, division, court action, malice and idolatry;

8. From *The Highway of the Seven Stars*, p64

1. I am meek and lowly

- the effect of law upon a church's administration: leading to the dynamics of consensus or hierarchy, autocracy or democracy, collegiate and corporate structures which do not conform to the Godhead model;

- the danger of synthesising law with the true administration;

- 'godlikeness' versus godliness;

- how the hand of presbytery restores a local church to the corporate yoke of Christ;

- how presbytery 'rebirths' and reforms a church by a fatherhood mode;

- how we are to warn and rebuke our beloved children;⁹

- how presbytery 'lives and dies' together with a local church, activating the seed principle for increase;¹⁰

- how the presbytery exemplifies submission so as to acknowledge the human face of Christ in the midst;

- how to revise a local church *angelos* administration, according to the instructions of 1 Corinthians 12-14;

- how to avoid 'transforming ourselves' into an *angelos* before the maturing process bears genuine fruit;¹¹

- how local administration submits to presbytery authority within the 'yoke';

- the proper use of authority, as opposed to the control that is motivated by reaction to disorder;

- how to use authority for edification and not destruction;

- how to allow Christ to come in and 'sup', as per the vision of Christ toward Laodicea, so that we embrace genuine *koinonia* in the Lord's death;

- how presbytery works to restore true *koinonia*, where members discern the corporate body;

9. 1 Cor 4:14 10. 2 Cor 7:3 11. 2 Cor 11:13

- how imputing operates within the one corporate 'seed', as opposed to seeking to trade and impute toward an individual 'seed';
- Satan's mode of trading as the alternative to the multiplying dynamic: as when the king of Sodom offered Abraham a 'give and take' relationship;
- giving and receiving as the basis for increase, as exemplified by the Macedonian Christians;
- the reasons for lack of increase to the 'regions beyond';
- giving-love as the mechanism for increase, as in the Godhead;
- how to address those who 'have not love', whose faith-imputing is profiting nothing;
- how to use spiritual weapons to cast down high-minded assessments and to yoke believers to the obedience of Christ.

While not all of these topics will be covered in the study, the listed elements show the overall direction.

2. Toward the Ephesian Pattern

Of all the epistles and passages that relate to the Ephesian Pattern, perhaps the most important sections of Scripture are the two books of Corinthians. The first was written from Ephesus, and the second shortly after Paul's departure from there. Because our present interest is in restoration, the Corinthian struggles at the time of Paul's writing, and his 'method' of restoring and yoking the church, are of particular interest to us. Clearly, Paul understood how to minister the cross so as to restore unity and call the church to maturity and fruitfulness. We speak in our title of a 'presbytery handbook', because Paul, and like-minded messengers such as Titus and others, was acting as the 'hand' of Christ. They were intent upon apprehending the Corinthians and restoring them to the corporate yoke of Christ. So our purpose is

to review the books of Corinthians as a handbook by which a presbytery might restore a church to the yoke.

At the heart of their dissembling, the Corinthians were unequally yoked to 'lawlessness' and 'darkness', thus warning us how easily this can happen to a gifted, charismatic church. The focus of our study is the mode of 'weakness'¹² that Paul employed in addressing the Corinthians. In fact, he speaks of the weakness of God as being stronger than men. On first reading, we could think this expression to be nothing more than a figure of speech - the weakness of God is stronger than men! - as if a champion on a bad day is still better than his contenders. It becomes clear however, that Paul understood the key to the power of God. He knew how to be yoked to the power that is *in* a yoke; in this case, Christ's yoke.

In terms of Ephesian Pattern, we began our quest many years ago with the call to first love. Since then, we have exercised ourselves toward understanding first love as an entire culture for family and church life. We saw the need to practise first love as a mode of leadership as well. This has led us through a great many stations upon our journey, in the hope of recovering the character of the New Testament church as it was at Ephesus before it fell from first love. We have maintained restoration as our goal, and yearned for a coming together of the body of Christ from its Corinthian-style division. Our ideals have been earnestly maintained, but our struggle to reform our previous religious cultures has prevented our achieving them as we had hoped. Our understanding of the lampstand and of the 'star', or *angelos*, that cares for each lampstand, has also progressed. But the challenge lies heavily upon us as to how to proceed further in restoration. This is where the Corinthian scene is so helpful.

12. 1 Cor 2:3

The Corinthian scene in brief

The Corinthian church was established during a visit by Paul toward the end of his second missionary journey. Mid-way through his time in Ephesus, as part of the third journey, Paul wrote 1st Corinthians.¹³

Now the church in this foremost centre of Jewish acumen and Greek culture, was being overcome by Jewish fascination with the supernatural, and by Greek fascination with philosophy (sign-seeking and wisdom.¹⁴).

Clearly, in part, the gospel was merely being added onto the existing cultures and mindsets.

‘Babes’ were not advancing to maturity.

The church was rich in gifts, but carnal division, immorality and idolatry were gaining a foothold.

There were signs, Paul obviously felt, that the church was not yet established through, and by, suffering. Their works were flammable - ‘wood, hay and straw’- not ‘gold, silver and precious stones’.¹⁵

The church was starting to resonate like ‘sounding brass’ or a ‘clanging cymbal’.

The public meetings were becoming idolatrous and eccentric.¹⁶

From the second letter, we interpret that the Corinthians needed a thorough revision on how to live the life of Christ, and how to administer the glory of the new covenant, instead of the glory of law. Overall, the believers were unequally yoked to lawlessness and

13. Scholars believe that there was a letter before this, alluded to in 1 Cor 5:9, probably one between the two that we have (2 Cor 7:13) and also one after, possibly absorbed in the content of 2 Cor 10-13. Careful analysis also suggests that Paul made a brief ‘painful visit’ (1 Cor 16:5) from Ephesus, followed some time after by the relieved tones of his 2nd epistle, written from Macedonia upon meeting up with Titus. 2 Cor 7:5-7. See *Cities on Fire* p42. The second visit is the one alluded to in this volume, when we speak of Paul’s willingness to be confined and to lay down his life in Corinth, awaiting a release in the believers’ faith that would bring increase, and allow Paul to move to the regions beyond. 14. 1 Cor 1:23
15. 1 Cor 3:12 16. 1 Cor 10:7; 14:23

darkness, and not to the fatherhood of the presbytery by which Christ would be formed in them. This is clear from 2 Corinthians 6:14-18.

Paul's overall message

By the time Paul writes his first letter from Ephesus, and his letter after leaving Ephesus, he is even more mature in his understanding of how the churches are to be established through suffering (the affliction of the seed).

Paul is also mature in his exercise of authority. He knows how to employ the appropriate 'weapons' to make everything captive to Christ.¹⁷

He understands how to be yoked, himself, to the 'meek' and 'lowly' yoke of Christ which brings rest. He is determined to release the young churches from all other unequal yokes, and harness them to Christ.

Paul has understood how to be identified with the cross of Christ as the wisdom and power of God.

He is now able to administer the cross himself, as a fellow-worker with Christ.

He understands the 'weakness of God' - how to be 'weak in Him' and how to live by the power of God - as is the principle of the seed.¹⁸

He has understood that the power of God in resurrection was always 'toward you', for the sake of the body of Christ.

First, second, third visit

He particularly understood how to establish churches by the three-phase operation of the seed - planting, process and increase, or death, burial and resurrection.

17. 2 Cor 10:4 18. 2 Cor 13:4

2. *Toward the Ephesian pattern*

Across three visits to churches (or approaches by letter instead), Paul followed a set pattern. The first visit was to establish the gospel and plant the seed, by yoking them to the corporate yoke. The second visit was to observe and support their process in the purging fires of affliction. On the third occasion, he could identify those who had been fathered, those who were of the same spirit with the presbytery, and therefore ordain elders. It would appear that Corinth stalled between visits, requiring a presbytery intervention to yoke them once again to the seed and process for increase. The picture emerges that Corinth was a church not established through suffering as others were - hence the tone of the second letter, where the themes of suffering, consolation, the dying of the Lord Jesus, and strength through weakness are prominent. Paul hoped that his 'second time' admonition (ie the first letter, which followed his first visit) had yoked them afresh to the cross of Christ. By the third time, as mentioned in his second letter, he would have hoped to find maturity and increase.

'Now for the third time I am ready to come to you ... for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.'¹⁹

'This will be the third time I am coming to you ... I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write.'²⁰

Hearing the second time

Let us dwell on the thought that by the third time, the presbytery should be able to find the fruit of the second time visitation. 'And the word of the LORD came to me the second time.'²¹ Let's relate this thought to our need to hear the word on the Ephesian Pattern for the second time. The question, as for Corinth, is aptly focused in

19. 2 Cor 12:14 20. 2 Cor 13:1-2 21. Jer 1:13. See also Isa 11:11

Stephen's last sermon. Will we *hear* the second time, or *miss* the visitation because we did not survive the trial of our faith, the very trial that forms the beaten gold of the lampstand?

'And the second time Joseph was made known to his brothers.'²² Stephen's sermon reminded and warned the hearers of this crucial historic theme. What was it that angered the Jews? Stephen reminded them that, in their history as a nation, God had blessed them once, as at Passover for example, but then expected them to endure until He met them the second time. In many cases, they did not endure to the second time. They hardened their hearts and resisted the Holy Spirit. They received from God initially, but did not 'survive' the second time.

Applying this to Corinth and then to ourselves, the question is: 'Will we become second time people, or will we 'fall in the wilderness'?'²³ The New Testament churches were not established the first time, on the apostles' first visit. Only after enduring affliction and responding to the gospel word for the second time, did they become established. Then by the third visit, a tested *angelos* could be ordained. This helps explain why we read very little about viable elderships, when Timothy and Titus *had* been *instructed* to ordain elders in every place.²⁴ Notably, the seven churches of Revelation are described as having *angelos* 'stars' by the time they are addressed by Christ. Obviously, other churches besides Ephesus, and perhaps even Corinth, did develop an *angelos* as a result of second time process.

In our case, we can testify that the vision of the Ephesian Pattern has come to us in a 'first time' revelation. As we approach its second time proclamation, we must see whether we can emerge from the relational trial, from the affliction and burial of the seed, and from the scandal that the word has caused, to hear the word a second time. Will we build upon our gifted foundation with precious stones, or

22. Acts 7:13 23. Heb 3:17 24. Titus 1:5

2. *Toward the Ephesian pattern*

become false brethren just as the second time breaks upon us? The dynamics of heaven and hell, of salvation and damnation, are active right in our midst.

Gifted but false *angelos*

Paul understood the impact of false brethren,²⁵ who began as gifted luminaries, just like Lucifer, but who were ‘transforming themselves into angels of light’.²⁶ We could say they were pursuing the aspect of *angelos*, but from a base of self-projection, not from submission. We shall develop this thought later. It would appear that Paul’s first visit produced a whole range of gifted members. Some were maturing and being yoked by presbytery to their true place in the body. Some were becoming false by their self-projection and rejection of the presbytery. A genuine local star-messenger had not yet emerged.

This was the troubled mixture to which Paul came, and later wrote, employing the foolishness and weakness of God as a stumbling-block to arrest believers, and yoke them once again to the cross and its process.

25. Cor 11:13, 26; cf Gal 2:4 26. 2 Cor 11:13

3. Lowly among you

The connection between Christ's yoke and Paul's mode of Christian ministry is abundantly clear when we compare the verses in Matthew chapter eleven with Paul's comments to the Corinthians in the second letter.

'Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am *gentle* and *lowly* in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.'²⁷ These were the words of Christ. Now notice what Paul says.

'I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the *meekness* and *gentleness* of *Christ* - who in presence am *lowly* among you.'²⁸ The parallel between these Scriptures is unmistakable. Christ says that He is gentle and lowly. Paul pleads with the church as one who is gentle and lowly.

27. Matt 11:29-30 28. 2 Cor 10:1

3. *Lowly among you*

In this same chapter, Paul continues to speak about obedience and limits, and declares that the acceptance of limits is the key to multiplication. ‘We will not boast beyond ... the limits of our sphere ... having hope that as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you ... to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.’²⁹

It’s not difficult to see that Paul’s address is entirely connected with the principle of the seed. The practical outworking of laying one’s life down, as a seed in the ground, is the acceptance of one’s specific limit, or yoke, within the corporate body. Taking Christ’s yoke is not a quaint image of brotherly harmony with Christ. It is the strongest possible reminder that there is no life outside of the corporate body. The commandment of the Father concerning eternal life is that this life is found in the Son. The new commandment of the Son is that we must each find our place in the vine, and love the brethren.³⁰

The corporate Son is the context

It is important to remind ourselves that the Son does nothing apart from the Father, and that the Father has done nothing apart from the Son - nothing that is not revealed in the Son.³¹ The Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, is the fullness of the Godhead, in bodily form. There is no independent work of creation or incarnation that is apart from the Son, who is the complete image of all that the Father has conceived. ‘He is the *image* of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For *by* Him all things were created ... all things were created *through* Him and *for* Him. And He is *before* all things, and in Him all things *consist*.’³²

Simply, there is no life apart from the Son. Zoe-life, once received from the Father, must be planted in the Son, in the corporate vine. Hence our specific *limit* within the corporate body is our *yoke*. This is

29. 2 Cor 10:13,15 30. John 15:1-4; 1 John 3:14 31. John 5:30 32. Col 1:15-18

the yoke of Christ which we are to accept. To 'take the yoke' as per our title is to be harnessed, as an individual disciple, to the corporate Christ. 'For as the body is one and has many members ... so also is Christ.'³³The application of this yoke is by the hand of the presbytery. A local lampstand-church, functioning in 'body' reality, will be able to receive this 'hand' of adjustment, and then bless the cup of life from one to another. Believers will rightly *reckon*, or *account*, as given to them what *substantially* belongs to them in the Son. This is a difficult statement, but intended to lead us forward to the crucial subject of imputing, or reckoning.

Faith and imputing

Let us take this important subject slowly, although we'll cover it only briefly here. What is faith? At the heart of it, faith is a commitment of relational respect and obedience that we offer to God and to one another. True faith is the attitude of laying life down, in the mode of the seed, as the only reasonable response that can be made. Much that we call 'faith' is actually imputing.

What is imputing, or reckoning (noting that the two words are used interchangeably in the New Testament)? First of all, God reckons, and we also reckon. 'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted [reckoned, imputed] to him for righteousness.'³⁴ This verse shows that God reckons or imputes. For the moment, let's express it this way. Reckoning is a dialogue about what is substantial, what is real. Do we give substance to a lie? No. Satan tries to have us impute substance to his lies so that his insubstantial claims can gain substance. To what do we attribute substance? We may not impute reality, or substance, to whatever we conceive or choose. We can only

33. 1 Cor 12:12 34. Rom 4:3

3. *Lowly among you*

impute reality to what is conceived and predestined by *God*. This predestination is made known to us by the proceeding word.

So we believe the word as it is spoken. But more than just believing, we are told that 'faith is the *substance* of things hoped for'.³⁵ How does the thing promised or proclaimed by the word become substance? By imputing! We are required to reckon. The book of Romans says that we must reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.³⁶ We must reckon ourselves to be who He says we are. We must learn not to reckon substance or reality to the old man, with all its complexities, that is now crucified with Christ. Does this mean that we may 'name' and 'claim' a new life for ourselves? No, we must hear a word and then impute substance to the truth that is made known by the word. This word in our mouth becomes a word of imputation.

Not imputing sin

Thinking practically now, Paul makes the point strongly in Romans and Corinthians that God does not impute reality to sin and trespasses. 'Blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.'³⁷ 'God was in Christ reconciling the world, not imputing their trespasses to them.'³⁸ Now this is quite significant. Do we sin and commit trespasses? Yes, we do. Do they have real impact? Yes, they do - and we are required to be accountable for this. So what do these verses mean? The truth is that God doesn't impute such substance to our sin, or place such weight upon it, that we are defined as sinners (at least, not once we have accepted Him). Rather, He imputes righteousness. He says, 'you are righteous'. In what sense? We are righteous, not just in a legal sense that lacks reality, but because He makes it substantially so. He gives us the gift of righteousness - once again, not as a legal certificate, but as a portion of the eternal *life* and

35. Heb 11:1 36. Rom 6:11 37. Rom 4:8 38. 2 Cor 5:19

substance of the Son.³⁹ Christ is our righteousness. The Son shares a portion of His life, not just in the sense of a vital energy, but as a substantial portion of *Himself* - 'Of His fullness we have all received'.⁴⁰ This is what the Son of God contributes to the covenant proposition; whereas the Father shares the essential seed-life. We '*share in Christ* if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first'.⁴¹ For His part, the Father shares the essential seed-life, and the Holy Spirit contributes 'holifying' power, as we've written elsewhere. It is between the Father aspect and the Son aspect, between seed-life and righteousness, that the practice of imputing has its place.

Imputing - communion

The next point is that this share in Christ, in the corporate Christ, is represented in the bread and wine. This is wondrous and vital. We are not just sharing a token of something. Rather, we are affirming to one another that we each have an immutable portion. This can be expressed in three steps: First of all, we are accepting this offer of participation. Secondly, we are offering ourselves to the corporate whole; and thirdly, we are committing ourselves to reveal one another, according to this portion of the total grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are affirming that we need one another, and more! We are committed to esteeming, guarding, guiding, 'laying our hands', yoking and adjusting one another so that other members apprehend and flesh out that part of the 'body' which is their particular portion. This is where imputing links with communion.

The *koinonia* is the focal point of all imputing. Where we participate, discerning, is the point at which we impute substance in our vital participation as members of Christ. Either this is so, or our

39. Rom 5:17 40. John 1:16 41. Heb 3:14 NIV

3. *Lowly among you*

faith is in vain. 'Faith is the substance ...'.⁴² We impute substance to the righteousness of each member right at the heart of our *koinonia* gathering. We do not 'receive the grace of God in vain', as Paul pleads, but become co-workers in the righteousness of Christ.⁴³ We must either move to this kind of imputing, in relation to the Son, or the gospel proposition becomes legal fiction.

Pastoral implications

This is why presbytery must have such a hand in what is being administered at the local *koinonia* gathering. Can we begin to see the pastoral implications of this subject? A presbytery must interface with each local *angelos*, as Paul did with Corinth, to review this crucial dimension. What exactly is happening at the hub of each *koinonia*? First of all, is it a fellowship in the cross - in the Lord's supper, the Lord's death, and in discernment of the Lord's body? Secondly, are members ministering life one to another as a result of having participated in His death?

Church leaders should not be merely adjusting fine points of behaviour, filled with comparison, jealousy and carnality. We are to be involved with imputing righteousness, meaning that members are to faithfully reckon toward the manifold grace of one another. We are reconciling each to his destiny and place in the body. We are urging the seed operation of circumcision, burial and resurrection, by which the full substance of the seed comes forth as a 'harvest of righteousness'.⁴⁴ This is imputation. At present, it is a lost weapon in the armoury of the Christian church - a lost jewel in the foundation of our faith. Once we catch sight of it, we begin to see its glint shining clearly from among the other foundation stones. Imputation is an essential dimension in the apostolic formation of the church.

42. Heb 11:1 43. 2 Cor 6:1 44. 2 Cor 9:10

The church that is not yoked to the corporate Seed, to the fullness of the Godhead manifest in Christ, cannot impute to reality. Its members can only imagine vain things, or sink back to isolated Christian anecdotes - or worse, revert to Satan's legal proposition while using all the correct terminology.⁴⁵

Transforming ourselves - false imputing

This is exactly what was happening at Corinth. There were false apostles who were bringing 'a different gospel'.⁴⁶ They were 'transforming themselves' into messengers, into 'apostles of Christ'.⁴⁷ Their whole measure of reality (imputing) was different. They were not accepting the yoke laid upon them by the hand of presbytery. The proper yoke could have caused them, and all the Corinthian believers, to impute toward the correct substance and portion of Christ's grace. Now we can appreciate the meaning of the term, 'the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ'.⁴⁸ He is the fullness of grace and truth, and this fullness is apportioned amidst a body of members. These ones eat and drink, while discerning one another and actively blessing the cup toward one another, imputing to the genuine graces of Christ - the 'foot', the 'hand', the 'eye', and all the 'less honourable' parts needed to compose the body of Christ.⁴⁹

One seed

In this context, we recall Paul's argument in Galatians, that there are not *many* seeds but only *one*, Christ. 'Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does *not* say, "And to *seeds*" (ie many), but as of one, "and to your Seed," who is Christ.'⁵⁰

45. 1 Cor 13:11 46. 2 Cor 11:4,13 47. 2 Cor 11:13 48. 1 Cor 16:23; 2 Cor 13:14
49. 1 Cor 12:15,16,23 50. Gal 3:16-17

3. *Lowly among you*

The mystery of Christ is that the 'one Seed', Christ, shares the Father's life with many, thus fulfilling the Father's desire for a multitude of sons 'as the stars of heaven in number'.⁵¹ However there is still only the one Seed, for 'this life is in the Son' as John says.⁵² We have an individual birth in relationship with the heavenly Father. However, for this seed of life to survive, each of us must be planted in the 'ground', or shall we say: we must abide in the vine.

Returning to the subject of imputing, let us reinforce the central point. When it comes to *reckoning* what we can be or *will be* in our various gifts and ministries, we must remember that all imputing is to do with the Son, ie with whom we are in His *corporate* body. We do not reckon or impute toward individual identity. It's true that we have unique identity from the Father. However, when it comes to the actions of presbytery whereby we lay hands upon one another in relation to the *grace* of Christ - toward the specific *righteousness* that we are to manifest, toward the *work* to which we are separated, and in relation to the *fruit* that is to be borne - we must realise that such presbytery actions define a yoke and limit in relation to the *corporate* body and not toward an individual 'calling'. Our yoke describes who we are in relation to others. Each specific relationship is righteous, and the 'works prepared' for us are to do with the corporate righteousness.⁵³

The familiar tones of the verses from Matthew chapter seven should now ring in our ears. 'Not every one who says to me "Lord Lord" ... but he who *does the will of my Father* ... and I will say, "I never *knew you*, depart from me, you who practise lawlessness".⁵⁴ We are warned hereby of the deception of working works of our *own* righteousness which are not the will of the Father. For our works to

51. Gen 22:17 52. 1 John 5:11 53. Eph 2:10 54. Matt 7:21-23

be the righteousness of Christ, they cannot be our 'own'. They must be the works given to us to do for the good of the corporate body.

Christ, our righteousness

At this point, we must revise the subject of righteousness, and compare it briefly with sanctification. Once we reckon ourselves alive unto God, we become 'slaves of righteousness', and our obedience leads to fulfilling the 'works prepared beforehand that we should walk in them'.⁵⁵ With the term 'righteousness', the emphasis is on filling out the portion of Christ that is our 'gift' within the corporate body. The focus is on the imputing, the works, the seed and the fruit, which lead to eternal righteousness. With *sanctification*, the focus is on *the individual process* by which we are separated toward this righteousness. This is slightly too simplified, but helps stress that our Christian focus cannot rest merely on achieving personal sanctification, while our work of righteousness is never fulfilled. Practically speaking, we must hold these in tension from day to day, since preoccupation with one or the other will bring us to a standstill. Sanctification should lead to the practice of righteousness, and not to a self-indulgent, pious and unrelational life. True righteousness should lead to the achievement of our individual sanctification, and not to our 'own' program of good deeds.

Our main point here is that the focus of righteousness is that each of us should live his 'right life', given as a gift, within the corporate body. All the glory belongs to Christ. 'Of *Him* you are in Christ Jesus,' said Paul at the conclusion of his discourse about the cross bringing everything to nothing.⁵⁶ We know we *are* commanded to bear fruit, and we are judged according to our works, not for either having, or

55. Eph 2:10 56. 1 Cor 1

3. *Lowly among you*

failing in, identity. But there is a way to function as individuals whereby all the glory is in the Lord.⁵⁷

There is a way to lay life down in the corporate body, so that Christ is our righteousness, and our righteousness is Christ.⁵⁸ Simply and practically speaking, the grace of God is not given to us so that we are to go out and exercise individual initiatives. Grace is given to benefit the whole. Otherwise, God is not one, and His works are not 'finished'. Hebrews advises us that we enter rest when we participate in the realm where His works are finished - meaning that we are participating in the original covenant conception, ie the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵⁹

It's easy then to understand Paul's burden for Corinth. The seed had been planted in the hearts of many believers. However, they were beginning to cast off the corporate yoke. Individualism was prospering, and the administration of the Corinthian lampstand urgently needed the hand of presbytery to restore the yoke.

57. 1 Cor 1:31; John 15:16; Matt 16:27 58. 1 Cor 1:30 59. Heb 4:3

4. Paul - an example of presbytery mode

To understand Paul's strategy as a presbytery exercise, let's look at the Corinthian church from a 'bird's-eye' view, as depicted in Paul's two letters. What would we expect an apostle like Paul to do if he was confronted with a church like the one at Corinth? It was gifted but immature and divisive, influenced by Jewish sign-seekers and Greek philosophers, beginning to favour charismatic presentation, reverting to the craft of law in taking each other to court, immoral and unrepentant, not discerning the body, unprofitable in love, disorderly in the 'spirituals', allowing false doctrine about the resurrection, unfathered, short on liberality, not growing, not abounding ... and the list goes on. What demeanour would Paul, the foremost apostle, adopt in his letter-writing and proposed visits to such a church?

4. Paul - an example of presbytery mode

As we know, he approached the church like a seed falling into the ground. He expressed himself in weakness, as an example of one who bore the yoke of Christ. By this means, he made it possible for Christ to entrap the wise in their own craftiness, by the cross. He also invoked the cross as a weapon for the 'casting down of strongholds', and established the dynamic of the cross, as it is in the Godhead, as the power unto salvation.⁶⁰

To state our theme, moving from the beginning of the first letter to the end of the second, we could rightly say that Paul succeeded in carrying them *in* the name, *by* the cross, *to* the yoke. He started his letters by pleading with them 'by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ' - the corporate name.⁶¹ Then he proclaimed nothing else but Jesus Christ and Him crucified.⁶² And he finished his second letter with joyous and mature relief, 'We are glad we are weak ... and this also we pray that you may be made complete'.⁶³

When we say 'presbytery mode', this is what we mean - viz. the living demonstration of the Godhead model: the seed dynamic, the cross. Let's express it this way. Paul spoke to them right out of the dimension of the corporate heaven, from heavenly places itself, where he well knew 'the grace of the *Lord Jesus Christ*, and the love of *God*, and the communion of the *Holy Spirit ... Amen*' - as expressed in this verse which is the benediction to the two letters.⁶⁴ What an amazing thought! Paul spoke from within the realm of blessedness, the *koinonia* of God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

60. 2 Cor 10:4-5; 1 Cor 1:18 61. 1 Cor 1:10 62. 1 Cor 2:2 63. 2 Cor 13:9
64. 2 Cor 13:14

Grace, peace and exceeding joy

Paul began the first letter in exactly the same way. ‘Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’⁶⁵ This could seem like a poetic Christian greeting. But it’s more than that, much more. This is Paul’s briefest possible summary of the fruit, fragrance, joy, peace and rest of the true heavenly dimension. Grace and peace! There was no greater joy in store than the reward of the relationship to which he was about to call them - ‘having confidence in you all that *my* joy is the joy of you *all*.’⁶⁶ As Paul said to the Thessalonians, ‘For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even *you* in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?’⁶⁷

So the opening salutation on grace and peace is quite profound. And following this exact format, Paul first commends them for the *grace* that is evident among them. ‘I thank my God always concerning you for the *grace of God* which was given to you by Christ Jesus.’⁶⁸ There is grace among them, but what about peace? Where is the rest that should come from ‘taking His yoke?’ ‘Now I plead with you, brethren’, Paul continues after his initial commendation.⁶⁹ ‘I long for you’, Paul agonised, ‘because of the exceeding *grace* of God in you’.⁷⁰ If only all could see, the loving apostle urged, that ‘our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory’.⁷¹ Oh the exceeding riches, the exceeding joy, of the everlasting consolation.⁷² Paul’s spirit exploded with a constant outburst of eternity that sprang up within him like rivers of living water. How he longed to ‘seal’ them in the ‘fruit’, the richness of heavenly places, right there and then.⁷³ They were to show forth the

65. 1 Cor 1:3 66. 2 Cor 2:31 67. 2 Thess 2:19 68. 1 Cor 1:4 69. 1 Cor 1:10
70. 2 Cor 9:14 71. 2 Cor 4:17 72. Eph 2:7; 1 Pet 4:13; 2 Thess 2:16 73. Rom 15:28

4. Paul - an example of presbytery mode

praises [virtues, excellences] of Him who had called them out of darkness.⁷⁴

And we know that it was not until many painful exchanges later before Paul could close his discourse with the three-fold benediction. What a challenge to us! We should have a constant experience, not just of an order, a pattern, and a vision, but the joy of the order, the life of the pattern and the reality of the vision - the flesh on the bones, we might say, or the fruit, flowers and fragrance in the garden of blessed relationship. The Corinthians were called to glory and virtue. They were to add to their faith, virtue, and so complete the beauty of the landscape.⁷⁵ Every heart belongs to this harmony, and every song sung is a small portion of the eternal being with which we are to be eternally preoccupied. May we discover the cross in its full dimension, so that we are 'sorrowful yet always rejoicing'.⁷⁶ The Corinthians did not know the cross, at least not in the eternal dimension of the weakness that could draw all suffering into itself, in an enfolding fire, and then raise from the dead into everlasting consolation. They needed to come to know this and not turn aside. The word of the cross needed to break through to them, carrying in itself the very life of this eternal, immanent dimension, as well as the enfolding fire that could remove all offenders to the blackness of darkness for ever.⁷⁷

This is the message of the cross with which the messengers came, and the fear in which they ministered.

Presbytery?

The term 'presbytery', as it is used in the New Testament administration, has a very specific application. Rather than using the term to refer to the whole body of elders (Gr. *presbuteros*), the New Testament reserves the term to describe a specific action-group where

74. 1 Pet 2:9 75. 2 Pet 1:3,5 76. 2 Cor 6:10 77. Jude 13

the authority of Christ is required in the 'laying on of hands', either to commission, send out, or apprehend (apply the yoke). A presbytery is not a static unit, like a Parliament, but describes a group that is active at a point in time, to augment the authority of Christ in a call to obedience.

With this in mind, we can say that Paul's actions toward Corinth represent the element of presbytery. The presbytery is 'the five-fingered hand' at work to adjust the local administration. In Revelation language, the local Corinthian church had a 'star' (*angelos*) administration, but Christ, through Paul, was knocking on the door, with the hand of presbytery, to adjust a wide range of matters - the way in which the leaders were ministering and building (chapters 2&3), handling marriage issues (chapters 7&11), administering the communion (chapters 10&11), functioning in spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14), refuting false doctrine (chapter 15), administering the gospel (2nd letter, chapters 2-4), permitting unequal yokes (chapter 6), leading by carnal comparison (chapter 10), allowing false apostles (chapter 11) and responding inadequately to authority beyond themselves (chapters 12&13).

Why do we associate Paul with the term 'presbytery'? Because Paul is not just acting alone. He frequently uses the collective term 'we', and specifically mentions the roles of other apostles, such as Timothy and Titus, in his heartfelt arrest of the Corinthian church.⁷⁸ Clearly, the presbytery '*hand*' was at work, but we notice that the leaders were not acting with *high-handed* authority. Twice Paul speaks of using authority for edification, not for destruction.⁷⁹ We would say that Paul was imputing toward the development of righteousness, not imputing trespasses.

78. 1 Cor 1:23; 4:8; 2 Cor 8:22; 10:14; 13:9 79. 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10

4. Paul - an example of presbytery mode

The first thing we notice is that Paul does not approach them as if he is the administration! In fact, he submits *to* the administration. How does he do this? He does so by showing himself least of all, a fool for Christ, one who has come to 'nothing'.⁸⁰ He lays down his life among them, and then quietly calls them to *their* calling! 'You see *your* calling, brethren!'⁸¹ This has enormous implications and we must not miss their significance. Let us walk with Paul through the two letters.

In chapter one, he gently reminds them of the foolishness and weakness of the cross. The foolishness of God is wiser, and His weakness is stronger than men.⁸² He calls them again to the meekness of true wisdom, as opposed to human wisdom.

In chapter three, he reminds them of the 'seed' principle by which he had established the church in the first place.⁸³ He calls the Corinthians his 'fellow-labourers' in the Lord's planting.⁸⁴ In chapter four, he reminds them that his apostleship is evidenced by poverty and persecution.⁸⁵ Then he warns them as dear children, drawing them back, by his fatherhood, to a fresh acceptance of the travail by which Christ may be formed in them.⁸⁶

He challenges their arrogance with a gentle spirit.⁸⁷ He exposes the leaven of immorality.⁸⁸ He uncovers their reversion to the use of law, since brother is taking brother to court to retrieve his legal rights.⁸⁹ He makes himself a slave so that his race will not be in vain.⁹⁰ He challenges their worldly wisdom. And there's more.

Recovery of *koinonia*

As we read on in the chapters of the first letter, the high point arrives. Paul urges the church to recover the true *koinonia* - their fellowship in the cross, their participation in the body and blood.

80. Cor 1:19; 4:10 81. 1 Cor 1:26 82. 1 Cor 1:25-31 83. 1 Cor 3:6 84. 1 Cor 3:9
85. 1 Cor 4:13; 2 Cor 6:4-9 86. 1 Cor 4:14-15; cf Gal 4:19 87. Cor 4:18,21
88. 1 Cor 5:1 89. 1 Cor 6:1 90. 1 Cor 9:19

Indeed, unless they see what the *koinonia* means, and eat and drink in a worthy manner, they have no eternal life in them at all.⁹¹

Their refusal to be properly yoked is evident right at the heart of their corporate life. The communion gathering has become a witness to their divisions, not to their unity. Clearly, various factions are now appropriating the table to their own agendas. They are no longer blessing the cup to one another as good stewards of the manifold grace.⁹² They are no longer imputing toward the one corporate life of the new creation. Rather, they are seeking to appropriate blessing toward independence and strife.

Proceeding on to chapter twelve, we read that they are gifted in the spiritual gifts, but their function as a genuine 'body' is limited and out of joint. 'The eye cannot say ... I don't need you,' Paul admonishes them.⁹³ In the next chapter we find that their prophetic and other gifts are becoming like 'clanging cymbals' which profit them nothing at all, since love is not the foundation.⁹⁴ In chapters fourteen and fifteen, their public gatherings are fraught with eccentricity, and they have become vulnerable to false doctrines about the resurrection.⁹⁵ Paul closes the first letter with a call to join in a collection that was being taken for the suffering saints in Judea. The capacity of the church, or their lack thereof, to abound in giving by the principle of the seed, is to become a salutary test in the context of the second letter.

Seed and fruitfulness

The second letter opens with further reflection on the 'seed' principle - viz. the matter of enduring affliction. With the seed of the gospel having been planted in the first visit, now the saints must accept that the affliction of the seed will bring them to the 'second

91. 1 Cor 11:27; John 6:53 92. 1 Cor 10:16; 1 Pet 4:10 93. 1 Cor 12:21 NIV 94. 1 Cor 13:1-3
95. 1 Cor 14:23; 15:12

4. Paul - an example of presbytery mode

time' blessing, to increase and fruitfulness.⁹⁶ Again Paul illustrates from what he has learned in his own experience. 'You know what trouble we had in Asia.'⁹⁷ As the chapters unfold, we find that Paul is leading to a crucial point. He wants to help their joy.⁹⁸ In the distinctive fragrance of Christ, he reminds them that the administration of law, despite its glory, is vastly inferior to the glory of the new covenant.⁹⁹

The human face of Christ

Most importantly of all, Paul turns them to the human face of relationship one with another, in Christ. In the former administration, the glory was veiled. Now they, and we, are to behold the glory with unveiled face, because it is no longer resident in a lifeless administration, supervised by angels. The glory is resident in the flesh of mankind. Believers are to see that the face of Jesus Christ is in the human face of relationship, or else they are under the blindness of Satan.¹⁰⁰ The *messengers* to the churches are 'the *glory* of Christ', Paul said.¹⁰¹ The corporate messenger is the living face of Christ, and the churches are the living epistles, the very fragrance and evidence of Christ, potent in bringing life or death.¹⁰²

The life of Jesus, Paul said, is manifested now *in* mortal bodies. We may be perishing outwardly, but we are being inwardly renewed day by day.¹⁰³ Yes, we are yet to put on the final shape of our spiritual body, and we groan to this end.¹⁰⁴ But in the mean time we have received the ministry of reconciliation, here and now. We are no longer to regard one another from a worldly point of view, since we are

96. 2 Cor 1:5 97. 2 Cor 1:8 98. 2 Cor 1:24 99. 2 Cor 2:15; 3:1-18 100. 2 Cor 4:6
101. 2 Cor 8:23 102. 2 Cor 2:15; 3:1 103. 2 Cor 4:16 104. 2 Cor 5:1-3

part of the new creation, here and now.¹⁰⁵ We are not conducting a ministry that imputes substance to the trespasses to which all are vulnerable.¹⁰⁶ The penalty and sentence has been commuted, by Christ, to a yoke - a constrained lifestyle in which we live no longer for ourselves, but for the corporate body.¹⁰⁷ Hence we are now imputing substance to the word of reconciliation, and thus reconciling all believers to their true destiny within the body of Christ.

Fellow-workers in the active covenant

We are God's fellow workers, for your joy!¹⁰⁸ Note the theme of joy once again. 'Now is the *acceptable* time', and more than this, as Isaiah says in the parallel Old Testament verse, 'In the *acceptable* time ... I will ... *give you as a covenant* to the people, to *restore* the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages'.¹⁰⁹ What does it mean to be given as a *covenant*, in an *acceptable* time? This is the reference to the Everlasting Covenant that is breaking into time here and now. This is the time. The word is near. The covenanting Godhead becomes immanent - immediate to us. How? By those whom *He* gives as a covenant. This is an extraordinary unveiling of how Christ works through a presbytery. He is now revealed in the flesh, and His active 'hand' travels through the church in those with a five-fold ministry authority belonging to Christ, gently laying the yoke upon Christian fellows. We have been given this ministry. This is Paul's exultant point. We are carrying in ourselves the power of the Everlasting Covenant, through the immanent word.

105. 2 Cor 5:16 106. 2 Cor 5:19 107. 2 Cor 5:16 108. 2 Cor 1:24; 6:1 109. 2 Cor 6:2; Isa 49:8

5. The yoke!

As chapter six of the second letter continues, the subject of the yoke begins in earnest. Paul challenges the believers that they are not properly yoked to Christ, in the corporate dimension offered by the presbytery. They are unequally yoked to unbelievers - not just in a worldly sense, but in the sense that they are bound in covenants, based in fleshly obligation, to corrupt and dark elements right in the *midst of the church*.¹¹⁰ Their communion is supposed to be sanctified and unmixed, but as recorded in the first letter, the table of the *koinonia* - while it is indeed the table of the Lord to some - is a table of demons to others because of their idolatry.¹¹¹

The result of their unbridled activity, Paul shows, is that many are limited in their affections toward the presbytery, and have forsaken

110. 2 Cor 6:11-18 111. 2 Cor 6:14; 1 Cor 10:21

the yoke of fatherhood by which they were to be formed in Christ.¹¹² He has to call them to ‘come out ... and be separate’ so that they can be the temple of the living God. They must ‘come out and be separate’ in the *church* context! We know that the apostle is referring to being separate within the church context, and not from the world, because of his comment about the temple of the living God.¹¹³ The only way they can be separate is to hear the call of the Father to be sons.¹¹⁴ In practical terms, they must be yoked once again to fatherhood. How? They must come under the hands of the presbytery. How do they do this? Paul answers, ‘Open your hearts to *us* ... for I have said before that you are in our hearts to die together and to live together’.¹¹⁵ As he said in the previous chapter, his heart was wide open to them, but they did not ‘return for the same’.¹¹⁶ And because they were not yoked in one spirit with the apostles of the presbytery, they had taken on other yokes. Their *formation* in the womb of God, or in the ‘cross’ in other words, was stalling. They were children, mere men, needing to be drawn back into the process of spiritual gestation toward their mature destiny.¹¹⁷

The fruitfulness of the Macedonian church

And now in chapter eight, the exemplary generosity of the Macedonian churches is applauded by Paul in an effort to urge Corinth to pursue the same goals.¹¹⁸ ‘It is to your advantage,’ he says.¹¹⁹ The northern churches had found the key - in poverty they had overflowed.¹²⁰ They had found the key to increase. They had learned to activate the seed process. Their weakness, their poverty, their acceptance of the yoke of Christ, had yielded the fruit of supernatural increase. Now Paul was sending Titus in the same bonds of carefulness

112. 2 Cor 6:11-18 113. Cor 6:16 114. 2 Cor 6:17-18 115. 2 Cor 7:3 116. 2 Cor 6:11-13
117. 1 Cor 3:1,3 118. 2 Cor 8:1ff 119. 2 Cor 8:10 120. 2 Cor 8:3; 9:2

5. *The yoke!*

for the church, to work through this matter of the yoke at Corinth.¹²¹ ‘Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.’¹²² Corinth would never succeed as a lampstand church while this internal constriction remained.

The limits of your sphere

It is when we read chapter ten of the second letter that we are thoroughly convinced of Paul’s mode in relation to the yoke. ‘I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the *meekness* and *gentleness* of *Christ* - who in presence am *lowly* among you, but being absent am bold toward you.’¹²³ The parallel between the Scriptures is unmistakable, as we said earlier. ‘Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am *gentle* and *lowly* in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’¹²⁴

Paul is moving to a conclusion. He is about to speak to them about abiding within the limits of their sphere. In other words, each one is to be yoked to Christ, in his proper place within the body. Everything and everyone are to be brought into obedience to Christ. They are to take Paul’s example and be as he is. They are not to compare themselves among themselves. They are to learn the seed principle, that if they will lay their lives down into their respective limits within the corporate body, there will be an increase. There will be an expansion to the regions beyond.

And now Paul illustrates this in chapter eleven by highlighting those who come like ‘super-apostles’ with another gospel.¹²⁵ Knowing that he could have chosen to expound his credentials as an apostle, he chooses rather to lower himself by placing no financial burden upon them. Those who behave with the former demeanour, he says clearly,

121. 2 Cor 8:16-23 122. 2 Cor 9:6 NIV 123. 2 Cor 10:1 124. Matt 11:29-30
125. 2 Cor 11:5 NIV

are promoting and transforming *themselves* into messengers, just as Satan did. They are of an alternative administration. They are not being revealed by the imputing mechanism as defined earlier. In presbytery terms, true imputation works through us toward others and not toward ourselves. In contrast, the false messengers are self-defining and self-revealing. Their wisdom does not come in purity and gentleness 'from above', but is rising up in duplicity and pride 'from beneath'.¹²⁶ They are so keen to *be* the administration that they fail to submit *to* the genuine administration.

Paul's method for yoking

What is Paul's answer to this kind of self-transformation? Paul knows exactly what he is doing. He is not to be taken as a fool.¹²⁷ He is not feigning humility and weakness in order to appear genuine. Rather he is actively boasting 'of the things that show his weakness', rather than his strength.¹²⁸ He proclaimed himself the 'least', well knowing that in terms of grace, he was not less than the foremost of apostles.

In a sense, Paul felt driven to make this example of himself, since he should not have needed to make the point so markedly. He 'ought to have been commended' by them without this exceptional and sustained show of weakness.¹²⁹ They ought to have already followed his example. But he feels he must 'lay up ... for the children'.¹³⁰ In fact, he is ready to be 'humbled' among them even further, if needs be, to confront the jealous and angry factions of the church.¹³¹ This is the way to silence the anger of those who transform themselves. This is the effective weapon referred to from the beginning of the letters - 'the

126. Jas 3:15-17 127. 2 Cor 11:16 128. 2 Cor 11:30 NIV 129. 2 Cor 12:11
130. 2 Cor 12:14 131. 2 Cor 12:20-21

5. *The yoke!*

weakness of God'.¹³² This is stronger than men because it is the way of the seed.

And coming to the end of the second letter, Paul's benediction is yet one more recitation of the principle of the yoke. 'For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we also are *weak in Him*, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you.'¹³³ How clear this is! Through Christ's yoke as the instrument, we are harnessing the power of God to do His work - the power of God toward you.

As a presbytery practises imputation toward others, 'we live' as Paul says. What was the key to operating in the power of God toward the church? How did Paul exercise the authority of Christ to which he had been called? He practised Christ's own mode, the way of the grain of wheat falling into the ground. And to conclude in triumph he adds, 'For we are glad when we are weak, and you are strong'.¹³⁴ What a challenge this is to us if ever we trust to see the hand of presbytery restoring the church of today.

132. 1 Cor 1:25 133. 2 Cor 13:4 134. 2 Cor 13:9

6. Resisting the yoke!

When the two Corinthian letters are considered together, in the light of the 'yoke' theme, a formidable list develops of all the attitudes that cast off the yoke. It is useful to read the letters chapter by chapter in this light, and sum up the content of each as an aspect to which we must be yoked. And in contrast, it's not difficult, in each chapter, to find the opposing attitude in the same chapter.

The yoke - first letter

In chapter one of the first book for example, the 'yoke of the name' as we might call it, is opposed by those naming Paul, Apollos or Peter as their faction leaders. The yoke of the cross which snares and destroys carnal wisdom is circumvented by Jewish sign-seekers and Greek philosophers. Corinth is the hot-pot of both. The Jews are

6. Resisting the yoke!

preoccupied with defeating 'time and chance', seeking signs.¹³⁵ By 'seeking signs', Paul infers that they are trying to harness the supernatural through conformity with the former angelic administration, ie by law, as was the mindset in the Old Covenant. The Greeks, the Hellenised believers, are trying to remove the offence of the cross, and bridge the gap between the scandal of the cross and four hundred years of Platonic sophistry.

In chapter two, the yoke of true spiritual demeanour is pitted over against 'excellence of speech'; hidden wisdom against human wisdom; weakness compared with persuasive words.¹³⁶

In chapter three, the yoke of foundational truth is contrasted with fleshly works, which like wood, hay and straw, will be quickly destroyed by fire.¹³⁷

In chapter four, the yoke of fatherhood is compared with kingly projection.¹³⁸

Chapter five compares the yoke of sincerity with the leaven of immoral mixture.¹³⁹

In chapter six, the yoke of heavenly administration, exalted above the angels, is contrasted with reversion to law - to such an extent that believers resort to human courts to defend their paltry rights.¹⁴⁰

In chapter seven, the yoke of slavery is compared with the lawlessness that resents one's daily calling. 'Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.'¹⁴¹

Chapter eight compares the yoke of love with a careless conscience.

Chapter nine contrasts the yoke of self-denial with the pursuit of selfish freedom.

Chapter ten proclaims the yoke of *koinonia* over against religious idolatry of the kind practised at the golden calf.¹⁴²

135. Eccl 9:11 136. 1 Cor 2:1,7 137. 1 Cor 3:12 138. 1 Cor 4:8,15 139. 1 Cor 5:7
140. 1 Cor 6:3 141. 1 Cor 7:24 142. 1 Cor 10:7

Chapter eleven instructs us in the yoke of headship order, as against divisive self-indulgence.

Chapter twelve holds up the yoke of the body above individualistic self-sufficiency. ‘And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”’.¹⁴³

The famous chapter thirteen praises the yoke of love above childish reckoning. ‘When I was a child I thought [reckoned, imputed] as a child.’¹⁴⁴ How does a child reckon? He reckons toward fantasy. He tries to impute substance to unreality and self-importance. But it profits nothing - as it is with the man who lacks love. Imputing apart from the love of the brethren has no substance whatsoever. Enthusiasm and positive affirmations are nothing but the music of emptiness.

Chapter fourteen deals with the yoke of functional order as opposed to self-originated prophetic practices.

In chapter fifteen, the yoke of active seed-life, in terms of death and resurrection, is compared with the vanity of passive precepts.

In chapter sixteen, the yoke of the brethren - in terms of their care for Timothy and for other churches in need - is magnified over against independent church attitudes.

The yoke - second letter

In the second letter, the picture continues in the same vein. Chapter one extols the yoke of their eternal bonds over against the style of inferiority that can limit Christians’ broader connection.¹⁴⁵

Chapter two compares relational obedience with the failure to be forgiving;

Chapter three - the yoke of new covenant administration with the bondage of legal administration;

143. Cor 12:21 144. 1 Cor 13:11 145. 2 Cor 1:14

6. *Resisting the yoke!*

Chapter four - the yoke of Christ's dying and living with mortal discouragement;

Chapter five - the yoke of the new creation with confidence in the flesh;

Chapter six - the yoke of co-ministry with the unequal yoke of unbelievers;

Chapter seven - the yoke of godly mourning with worldly sorrow;

Chapter eight - free giving with narrow constriction;

Chapter nine - a yoke of fruitful administration with the opposite attitude of limitation to mere necessity;

Chapter ten - the yoke of the corporate limit with self-commendation;

Chapter eleven - the yoke of simplicity with the snare of Satan;

Chapter twelve - the yoke of weakness with selfish ambition;

Chapter thirteen - the yoke of the faith versus disqualification.

The yoke. Paul's mission was clear. But what was his method? With what message did he come? How did he apply the foolishness of God through the message of the cross? In what demeanour did he come? How did he demonstrate the weakness of God? What profound lessons we can learn from the two Corinthian epistles.

7. Paul and the weakness of God.

Let us take the theme of the ‘weakness of God’ first of all, and then discuss how God brings us into weakness by the foolishness of preaching.

How did Paul employ ‘the weakness of God’ as the strength by which he adjusted the troubled church? Simply, Paul didn’t use his authority in Christ to conflict with the Corinthians. Instead, he brought the fundamental message of the cross. He reminded them that ‘Christ crucified’ was the complete statement of our supposed ‘strength’ and God’s own weakness. His message encompassed all fleshly endeavour, summed up in the religious spirituality of the Jew and the philosophical science of the Greek, and drew everything ‘down’ into the place of gentleness and lowliness, where the yoke of Christ could be firmly attached.

7. Paul and the weakness of God

Because the cross was a total statement of our depravity, it was also a complete statement of God's judgment upon all sin. The cross would abase everything proud, make worldly wisdom foolish, humble the noble, and bring everything that was something to nothing. The cross would act like a stumbling-block, and entrap everything offensive into the death of the cross.

The cross simply called the sinner to participate in the death of the cross by dying with Christ. Participation is the key word. We shall amplify the matter of participation further on.

Before we discuss these matters at length, let us state briefly what must be learned from the Corinthian handbook.

1. As with God, and with Paul as our example, we do not meet the threat, we absorb it.

2. The weakness of the cross is a mode that captivates, and then a weapon that disarms.

3. In this way, high things that exalt themselves and become strongholds, can be embraced and torn down.

4. As with Paul, this means that in weakness, we must necessarily become a spectacle to angels and men. In the face of the human power and wisdom, we must appear weak and foolish. Satan's counter will be to characterise true wisdom as foolishness, true power as impotence and godliness as scandalous. He will use characterisation (and even caricature, or exaggeration) to create a scandal around the truth. For example, Christ was mocked as the king of the Jews, when this is exactly who He was!

5. The way of our future will be to accept being a scandal, precisely so that the cross can act as a stumbling-block (Gr. *skandalon*) to capture all contrary wisdom. Isaiah says that when others cry and fear 'conspiracy', we should not fear what they fear, for the Lord will build

His sanctuary amidst this kind of strife.¹⁴⁶ In fact, He permits this as the method by which He stumbles and snares all conspiracy.

6. Scandalous characterisation is the world's most subtle device, for the claims made cannot be rebuffed. Like Christ, we shall have to be silent before our accusers. How, for example, can Christians defend the accusation that they love the brethren of Christ more than father, mother, sister and brother? There is nothing to say when godly parents are characterised as 'fundamentalist', or when obedient disciples of *His* name are called a 'cult'.

7. The customary, but improper, responses of a church to unpopularity are found in the Corinthian example. Again, we can align these with Jewish-style spirituality and Greek-style wisdom. Believers may seek to demonstrate powerful spirituality, as at Corinth. Alternatively, they may try to 'take a stand' against impending threats with the power of evangelical argument. In both cases, as in Corinth, the church becomes yoked to idolatry and lawlessness, while claiming to offer genuine *koinonia*.¹⁴⁷

What is the weakness of God?

The weakness of God is that disposition by which God willingly draws everything contrary into Himself, rather than rising up to meet the threat. Clearly, this disposition was manifested fully by Christ.

That we should be weak so that He is strong, is logical, because we are not God. However, the idea that God would be 'weak', and that we should be commended toward such weakness, is the real mystery. What is God's weakness? Here we are touching upon the essential covenanting dynamic, the discourse of faith, hope and 'first love' that is everlasting. This is the covenant that continues wherever the

146. Isa 8:12-14 147. 2 Cor 7:14

7. Paul and the weakness of God

immanent word enlivens the immanent covenant dialogue of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The power of this weakness lies in the resurrection capacity which raises one for the sake of the other. This is the essential 'God' principle, or shall we say the mystery of godliness - where the power is not sourced in the self. Remember, the Son did not raise Himself. He was also begotten from the dead, as the beloved Son, by the Father Himself. 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'¹⁴⁸ Equally, the Holy Spirit raised the Son so that He could be declared 'the Son of God with power'.¹⁴⁹

According to this essential principle of God Himself, the most essential operation of life, the real strength, is always in the other; that is to say, in the faith by which one commits absolutely in trust toward the other. This is defined as the ultimate weakness. Yet it is at this point that the power of God is manifest in resurrection, not for our own sake, but for the sake of the other. By this means, the power of God infinitely surpasses the strength that is sourced in self.

Power and wisdom

Paul is not merely fighting one wisdom with another, or one power with another. Let's examine the 'logic' of what Paul is saying for a moment. It's noteworthy that the Jewish approach to life would have involved 'seeking a sign'¹⁵⁰, since their whole history was dotted with miraculous interventions from *Yahweh*, and angelic visitations. With Solomon's treatise on futility, on time and chance, in their background, the Jewish solution would have been a mind of religious spirituality. The Greeks, on the other hand, rested their confidence in the science of philosophy, in 'wisdom', hoping to manipulate cause and effect by analysing causes for a better effect. The Jew sought power and the

148. Heb 5:5 149. Rom 1:4 150. 1 Cor 1:22

Greek, wisdom. Did Paul merely recommend the cross as a superior power and a pre-eminent wisdom? Did he come demonstrating greater miracles, and superlative theology? Not at all.

Paul completely undercut both. He proclaimed that the cross was the true power and the true wisdom, confounding, not just conquering, all contrariness. To the Jewish approach, the cross was a trap; to the Greek approach, the cross was foolishness.¹⁵¹ So the cross has two effects, tailored to the two extremes of worldliness. On the one hand, the cross entraps all spirituality back into futility, and on the other, it snares the wise in their own craftiness.

Note the following verse which mentions both these snares, but in reverse order. 'He *catches the wise* in their *own* craftiness, and ... the LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are *futile*.'¹⁵²

The beauty of this passage is that it encompasses both the 'active' and 'passive' elements of God's judgement. In other words, God's judgment on mankind was expressed in the *active* sense by the 'curse' upon creation - 'subjected to futility, in hope' - and in a *passive* sense, meaning that sin simply bears its own fruit. The latter thought is carried in the above Scripture: the wise are caught in their own craftiness.

Paul is saying that while these are distinct, nevertheless the cross embraces both. This becomes encouraging for us in very practical ways, for we soon realise that whether our sufferings are because of God's active discipline upon us, or because of futility and mortality in general, these both find a resolution in the cross. We don't have to seek a supernatural solution (cf Jew) or pursue the science of clever philosophies for improved health and lifestyle (cf Greek). There is a 'third way', viz. the weakness of God, or 'the cross' in other words -

151. 1 Cor 1:23 152. 1 Cor 3:19-20

7. Paul and the weakness of God

which introduces both power *and* wisdom, but in a completely different mode. This is our inquiry.

8. The foolishness of God

If the *weakness* of God counters the *power* of Jewish spirituality, and thus leads to the true power of the cross, then the *foolishness* of God counters the *wisdom* of Greek philosophy, and leads to the true wisdom of the cross. This is the sense and symmetry of Paul's proposal regarding the cross. So the *weakness* and *foolishness* of the cross are the answer to all forms of human *power* and *wisdom*.

Having earlier examined the weakness of God in His own 'pastoral' mode, we must now understand the foolishness of God. Both weakness and foolishness are manifested at the point where God touches flesh - the point where God has embraced the flesh of man in Christ, as part of the Everlasting Covenant. Just as it demonstrates God's *weakness* to have *embraced* the creation and destiny of flesh, so it demonstrates God's *foolishness* to have determined to *express* Himself

through flesh. ‘The Word became flesh’, John says in introducing his gospel.¹⁵³

The preaching of the cross - foolishness

‘For the *preaching*¹⁵⁴ of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.’¹⁵⁵ Now we must deal with the theme of the foolishness of God, and the connection between foolishness and preaching the message.

If *weakness* is the action of God to *embrace* all contrariness in the cross, then *foolishness* describes the allied action of linking hearers, by the preached word, to the *processes* of the cross. Simply, God is ‘*weak*’ because He’s *revealed* in flesh. He is ‘*foolish*’ because His will is *declared* in the flesh.

The point is not just a logical proposition that argues strong versus weak, wise versus foolish. The truth is not just: we are weak, He’s strong, so we must grasp for supernatural signs, like the Jews. Nor should we think: we are fools, He is wise, so we must seek wisdom. The cross is not merely stronger and wiser. Rather, the cross confounds both these views, because it doesn’t show God as either strong *or* wise. By the cross, God employs foolishness and thus *apprehends* all flesh through the foolishness of preaching. Then the cross displays weakness and thus *comprehends* us in its power for reconciliation. We are arrested and then included.

Having limited Himself to flesh, in weakness, now the Word is the break point between flesh and the immanence of God. As Jesus Himself said, ‘The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has *anointed* Me to *preach* the gospel to the poor.’¹⁵⁶ He was anointed to preach! And His word announced *healing* to the ‘broken-hearted’,

153. John 1:14 154. Gr. *Logos*, word, or message, not ‘preaching’. However, the reference to preaching in vs 17, 23 and elsewhere, gives credence to the sense conveyed in the KJV.
155. Cor 1:18 156. Luke 4:18

'liberty to the captives and recovery of *sight* to the blind'.¹⁵⁷ The proclaiming of the 'acceptable year of the LORD', quoted from Isaiah¹⁵⁸, is an announcement that His immanent covenant and presence are among us as 'Immanuel' (meaning 'God with us'). The LORD is here with us. The 'Consolation of Israel'¹⁵⁹ is here, bearing all the marvels of salvation, and in particular, announcing these by anointed preaching. What encouragement this is to us concerning the power of the preached word, and the immediacy of the gifts of God by which healing, liberty and deliverance will be ministered.

The foolishness of preaching is God's method for intervening into the realm of flesh. Finding this foolish indeed, men could well ask, 'Should we not rather expect spiritual experiences and angelic visitations?' No, says Paul, in fact, 'if we, or an *angel from heaven*, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed'.¹⁶⁰ This is strong language indeed. 'Accursed!' Without the word of the cross announced through the foolishness of preaching, we are accursed. We must dwell on this imperative. Life and peace on one hand, and the curse of eternal blackness on the other, pivot around our response to the preached word.

Foolishness leading to weakness

God has tied the power of His cross to a preached word. From God's direction, He has *first* demonstrated His *weakness* in the cross, and then His *foolishness* by expounding the power of salvation through a *preached* word. Weakness then foolishness. From our direction, the elements are in reverse order. Foolishness then weakness. We hear the message preached, and the so-called 'foolishness' of this preaching communication undercuts all other wisdom. Then, as we respond to

157. Luke 4:18-19 158. Isa 49:8 159. Luke 2:25 160. Gal 1:8

8. *The foolishness of God*

God's foolishness in arresting us by the preached word, we are drawn into the weakness of God.

As Paul showed, God's servants are called to carry this operation forward. Our preaching continues to embody the foolishness of God, and aims to tie those who are foolish *to* the cross, by the preached message. The word does this by convincing hearers that they are included in the double action of the cross (judgment and life).

Here is the process. To hearers seeking power in the religious message, we come in weakness. To hearers pursuing wisdom, we come with foolishness. According to Paul's instructions, our aim is to reconcile, not impute trespasses¹⁶¹ to the hearers. However, in order to minister reconciliation, we make known God's all-inclusive judgement. We do so in the hope that this *foolish* message will draw *them* into *weakness* also. The cross offers participation in Christ's sufferings as well as in His resurrection life.

Conviction and illumination

Every word preached carries the imperative of God's call upon hearers. Every message conceals a force of conviction that is like a hammer on rock, or a fire upon chaff.¹⁶² The word also brings sight to the eyes - illumination. Paul spoke of his mission to 'open their eyes'.¹⁶³ The power of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven¹⁶⁴ rests upon the word. Then as the word breaks in and convicts the hearer, the motivation of the Spirit of God can overpower all other contrary motivations, and effect change. Change is the key word. Every stronghold can be broken, every high thing exalting itself against God can be brought into captivity.¹⁶⁵ The *foolishness* of God, in a messenger of flesh and blood, arrests and includes the hearer in the work of the

161. 2 Cor 5:19 162. Jer 23:28-29 163. Acts 26:18 164. 1 Pet 1:12 165. 2 Cor 10:4

cross. For a moment in time, each hearer sees that he has been included. Now he faces a choice.

The effect of the word

The hearer is in a valley of decision, for the conviction is two-fold. The word is double-edged. The word of the cross will have two effects, not just one. Paul argues in Romans nine, 'I have great sorrow for my kinsmen ... but it is *not* that the word of God has taken *no* effect'.¹⁶⁶ The word did have an effect, as God's *sovereign action*, in *both* directions. The cross *produced* salvation, and it also *produced* wrath and destruction.¹⁶⁷ This is what we must understand about the word, both in hearing it and in preaching it. The preached word carries the power of this eternal imperative. Paul is adamant in Romans chapter nine that the vessels of God's wrath are so because the Potter Himself has formed both types of vessels for their eternal destiny. When did He prepare them for 'glory' or 'destruction'?¹⁶⁸ 'Beforehand', Paul says. Does this mean that He predestined them for either blessing or curse? In one sense, yes, because the eternal predestination is transacted at the point of the word which is preached to us!! The cross is a single action with a double effect. Both results are produced by God's sovereignty. This is the matter in which we may not 'reply' against God.¹⁶⁹

This is why the argument of Romans chapter nine has been so greatly misunderstood. *What if* God does this! 'He has mercy on whom He *will* have mercy, and whom He *wills* He hardens.'¹⁷⁰ But when does this take place? It takes place at the point where *we* interact, in time, with the word of God - for the word spoken *is* a sovereign action of God. The foolishness of God, linked to a preached word, is the sovereignty of God. It is startling that God would tie Himself to this

166. Rom 9:6 167. Rom 9:22 168. Rom 9:27-28 169. Rom 9:20-22
170. Rom 9:18,22

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foolishness. But this is the mystery of His sovereignty. This is the power of the creative word. The sovereign, creative power of God is manifested as a double effect. Whatever transpires, at the point of the preached word, is itself sovereign. It is declared that God has formed the one result and the other. And this must needs be so. Why? Because it is not possible for any *eternal* result to fall outside the realm of God's sovereignty. This answers the familiar dilemma concerning God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Does God sovereignly initiate our salvation, or are we totally responsible to apprehend it? The simple answer is that both are equally true. So we take care that discussions about predestination don't veil our ears and eyes to the power of heaven and hell that is invested in the preached word.

Once again, 'it is *not* that the word of God has taken *no* effect'. The cross has *not* been emptied of its effect - its double effect!

Cut to the heart

A hearer is either apprehended 'line upon line' for salvation, or else the same word, 'line upon line' causes him to 'fall backwards, be broken, snared and caught'.¹⁷¹ One way or the other, he will be captured. The word will 'cut' him 'to the heart'¹⁷² with unavoidable conviction, and then like Peter's hearers, he will believe and cry out, 'Men and brethren what shall we do?'¹⁷³ Or else, like Stephen's hearers who were also 'cut to the heart', he will 'gnash [his] teeth' and turn upon the messenger in antagonistic rejection.¹⁷⁴

If he is arrested by the cross, the hearer yields to the *weakness* that catches all his sin in the process of the cross. This is the perspective we may cast across the two books of Corinthians. It is as though foolishness and weakness are like a huge filter in front of a door. By

171. Isa 28:10-13 172. Acts 2:37; 7:54 In both cases, the hearers were cut to the heart, albeit the response was different in each case. 173. Acts 2:36 174. Acts 7:57-59

simple preaching, Paul gathered up the total practice of the Corinthians and drew it all through this door of entry, into the process of the cross, unto salvation.

To those who are perishing, this whole matter remains foolishness, but to those being saved, it offers the power of God unto salvation. And there is no other way to be saved.

The purpose of conviction

It is startling to us that the awesome imperative of eternal destiny should be carried in the word of the cross, by the foolishness of preaching. Eternal, irreversible judgement is almost inconceivable to our minds. We find it difficult to imagine how a 'living soul' created by God with an eternal existence, simply continues forever in hell - never becoming extinct, and never having an opportunity to renegotiate salvation. For what crime, or for what ignorance, does a soul remain frozen forever in a state of death, having a name that is cut off¹⁷⁵ from God? Such a permanent state, with no 'second chance', is almost beyond our comprehension. We soon realise however, that the verity and eternity of life, if misappropriated, must necessarily create the eternity of hell. On the positive side, we are caused to exclaim in wonder that a living being *can* apprehend an eternal destiny, a capacity for eternal expression which is also for ever.

Then we should ask, 'By what operation is flesh transformed? By what life-long process does an individual, with a *zoe* destiny from God, either forfeit his eternal name or apprehend it?' This is just the beginning of our curiosity at the significance of the 'foolishness of preaching'. Suffice to say that the preached word is the break point. Right at the point of conviction, we are poised to either appropriate or misappropriate the eternity that resides within us.

175. The cutting off of a name from the land of the living is referred to in Jeremiah 11:19

Set on fire of hell

We must understand that our faith and confession, at the very point where a word cuts us to the heart, is the break-point between the fire of offering and the fire of hell. Our tongue, our confession, makes the difference. ‘See how great a forest a little fire kindles! And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is *so set among our members* that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell.’¹⁷⁶ At the point where conviction wells up within us, the first time we ever hear, and *every time after that*, the eternal fire of God that enfolds us either becomes the rush of salvation, or an outburst of wrath. The tongue is ‘so set’ among our members. ‘Outbursts of wrath’, as Paul called them, can be the very stench of hell itself, proof to us that malignant cells are taking over - whose ‘worm’ doesn’t die, Jesus warned, and whose permanent disease is never quenched by fire.¹⁷⁷

This is the power of belief and confession. We believe with our heart, and confess with our mouth.¹⁷⁸ Salvation and damnation are effected at each and every point where the word convicts us and illuminates our condition. No wonder the Psalmist speaks of the ‘strife of tongues’.¹⁷⁹ Our confessions literally ignite hell from within us, just as the irresistible fire of God seeks to enfold us in wheels of endless offering. A fire breaks out that either casts a man out as profane, or includes him in the fire of eternal giving.

This is not to say that our eternal security is forever in jeopardy. On the contrary, we can stand in jeopardy because we are convinced of resurrection life, as Paul said.¹⁸⁰ And at the same time, we are warned by the example of those who came out under Moses, but perished in

176. Jas 3:5-6 177. 2 Cor 12:20; Mk 9:48 178. Rom 10:9 179. Psa 31:20
180. 1 Cor 15:30

the wilderness because they lusted after evil things.¹⁸¹ And we should not hurry across the issue of lust, as if we believe we are free of such excesses of evil. As exemplified in Corinth, many of the obvious lusts were addressed and arrested, while some of the *most* destructive issues were those hidden under a religious cloak.

Fire from our own midst

The realisation, or misappropriation, of eternal destiny is illustrated in the symbolic description given to us of Lucifer's fall, encased in the prophetic judgement of the King of Tyre. Take note of the emphasised expressions in the extended quote from Ezekiel 28.

'You were the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden [cf the serpent]... The *workmanship* of your timbrels and pipes was prepared for you on the *day you were created*.

'You were the anointed cherub who covers; I established you; You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked back and forth in the midst of fiery stones. You were *perfect* in your ways from the day you were created, till *iniquity* was found in you.

'By the abundance of your *trading* you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; therefore *I cast you as a profane thing* out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones.

'Your heart was *lifted up* because of your *beauty*; you *corrupted your wisdom* for the sake of your splendour; I cast you to the ground ...'.

'You defiled your *sanctuaries* by the multitude of your iniquities, by the iniquity of your trading; therefore I brought *fire from your midst*; it *devoured* you ... you have become a horror, and shall *be no more forever*.¹⁸²

To come directly to the point: From the day that Lucifer was created, he possessed all the capacities for eternal expression and

181. 1 Cor 10:6; Heb 3:16-17 182. Ezek 28:12-19

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relationship. But he *turned his own eternity into his own destruction*, his own hell. God allowed fire to come *out of his own midst*. In another parallel prophetic passage, this time citing the judgement of the King of Babylon, Lucifer is quoted as saying in his heart, 'I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne *above the stars* of God'.¹⁸³ Note the mention of 'stars' here, as related to our study of the star-messengers in the book of Revelation.

Now Paul has these prophetic Scriptures in mind as he warns the Corinthians of false apostles who *transform themselves* into ministers of Christ. His emphasis is on 'transforming themselves', for he goes on to say, 'and no wonder, for Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers *transform themselves* into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.'¹⁸⁴ To understand the warning, we should remember that Lucifer *was* an angel. Yet it is said in Isaiah, and by Paul, that his *modus operandi* was to exalt himself, by pride, *trading* and false projection, to be above the *stars* of God. Though he was a perfect and prominent angel in creation, Satan aspired and sought to present himself in the place of the *angelos*. There is much we could say about this, but our current discussion concerns the fatal shift of heart by which we can misappropriate eternity to become a horror, and to *be* 'no more forever'.

Surely, salvation and damnation are here among us. To this incredible imperative, the preached word is addressed.

Trading

Citing the case of the false apostles, Paul is warning that we cannot impute toward a reality that is not from God. To do so is the practice

183. Isa 14:13 184. 2 Cor 11:13-15

of trading, as found in the symbolic description of the King of Tyre¹⁸⁵, a parallel to Lucifer. Paul specifically compares this action of transforming ourselves, to the mode of Satan's pride. How could he actually transform himself, when in truth, the angels were not able to grow, change or develop to be anything other than what they were in creation? All that an angel like Lucifer could do was to project, pretend, posture, pose, trade, distort, lie and use his capacities for a lawless purpose. He could not actually change who and what he was. What defiled his sanctuary and led to his eternal destruction was the multiplied effect of his trading. Trading! What is trading? Simply, trading is the opposite of giving. Trading is an exchange in which there is mutual benefit. We should keep this in mind as we examine the self-promoting mechanisms that Paul was seeking to undercut.

Enemies of the cross

Satan's device, to which Paul is drawing attention, is the practice of gaining support, by exchanging loyalty and affirmation, for a false projection of identity and ministry. This exercise can easily take place between leaders and the people with whom they trade. There is some mutual benefit in believing the lie, just as there is for Satan when he tempts us to impute substance to things that are not of God. This is how we become *enemies of the cross*, 'whose end is destruction'.¹⁸⁶

Paul is making it clear that it is possible to misappropriate the 'powers of the age to come'¹⁸⁷ in such a way as to produce eternal death. We should meditate on this principle. Jude shows that some touch this 'second death' even while alive. They are 'twice dead, pulled up by the roots [seed terminology]; raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; *wandering stars* for whom is reserved the blackness

185. Isa 28:16,18 186. Phil 3:18-19 The Greek for 'destruction' has the same root as Apollyon, the power of destruction that is quite different from Satan. 187. Heb 6:5

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of darkness forever'.¹⁸⁸ The implications are enormous. Not only is it possible to be a wandering star, a luminary - and shall we even say, a self-transformed *angelos* - but it is also possible to be 'twice dead'. What does this mean? This is a reference to what Revelation calls the 'second death'.¹⁸⁹ The first death is the death of mortality which comes to all. Then we know that all are raised, some to eternal life and others to eternal death.¹⁹⁰ This is the *second* death, which according to Revelation, does not 'hurt' the overcomers.¹⁹¹ There are those, Jude is saying, who are 'marked out' for the second death. They are 'twice dead' while they are alive. It is impossible for them to be renewed to repentance.¹⁹² What is more amazing is that these are also 'wandering stars'. They are light-bearers, a false *angelos*, just like Satan. Their own destiny has been misappropriated to damnation.

The dividing line between salvation and damnation is misappropriation. We note in other studies that at the time of the fifth trumpet, this form of misappropriation opens the bottomless pit from which the Destroyer, Apollyon, arises to severely torment men. Curiously, those afflicted 'seek death and will not find it'.¹⁹³

Our elementary point here is that the cross, as it is ministered, makes just this kind of distinction. On the one side, hearers appropriate eternal life. On the other, opposers misappropriate eternity toward ultimate destruction.

188. Jude 12-13 189. Rev 21:8 190. John 5:29 191. Rev 2:11 192. Heb 6:6
193. Rev 9:1,4-6,11

9. Understanding the cross

At first hearing, and upon first sighting, the cross is an instrument for killing someone or something. What we have to answer regarding the death of Christ is this: 'Is He dying as a *substitute* or as one who is *including* all in His vicarious acts?' This needs careful thought.

Certainly we are convinced that He died in our place as a sacrifice, 'the just for the unjust'.¹⁹⁴ But very soon we must make an important step in our understanding. He is dying in our place, but in the sense that He is including us in the 'body of His flesh' so that 'through death' we can be reconciled, and ultimately presented 'holy and blameless'.¹⁹⁵

Taking the eternal view for a moment: Did Christ plan to stand in our place, or did He plan to take upon Himself the likeness of human flesh,¹⁹⁶ sinful flesh,¹⁹⁷ and thus include our contrariness so that it would be removed? Then we could be genuine parts of the flesh of His

194. 1 Pet 3:18 195. Col 1:22-23 196. Phil 2:7 197. Rom 8:3; Heb 2:14

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own body,¹⁹⁸ purified and matured by the cross. Clearly this is the only interpretation of the cross of Christ. So the key words are inclusion and participation, not merely substitution and expiation.

One died - all are dead

The cross of Christ convinces us that we are all guilty of the death that He died. It is we who pierced Him, and the death He is dying is the one that we should be dying. Therefore we are all utterly condemned, and already under eternal judgment. To quote a key verse, 'The love of Christ compels us, because we *judge thus*: that if One died for all, then all died'.¹⁹⁹ This is perfectly clear. In this sense His death appears to be vicarious, or substitutionary - 'the just for the unjust'.²⁰⁰ A more helpful term however, would be to say that His death is *inclusive*. When we sight the cross, we do not conclude that He is suffering so that we will not. We are convinced that He is dying *our* death, our eternal death, in our place, and because of *our* sins. We become aware that by some means, He has drawn in and comprehended in Himself, all our lawlessness. So, immediately we find ourselves to be accountable *for* the cross, and *to* the cross. 'And He died for all, that those who *live* should live no longer for *themselves*, but for Him who died for them and rose again'.²⁰¹

A propitiation for the whole world

We also become aware that in comprehending our sin, He has become an expiation for the *whole* world, not just for a select few. God 'desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth'.²⁰² However, while all are loved, 'not all have faith'.²⁰³ Are all men saved by His substitutionary death? Clearly not. Yes, they were all

198. Eph 5:30 199. 2 Cor 5:14 200. 1 Pet 3:18 201. 2 Cor 5:15 202. 1 Tim 2:4
203. 2 Thess 3:2

comprehended in His propitiatory sacrifice. But we ask, 'By what means then does His inclusive death become propitious for each one of us?' 'Is it enough to believe in Him?' 'He that believes in Him shall have everlasting life.'²⁰⁴ Yes, we must believe. This is the response we must make. The questions are: What do we believe? What does it mean to believe in Him? In time, we find ourselves compelled to believe, 'that if One died for all, then *all* died'. And as we said above, those who now live should no longer live for themselves.

Other verses then come to mind on this subject. 'I am crucified *with* Christ, nevertheless I live.'²⁰⁵ This is startling at first. Not only was Christ crucified, but I was also. So again, 'What do we believe?' We believe that He has included us so that *we* will participate in *His* death, through faith. For what purpose? We read, 'He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might *become* the righteousness of God in Him'.²⁰⁶ He was made sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God. We were embraced in an operation - what Paul calls 'the operation of God'. Christ did not merely stand in for us as a sacrificial scapegoat. He was made 'perfect through sufferings', Hebrews says, and then He died, was buried and rose again.²⁰⁷

The operation of God

Paul explained to the Colossians that our faith in Christ completely identifies us with the active process. He died, was buried and then raised. We also die with Him, are buried with Him in baptism, and are raised together with Him.²⁰⁸ When are we raised? The three-fold operation is active here and now, and is not just something that is effected when we die. Our entry into resurrection life is here and now.

Very simply, this is what the cross expresses to us. As we watch a holy God meeting the condition of mankind on the terrifying

204. John 3:16 205. Gal 2:20 206. 2 Cor 5:21 207. Heb 2:10 208. Col 2:11-13

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battlefield of human history, the cross tells us just who we are and who God is. The image of the 'serpent on the pole' tells us the degree to which Christ has identified with, embraced and absorbed all our sin.²⁰⁹ The first message is not the 'stained-glass' Saviour who steps from the vile crowd to die in our place, waive our justly deserved penalty and send us to heaven. This message can call to us, but cannot save us. The first message of the cross is that we are included in the scandal. *We are* the scandal. Why should a just man die for us? We are dead in our trespasses and sins. The entire condition of human depravity is represented in His marred visage and distorted frame upon the cross at Calvary. Ours is not to mitigate or diminish the degree of our sin. The entire disfigurement is equally true of each and every soul who gazes upon Him. The call upon us from the one who has engaged our sin, is to *participate* in His cross, and discover that it was indeed a vicarious experience on our account. The key word is participation, not substitution. He *stood in* for us, yes, but in an entire operation that dealt with sin. The good news is that He now takes us into Himself, with all our sin, and we now live in His operation as a permanent disposition.

In response, we should take our place, be baptised into His death, burial and resurrection, and thus become yoked to Christ. Now our eternal judgment is removed, in Him. We are forgiven our debt, in Christ. In actual fact, we are removed *from* the eternal judgment. While ever we continue in Him, we are inheriting eternal life. Outside of Christ, there is only eternal judgment.

It is His identification and our participation that cause the cross to be vicarious. Let us say again, it is evident that Christ was offered to all men as a propitiation. However, it is only those who *participate* who actually find His operation to be vicarious for them. Outside of

209. John 3:14; Num 21:8,9

participation, we remain under judgment. As Jesus said to the self-righteous Pharisees, 'Now you say, "We see." Therefore your sin remains'.²¹⁰

What is offered to us is a place in Him where we may die in Him, to sin. While we are in Him, dying His death and living His justified life, then we are removed from the prospect of eternal judgment.

The cross - offering - transformation

The essential truth of offering, as revealed in the Old Covenant practice is our key help here. The former worshippers met with God, with their sacrifices in hand. When the sin offerings were consumed, they were released from the consequences of sin. What do we learn from that vast program of offerings? We learn that at the point of offering, change took place. Transformation! This is crucial for us. Receiving forgiveness must lead to change. If we are forgiven much, we love much.²¹¹ And if we love sincerely, we pursue change. Forgiveness without subsequent change makes a mockery of the cross.

'There is no change without offering' becomes our catch-phrase. Symbolically speaking, the Old Testament offerer was presented and caught up into the fire of God's own being. 'Flesh' was caught up into the fire and was consumed. Paul had this in mind in his 'cross' chapter, 1 Corinthians chapter one, when he said, 'that no flesh should glory in His presence'.²¹² In each former offering, that which was mortal was being consumed and was vanishing away, leaving only what was purified to remain in fellowship. This is how we are caught up into the life of God Himself. In this way God uses offering to deal with everything that offends.²¹³

210. John 9:41 211. Luke 7:47 212. 1 Cor 1:29 213. This section draws from *Upon this Rock* Vol 2, pp 34-37

Showing forth the Lord's death

This is the meaning of *koinonia*. Any idea of fellowship that does not include participating in His sufferings, is a complete vacuum. The perpetual operation of God is the dimension that we enter through baptism, and in which we continue to fellowship. This is the only context for fellowship. The communion, Paul said, is a fellowship in showing forth the Lord's death. We are not merely remembering, and causing others to remember, His death. We are showing it forth. How does this work?

First of all, we deny ourselves and take up His cross. But here is the high-point. Every suffering, here and now, endured through faith in Christ, is declared to be connected to *His* sufferings. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. As I suffer today, Christ's rejection and crucifixion are manifested, today. Because God embraced all suffering beyond time, as part of His own Eternal Covenant, and then expressed this at Calvary, His cross is immanent, not only historic. His total suffering was only once for all. All the sufferings were embraced in His complete covenant action. Now my sufferings cannot add anything to the mystery of His total identification. So in the end, I do not die for my own sin, and I do not suffer any further, for my own sin. And nor can Christ suffer any further for the sin of the world. As Christ has embraced all suffering already, those whose lives are 'hid in Christ', who are completely identified with His operation for sin's destruction, *may now reckon that their sufferings are part of the full measure that He has suffered.*²¹⁴ Every new trial, while it is new to us, is already comprehended in the fullness of the cup which He accepted. The Father asked His Son in Gethsemane to die the one complete death of all men. Then, by the purging process He endured at the Father's hand, sin was removed, not just as an

214. Col 1:24

answer to law, but as a complete resolution within Their own relationship. This is the mystery of the cross.

Sharing in the sufferings of Christ

Now we just said that the cross is immanent, not only historic. The Lamb was slain before the foundation of the world. And then this totality of suffering beyond time was manifested in time as a revelation of the immanent realm. It is essential that we understand this, for the following reason. The sufferings of Christ are manifested at the moment that I experience them. He has identified with them and encompassed them all so that I may now participate in them. At the moment that I suffer, Christ suffers - not a new cross, but as part of the one and same eternal provision. The cross from 'before the foundation of the world' was immanent to the Old Testament saints, and it is still immanent here and now. This is what the New Testament apostles and Christians understood.

'Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but *share with me in the sufferings* for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was *given to us* in Christ Jesus *before time began*.'²¹⁵

Note the expression: 'before time began'. It's clear. An entire holy calling was given to us before time began. We were to be caught into this one Eternal Covenant operation of God. The power of God is manifested entirely within the one immanent operation - once for all eternity. We too can share in this once for all operation of God.

Unless we see the cross as an immanent operation, we cannot see any point in suffering. What possible purpose could our meagre

215. 2 Tim 1:8-9

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headaches, major afflictions and old-age degenerations serve? However, once we realise that we do *not add to*, but *share in*, His sufferings, then we can resolve to participate in them by the power of God.

This is why we look past the serpent to the 'bread and wine'. We look behind the crucifixion altogether, to the revelation of the giving-love of God. 'God so loved that He gave ...'.²¹⁶ We confront the inescapable truth that the 'cross', so called, is the most apt description of how the three persons live together. They live with an 'altar' at the heart, in a fire of perpetual offering (to introduce another typical symbol). They live in a relationship of absolute giving. Offering is not 'personless' abdication of essential identity, even though it is an abdication of personal sovereignty. Offering denotes the full expression of identity - toward the other, for the other, and in the exercise of revealing the other - for it is at the point of offering that identity is fully seen.

The 'finished' work

This is the only way to understand the work which was 'finished'²¹⁷ at the cross. It was in fact 'finished' or completely accomplished, outside of time, and then manifested at Calvary. It is said to be 'finished' because it embodied *all* suffering and *all* salvation, beyond our present context. The cross is complete such that no suffering that we present to Christ, in faith to participate in Him, can ever be extra to His 'finished work'. By this active participation *in* the cross, we may find all the grace that is necessary to run our course. Here lies the harmony that believers seek - that of trusting God for His supernatural gifts of healing and deliverance, while equally trusting Him to endure those sufferings by which we 'cease from sin', mature and inherit full

216. John 3:16 217. John 19:30

salvation. 'Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin.'²¹⁸ This is the key to rest and joy. Sadly, many believers distort themselves, mentally and spiritually, by trying to manipulate reality, seeking supernatural deliverance and condemning themselves for their lack, or blaming God for the failure of their endeavours.

To claim that His work is 'finished' and that He has 'done it all', as if we now cannot participate in it, and as if He will dispense benefits if we exercise the right kind of faith, reduces the cross to a meaningless void, emptied of its power. If this *were* the case, then it could easily be asked, 'What is the actual benefit of the cross, since human suffering and death have continued on unabated?'

Participation is such a powerful answer. The fullness of God is revealed in the Son, and the total statement of reality is found through a total fellowship with Him *in His complete and finished work*. As Paul summed it up, 'That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the *fellowship* of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.'²¹⁹

Consolation

'For as the *sufferings* of Christ abound in us, so our *consolation* also abounds through Christ. Now if we are afflicted, it is for *your consolation* and salvation, which is effective for enduring the same sufferings which we also suffer. Or if we are comforted, *it is for your consolation* and salvation ... as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also you will partake of the consolation.'²²⁰

218. 1 Pet 4:1 219. Phil 3:10-11 220. 2 Cor 1:5-7

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These are familiar and comforting verses, but we must apprehend them in a deeper sense. Simply, we are offered participation in the entire, eternal operation of the cross, and not just a *part* of it. Not just a part! This is the resounding truth of the cross, one that is perhaps lost in the maze of mystical icons and artistic tributes. The entire operation was both suffering and consolation - both death and resurrection. The resurrection element is the consolation. 'For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection.'²²¹ This is the meaning of consolation. Consolation harmonises two elements - the suffering and the resulting salvation. To preach consolation is to preach harmony. Every eternal benefit prepared for mankind in the eternal atonement, is now ministered by the word, by the foolishness of preaching. Now healing, liberty, deliverance and joy can abound -not as an escape from suffering, but as the joyous fruit of it.

Consolation - for your sake!

As we would expect, the purpose of consolation, as declared by Paul, is for the consolation of the other. 'If we are comforted [same Gr. root as consolation] it is for *your* consolation.'²²² We have said elsewhere, that for the trusting one laying down his life, resurrection is not sought and awarded as a 'trade', but is for the sake of the other. So it is with consolation. 'Therefore *if there is any consolation* in Christ ... fulfill my joy by being like-minded [in what respect, we might ask] having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind ... esteem others better than himself ... look out not only for his *own* interests, but also for the interests of *others*.'²²³

Thus stated is the key to eternal life, here and now. We seek the consolation of being raised to our place of endearing and enduring

221. Rom 6:5 222. 2 Cor 1:6 223. Phil 2:1-4

significance in relation to those others to whom we are to be yoked in eternal bonds, within the body of Christ. This is what causes the heart of a believer to cry out in joyous discovery, with an abundance of victory and grace. We trust and *entrust* ourselves to 'the other', first to the Lord and then to His brethren, as Paul said. 'But they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us.'²²⁴ We give ourselves in the hope of being raised so as to be a consolation to our brethren. How careful we must be to acknowledge and honor that significance which we have toward one another, as members foreknown and predestined to an eternal significance.

Summary

To encourage meditation on the wonder of this entire matter, let us summarise.

As an expression of the cross within His *own* relationship, God has embraced all sin and offence in the fire of eternal love and judgment. The one Son embodied the offence, and in trusting offering, gave Himself to the Father and Spirit as the Lamb.

Having fully identified with sin in Christ, God now pleads with man to be reconciled. The marvel is that Christ could be 'made sin', without committing sin. God neither ignored sin, nor rose to be equal to the threat, as if some law external to Himself demanded satisfaction. Nevertheless, God did 'satisfy', or reconcile, the adverse situation. He did so by allowing law to be manifested apart from love, thus imputing substance to the body of sin so that it could become exceedingly sinful and be destroyed. 'For sin is not imputed when there is no law.'²²⁵ In an amazing operation, Christ, the door, absorbed all sin and accepted all prophetic judgement against sin, including all the abasement and despising of the four elements of His own

224. 2 Cor 8:5 225. Rom 5:13

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administration, without ‘imputing their trespasses to *them*’, ie to the sinners, as we read in Corinthians.²²⁶ The wonder of this mystery is as infinite as God Himself.

Upon beholding this operation of God, its faith, its hope, and its love, we respond by believing. We believe that our sin and death have been included in Him, so we can now reckon ourselves *dead* indeed to sin.

The first truth about the cross is that participation in the cross has now been offered to man, for the removal of sin. The first word of the cross is participation. If we refuse participation, there is no separate vicarious activity of God in Christ to remove our punishment. We are already judged. The only release is willing participation *in* the cross.

He has identified with sin so that it may be removed. It is dealt with by a cleansing process in which we must participate. Once we participate, then we are pardoned from eternal punishment. Christ has indeed died ‘for our sins’, and now we are invited into the faith of the operation of God. Christ has amplified and fully defined this operation, in time, within the three days and nights that included death, burial and resurrection. Here in time, as a direct expression of the Everlasting Covenant, we behold the operation of God. We behold the pure, innocent Lamb who takes upon Himself the sin of the world. We behold the Father receiving the Son’s spotless offering at the conclusion of the passion. We behold a burial of Christ’s body, while He Himself is with the Father in paradise. We realise that the burial signifies the death of sin, and the approaching change from corruption to incorruption. We watch the resurrection of the body by the Holy Spirit. His is now a glorified body, inclusive of all those believers who are joined by faith to the Son.

226. 2 Cor 5:19

His weakness is stronger

Now we are convinced that the weakness of God is stronger than men. Every high thing that would exalt itself against God is drawn down into the place of being abased. The wise are made foolish, the strong are made weak, the mighty and noble are made base and despised, and the things that 'are' are now 'not'.

The great lesson we learn from Paul is that he carried in himself, in Christ, this capacity to be weak. 'We also are weak in Him', Paul said.²²⁷ This is amazing. Paul knew that while ever he proclaimed this message, nothing could exceed him or 'go past' him to become lifted up. He did not need to carry 'carnal' weapons, but he did have mighty 'weapons'.²²⁸

227. 2 Cor 13:4 228. 2 Cor 10:4

10. The weapons of the cross

What were these weapons? Paul carried the four elements of the cross as a stumbling-snare, accepting the thought that the cross amplifies the four faces of Christ - lion, ox, man and eagle.

The power (lion, kingship) of the cross, would now dethrone and shame the mighty, to bring to weakness, and now weakness in Christ would be the doorway to true strength.

The reconciliation (ox, priesthood aspect) of the cross would abase the noble, and then call those who were lowly and despised to a place of choosing. 'God has called ...God has chosen ...'²²⁹

The wisdom (man, prophetic eyes) of the cross, would make worldly wisdom foolish, and thus bring us to true wisdom.

The translating capacity (eagle, fatherhood) of the cross was now able to reduce the things that 'are' to 'nothing', and then, as for Enoch,

229. Cor 1:26-29

translate believers to the heights to which they were to be raised in Christ.

Christ despised - the four administrations

What we must understand, as did Paul, is that *all* our iniquity was laid upon Him. In amplifying this point, it is sobering to observe that Christ, the sum of the four-faced administration, became the recipient of the full weight of judgment upon the failure of these four administrations in Israel's history. He staggered His way to the cross as a despised king, priest, prophet and son of His Father. In effect, men could have said, 'Here comes the King' - only to find one who was despised and rejected. Or, 'Here comes the Priest' - only to find that like the priests warned by Malachi, He was smeared with refuse and carried *with* it outside the city. Or, 'Here comes the Prophet', or 'Here comes the Deliverer, the Son, the Heir!'

As we know, throughout history God's people had forfeited all four administrations, and reaped the colourful rhetoric of every prophet since the world began. Now the full abasement of kingship (lion), the scandal of failed priesthood (ox), the ruin of the prophets (man), and the captivity of every household relationship (eagle) was laid upon Him. The wonder of this for our salvation, is that having become the sum of all judgment, He also becomes the door to a restored administration. All iniquity was laid upon Him and *taken out* with Him. What Paul understood from this, in presbytery terms, was that the weakness of God became a snare, weapon for carrying away all false administration. The presbytery could then guard the door to see that no alternative kingly, priestly, prophetic or fatherhood ministry, could promote itself around or over the door and into the sheepfold. The cross brought everything to nothing. The cross, if preached properly without being emptied of its effect, could snare all fleshly endeavour in a *skandalon* and release believers to be yoked to Christ.

That the covenant may continue

The prophet Malachi speaks about the Levitical priests' calling, judgement and deliverance. We shall find that the content of Malachi's prophecy is the background of Paul's comments to Corinth. Note the following passage (emphasis ours).

'And now, O priests, this *commandment* is for you. If you will not hear, and if you will not take it to heart ... I will send a *curse* upon you ... I will *rebuke* your descendants and spread *refuse* on your faces ... and one will *take you away with it* ... that My *covenant* with *Levi* may *continue*, says the LORD of hosts ... For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But ... You have *corrupted* the covenant of Levi.'²³⁰

First of all, we know that the overall lament of the Old Testament is that God progressively abased all four of the administrations (faces) that should have been active amidst His people. Paul was well aware of this, and had accepted the same judgment, as reflected in his comments about being made to be the 'filth of the earth', a 'fool', a 'spectacle to angels and men'. But staying with the Old Testament for a moment, we recall warnings and laments about the fallen administrations: 'The crown has fallen from our head' (regarding kingship²³¹); 'the stones of the altar ... are beaten to dust (regarding priesthood²³²); 'the LORD ... has closed your eyes', namely, the prophets (regarding prophetic ministry²³³); and 'I will lay stumbling-blocks before this people, and the father and sons together will fall on them' (regarding the father-son aspect of the eagle²³⁴).

The warning in Malachi is directed to the priests, who were to keep the tenets of the covenant of Levi. The Lord warned that He

230. Mal 2:1-8 231. Lam 5:16 232. Isa 27:9 233. Isa 29:10 234. Jer 6:21

would 'take [the priests] away', along with the same animal refuse that was spread on their faces. What an image of humiliation. This kind of abasement would occur, Malachi proclaims, 'that the covenant could continue'. This is our major point of interest here - the continuation of the covenant.

To see the point, we must immediately think back to the Everlasting Covenant, to the covenanting dialogue that is ever-present toward us. As part of the covenant dialogue of the three persons, as part of the operation of the weakness of God, it is implicit in Their dialogue that the operation of salvation continues by the very means described here. It continues by engrossing us in the exposition of abasement - our experiences of foolishness, of being caught in our own craftiness, of being trapped in a *skandalon*, of being abased and despised, even by God Himself as we find ourselves under His judgement. In our daily disciplines we are caught into the wheels of process, into a participation in the cross. We are immersed in the processes of dying and of being buried, so that our transformation is effected and declared by resurrection life. We discover the essential redemptive principle. We are ransomed by this process, so that the covenant may continue.

Cross - yoke - limit

When the cross is preached, and when Christ is declared to be the one despised and rejected by the Father and by men alike, the message itself can *captive* all fleshly endeavour to the cross, so that it can be carried away in death.

A minister of the cross, by being 'weak in Him', can draw in and entrap everything that exalts itself 'higher' than this, and bring it down to nothing. In this way, a true minister carries a *yoke* of gentle wisdom, rather like a lariat, to harness every believer into the process of the *cross*, and thereby into his proper '*limit*' within the corporate

body of Christ. The cross is made to be of ‘no effect’ if we bypass weakness, and reinstate worldly spirituality and wisdom. This is the message of Corinthians, and this is why these letters become the presbytery handbook.

Caught in a ‘skandalon’

Paul warned the Corinthians right from the beginning of his first letter, that the cross would act as a stumbling-block (Gr. *skandalon*, a bent-stick trap, from which we derive the Eng. scandal). Being caught in a ‘scandal’ carries a similar sense of becoming trapped in our own inappropriate actions, the shame of which is known to others. What Paul understood was this. As a mature father approaching an unruly church, he preached the cross in a particular sense. He declared that the cross, by Christ’s identification with our corruption, had already found out and discovered the secret scandal of all our self-vaunting ways. The very first aspect of God’s operation in the cross, Paul showed, was to define all our actions *as* a scandal, and to include, engage, engross and captivate all our actions in His operation. While we were unaware, Christ knew and included all our scandalous, serpentine behaviour, without our planning for it to be exposed. This is exactly the sense carried in our modern use of the word ‘scandal’. Christ has identified with all sin, whether it is known to be so or not. The discovery of our sin, and our abasement, is waiting at the door. The Holy Spirit convicts and convinces us of ‘sin, righteousness and judgement’.²³⁵ Christ makes it possible for us to join the cross by snaring us in our own actions. ‘He catches the wise in their own craftiness.’²³⁶ And as the next verse says, He has subjected all our best

235. John 16:8 236. 1 Cor 3:19

achievements to futility. 'The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.'²³⁷

Snare - weapon - fire!

So then, here is Paul's crunch-point. The cross is first of all a *snare*, or *stumbling block* that entraps the contrary behaviour - as with the primitive bent-stick trap that snared small animals.²³⁸ So, *first of all*, the 'serpent' face of the cross *ensnares* all false wisdom, then acts as a *weapon* to kill and nullify the corruption, before the symbolic 'fire' aspect of the cross destroys it completely. The cross: snare - weapon - fire! This is the backdrop to what Paul is saying to the Corinthians.

Clearly, the Corinthians understood this backdrop to Paul's letter about the cross. Certainly, they knew the Old Testament references to which Paul was alluding, and they had also benefited by Paul's ministry visit in the first place.²³⁹ Now in his letters, they were being recalled to what they should have known. Mixture should not have crept in. Because immaturity had led to mixture, Paul the master-builder was *now employing the cross-seed operation himself*, in his own *demeanour*. He was not wielding the message like an indiscriminate weapon in an angry hand. On the contrary. He had established the church by living and dying with them. In fact, he had died with every new church. Persecutions had befallen him, and the new believers, in every place. But as he and the new Christians sprang up from the ground so to speak, they became a church. This was Paul's faith. This was the faith of the operation of God.²⁴⁰

Seed principle for increase

This was the mode of God's life. He buried himself with Christ in the ground of each local church, each with its novice difficulties,

237. 1 Cor 3:20 238. Rom 11:9; 1 Cor 1:23 239. Isa 29:14 240. Col 2:12 KJV

carnal restrictions, parental routines, daily necessities, practical limits and faith constrictions. In each place he submitted himself to this limit. In each place, Paul became a source of imputing. The substance and reality of Paul's own sphere were imputed toward him, at the same time as a word of imputation was imputed through him to others. He wasn't just sharing encouragement and good advice. He was acting in the dimension of the presbytery 'hand'. What he shared was a word of imputation which, when received, carried the power to call into existence the substance belonging to Christ.

Then as the faith of the local group grew, and as believers adopted the seed operation of death and burial believing for resurrection and increase, the gospel was enlarged so that Paul could proceed to the next city, if he so desired.

If the local faith was not enlarged, ostensibly he was content to die where he began. As each church was enlarged in its sphere, Paul was enlarged toward *his* own sphere. As he revealed them, they revealed him - to restate the principle of revealing one another.

The death of Christ

So the preaching of the cross gives us a choice. We may die with Christ, in His death, or we shall die the eternal death, the 'second death'.²⁴¹ The same cross that captured us will now act as a weapon to destroy sin. Sin will be cut off by the 'circumcision of Christ'.²⁴² Christ's death is found to be a particular kind of death. It was a circumcision. Sin was cut off. 'The death that He died, He died *to* sin.'²⁴³

Because He has died to sin, we may die with Him. Christ includes us, as we reckon ourselves dead, and our sin will pass out in death with Him. It is declared then that we are no longer dead in our own

241. Rev 20:6 242. Col 2:11 243. Rom 6:10

trespasses and sins, but dead with Christ. Christ takes us into Himself, with all our sin, then He deals with it and cuts it off as we participate in the dying processes. It is at the point of each suffering, each weakness, each 'foolishness', each experience of being abased or despised, that the operation of God includes us and brings us to nothing. 'Therefore, sufferings are essential', Paul was proclaiming to the Corinthian church. *Our interface with suffering is our meeting point with the power of God's operation.* The power of God first draws everything down to nothing, and then brings it back through resurrection. The power of God is such that He can create from nothing and expand the seed to infinity. At the same time, He can draw everything back to nothing, back into the birth-place of that which is new. This is the means by which God restores what is destroyed - as when Joel speaks of a restoration of that which has been eaten by the cankerworm etc. 'I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten.'²⁴⁴

So this is the all-important process. We are first drawn into His weakness. The weakness of God is the disposition by which He willingly absorbs contrariness, thus enabling us to participate in the resolution. Then the power of God in resurrection is manifested toward the other - 'toward you', as Paul said. The secret of weakness then, is that when we are weak in Him, we live with Him, by the power that is manifested toward the other, for the good of the other. The power of resurrection is *through* us, and not just *for* us.

If we choose to participate in this operation, we do not come under wrath. Mercy triumphs over judgement. If we choose to participate in the resolving work of the cross, the eternal punishment is removed. So we are no longer ashamed of the way in which Christ was abased, nor on account of others who share in His sufferings. We now share with

244. Joel 2:25

one another *in* the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God.

Examine your faith

This was ‘the faith’, the true faith, about which they were to ‘examine’ themselves, as Paul said at the conclusion of the second letter. ‘Examine yourselves as to whether you are in *the faith*. Test yourselves.’²⁴⁵ Paul was testing the Corinthian church. Would the believers adopt the ‘faith of the operation of God’?²⁴⁶ Would they activate the seed principle? ‘For though He was crucified in weakness, yet He lives by the power of God. For we *also* are weak in Him, but we *shall live* with Him by the power of God toward you.’²⁴⁷

Paul came to them, then lived apart from them, but wrote to them, always exemplifying the Godhead’s own mode. *He conveyed the cross as the immanent power and wisdom of God.* As he laid down his life in fatherhood toward them, they were called to reveal him in his sphere. Was the death-burial-resurrection operation functional in this church or not? This was his final challenge in closing the second letter when he spoke of the grace of Christ, the love of God (the Father) and the communion of the Holy Spirit. What did he really mean as he signed off? What was his challenge?

Was ‘the *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ*’ active through an imputing-blessing capacity? Was the crucial dynamic of the *love of God* present among them - the ‘seed’ dimension of giving-love? And was ‘the *communion of the Holy Spirit*’ producing an explosion in multiplicity among them? Amen.²⁴⁸

245. 2 Cor 13:5 246. Col 2:12 KJV 247. 2 Cor 13:4 248. 2 Cor 13:14

11. Our pastoral mode

We first wrote on this theme of the ‘weakness of God’ in *Cities on Fire*. At that time, the theme of the seed, when applied to Paul’s ministry, was convicting us of the way ahead in restoration. We could see that Paul’s exhortation to Corinth was to a church established *without* suffering, a church which must now embrace the affliction of the seed in order to multiply. We were also impressed that our pastoral mode in addressing contrary and threatening elements, had to be according to the ‘weakness of God’. At that time, we wrote that ‘the cross confined to flesh is the weakness of God’. With the expansion offered in this study, this definition is even clearer. It is at the point where God interfaces with flesh and thus with everything contrary that we see His weakness. And similarly, we are to employ the weakness of God as the mechanism for bringing down all the strongholds that exalt themselves against the work of God.

Offering reconciliation

We have laboured the point that the weakness of God is that disposition of *Yahweh* whereby He draws everything contrary into Himself, into His own covenanting operation. God doesn't 'reach up', so to speak, to be equal to the threat. He does not overpower the elements that oppose. Nor, in fact, does God orchestrate a legal expiation of sin by providing a scapegoat - even though this is how it appears from an objective viewpoint. Instead, God offers resolution by an operation within Himself. God even pleads with men to be reconciled, and then provides the full process of resolution. By the way in which the Three offer to one another in faith, hope and love, and in the way They give and reconcile by resurrection, 'flesh' is able to be consumed, purged and transformed into the life of God. A change occurs through offering. The fire of offering consumes all that is contrary. Then vengeance is the outflow of this resolution, the result of the fact that everything is now resolved to eternal life. The Lord now says that 'Vengeance is *mine*' because He *has* done all that can be done to arrest contenders.²⁴⁹ If resolution is refused, then 'coals of fire' rest upon those who refuse, so that a permanent state of resolution remains.²⁵⁰ Since God doesn't force resolution, the active operation that could have brought resolution is now eternally active in vengeance. The power to exclude is found to be, and must be, as eternal as the loving power to reconcile.

This is the backdrop to understanding how to practically absorb the contrariness of others, drawing it down into weakness.

249. Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30 250. Rom 12:20

Not imputing trespasses

The weakness of God is such that He merely absorbed all trespass within Himself, thus taking revenge upon all disobedience within His own obedient relationship.²⁵¹ In this way, God dealt with the substance of sin, without having to impute trespasses to the sinner. He did not meet offenders with the power of exclusion, but offered a process for inclusion. Simply, weakness was stronger than everything that confronted Him as strength. Christ simply allowed all the abasement and discipline to be the pathway to the door of salvation. This is now the pathway that *we* travel. Our crafty wisdom, shameful deeds and futile thoughts will cause us to be snared into the process. This is the operation to which we must humble ourselves and in which we must engage, if we are to minister the cross. We will be made a scandal, a spectacle to angels and men, abased and despised as the filth of the earth. This is what Paul demonstrated.

Weakness as a mode of relationship and care

This is the only way we can be fellow workers, ‘ambassadors for Christ, as though God were *pleading* through us’.²⁵² This is the only way we can be ‘Christ’ in our ministry to others.

How do we function in weakness? We explain thus: Since we are not greater than God, we cannot avoid, or help others avoid, the tribulation and abasement that befall us, since these are the evidence of the cross at work. We are ‘weak’ and cannot minister or effect the ideals that others seek. We are under no obligation to try to achieve them. We know only what God allows us to know, and are utterly weak toward issues that are beyond our knowledge or accountability. We make no judgements, nor do we receive judgements against

251. cf 2 Cor 10:6 252. 2 Cor 6:1;5:20

11. Our pastoral mode

ourselves. We do not even judge ourselves, as Paul says - in the sense that we rest at all times upon *His* justification, and not on the machinery of our own individual assessments.²⁵³ When we act, we can only do so according to the weakness of God, in case our 'strength' opposes His weakness, or our 'wisdom' counters the wisdom of the cross. The way that God acts to expose, then engross and process our sin is 'the wisdom of the cross'. There is nothing wiser than this, and we must take exceptional care not to propose sophisticated solutions when the weakness of God is actually working to engage flesh in a fiery ordeal for the destruction of sin.

253. 1 Cor 4:4

12. Authority versus control

Continuing on this same theme of Paul's approach to yoking the local church, let us make some observations about the proper exercise of authority. This is the area in which our study will have its most practical outworking. If in any way we are involved in applying the yoke, or indeed in accepting it, the question is, 'In what way do we understand authority?' Is authority a form of power that is used to enforce Christian obedience?

How does the notion of authority fit with what we have said about meekness and weakness? Simply, all authority truly belongs to Christ, and the exercise of authority relies entirely on our ability to operate as ones who are yoked to Christ, avoiding all the stones and pitfalls of carnality that Paul was addressing in the local Corinthian church.

Dividing between authority and control

First of all, there is a vast difference between the exercise of genuine authority and the exercise of control. Most believers would feel they understand the difference, at least in theory. However, to observe the distinction in practice is much more difficult. In practice, the dividing line must be established right at the very first point of interface with a particular challenge or situation that motivates our judgement. This is where we must take care. We must examine and govern our responses right where our consciousness is motivated in the first place. This is where we will either impute toward reality from God's perspective, or toward our own perspective, which can so easily promote the pathway of self-investment and personal validation.

The hallmarks of control

While we all hope to exercise true authority, it is needful to examine the steps by which a particular activity can become a misplaced exercise of control. As we make a study of these responses, we can better see what an example Paul was providing regarding the way in which believers should exercise authority.

The following are likely steps by which supposed authority becomes control.

1. *Self investment.* The fundamental basis of control is this: that one invests oneself in an assessment or judgement made of a particular situation. First of all, the challenge, new event, confronting behaviour or disorderly scenario draws my conscience to be involved. Not only do I have a view, an opinion, but there also begins to be an element of personal investment in stating this view, in being correct in this view, and in initiating some corresponding action. This whole dynamic is not a problem in itself, however it is what we do *next* that will

determine whether we move toward authority or control. Meekness and weakness are the touch points commended by Paul.²⁵⁴

2. *Drawn, without actually behaving accountably.* The next step is that we become 'drawn' by the situation and committed to participate in it, with a view to a resolution. We may even become driven by anxiety to reach an ideal conclusion. We find it difficult to let go of the matter without expressing our view, retaining our view, or remaining involved. We may or may not have a genuine accountability. If we *are* truly accountable, we should proceed via the pathway of true authority. When we are *not* actually accountable, there is a temptation to exercise ourselves in stronger assessments, for now we can invest ourselves for personal gain, without having to bear the consequences. It is often true that the less real accountability we have, the more control we seek to exercise. Control is not an accountable exercise, since personal investment means that one is only accountable to oneself, as a self-verifying exercise.

3. *Conscience dictates offensive action.* When one is aroused to action, even aroused to make judgements, one is acting under the dictate of conscience. The conscience should be bearing witness in the Holy Spirit - whereupon the will of the Father, in the Son, will be governed by the Holy Spirit, and all actions will be the outcome of true authority. The conscience, according to Paul's carefully delineated mode, should be 'void of offence'; that is, the conscience should not be aroused to take offensive action.²⁵⁵ Certainly Paul caused upset, but in truth he did so unintentionally. He took no 'offensive' action.

Of course, we cannot resort to inaction, since action is often required. Faith does demand that decisions be made. However, they must be made calmly and responsibly, not from nervous response.

254. Gal 6:1; 1 Cor 2:3 255. Acts 24:16 KJV

12. Authority versus control

4. *A victim of one's original assessment.* When one is motivated to offensive action of some kind, it can be said that one is the 'victim of one's assessments'. Because there is a personal investment in one's view, or in following through one's view, one is no longer free from the assessment or action. Having deemed another to be 'wrong' or inadequate, one is no longer acting with freedom, love and authority in the Holy Spirit. One is led to a conclusion by the original set of motivating assessments.

5. *Equal to the situation.* Once we are thus drawn into a situation, however we arrived, we are compelled to be equal to the situation. We draw others into our slipstream - and this can seem like leadership. By now, we believe we are equal to the challenge, and may show insecurity and reaction toward others who are viewing the matter differently, or who are suggesting a different approach. Remaining 'equal' to, and competent in, the situation, can now become a 'crusade'.

6. *A crusade.* Once the conscience is thus working by law, from a self-centred basis, a crusade has begun. It is progressively becoming important and essential that one is found to be 'right' in the actions undertaken. The compliant or non-compliant actions of others will now be judged as to whether they line up with the crusade being undertaken. Furthermore, the originator of this crusade is now obligated to pursue, and attain, the outcome that he had in mind.

7. *Not in control, but controlled.* Now the originator is *not in control* at all. He is controlled by the situation, and cannot stand free from it, or view it with mature disinterest. In particular, he cannot function corporately, seeking the good of the whole. He is controlled by it at the *point* of personal investment, and to the degree of personal investment.

8. *Emotive empowerment.* Emotive power and/or the capacity of reason will now become the strength being exercised. Genuine authority would be able to maintain some distance, some objectivity. True authority and personal investment are vastly different at this point.

9. *Success will vindicate.* Once we are on this pathway, we are obligated to produce a successful outcome. Why? Because we are personally invested in the crusade, and the outcome is now a self-validating exercise. We will push through to this outcome, adding further assessments and authoritative stances if necessary - even adding disciples to our cause - to make sure that the outcome is as we first anticipated. We should remember however, that success does not prove our assessment.

10. *Law versus grace.* Needless to say, this whole exercise means that law is at work, rather than grace. Only those who lay life down, in the very specific exercises of making judgements and determining loving actions, are able to exercise genuine authority to call others to obey their word.

Whenever we introduce the subject of 'law', we should remember that the standard, the law, in itself, is not the problem. In fact, the standard must *be* fulfilled. However, the need is to decide the correct way to fulfil the standard - in the flesh, or by the Spirit. Are we proceeding by grace-authority, or by law and control?

True authority

Briefly, true authority, in contrast to the above, requires a word from God, whereupon one is led by the Holy Spirit, according to the specific limit of Christ's grace. Paul's key was that he submitted himself to the administration, without seeking to carry the administration within himself. For us likewise, where our opinions and potential actions are laid down in the midst of presbytery, we are able to be sent as servants, according to grace, and without the factor of personal investment. Our *only* investment, so to speak, is in the yoke of the corporate Christ, by which another is revealed by a faith that is always working in line with the word of predestination.

12. Authority versus control

In the care of others, it is important that we should have a knowledge of our own temperament and unique 'culture'. Are we prone to be threatened by anomalous situations? Are we impatient and frustrated? Are we anxious to see good relational outcomes, and motivated by this anxiety? Do we tend to become over-committed because of idealism? Do we love to commentate on, and analyse, situations in ways that others do not comprehend? Do we pontificate strongly, while in truth we are reluctant to make decisions and recommend forward pathways?

Clarity in these matters leads us to being able to hold things lightly, while finding the Spirit's leading and motivation in His ever-present will being done. In fact, we will find a freedom to invest ourselves even more in expression and service to others, knowing that genuine humility allows plenty of latitude between fellows who are moving on in the maturing process.

13. Corinth here and now

To conclude our study, let us survey our current Christian condition in Corinthian terms. For Corinth, the first point was that although they were rich in speech, knowledge, gifts and vision, they were torn with rifts and contentions.²⁵⁶ In turn, these breakdowns were making way for immorality and idolatry, to such an extent that God's judgment was active among them. They were now guilty of the body and blood of the Lord²⁵⁷, and many were sick and dying as a result. It's not hard to see how these issues apply today. The sectarian divisions are easy to connect with today's denominational groupings. The Jewish sign-seeking can be related, as a broad generalisation, to the modern pursuit of supernatural gifts etc. The Greek wisdom can be applied to our modern preoccupation with the science of theological principles, techniques and methods. The issues of

256. 1 Cor 1:5-7, 11 257. 1 Cor 11:27-29

immorality (chapter 5), illegality (chapter 6), idolatry (chapter 8), disunity (chapter 10), family breakdown (chapter 11), loss of love (chapter 13), eccentricity in public gatherings (chapter 14) and false doctrine (chapter 15) are also easy to cross-apply.

Behind these obvious manifestations, Paul is digging much deeper still. His aim is to preach the cross so as to bring everything to nothing. Once the wisdom and power of human endeavours are brought to naught, the Spirit can raise what truly belongs to Christ. The diverse gifts, ministries, administrations and manifestations²⁵⁸ that *are* of Christ, can then be yoked to their proper place in the body, according to God's appointment. This is the high point of Paul's focus in the first letter.

Elements that were 'para' koinonia

In broad terms, Paul was confronting elements that were 'para',²⁵⁹ or extra, to the central *koinonia*. There was obviously a range of prominent 'wisdoms' and 'powers', we could say, that were gaining converts. Perhaps local leaders themselves had a capacity to enthuse others along the lines of their unique ministries. This is the sense conveyed in the early chapters.

More seriously, liberties were being exercised such that some were said to be defrauding their brethren.²⁶⁰ Apparently their actions were technically lawful, but not actually profitable, or expedient.²⁶¹

In chapter eight, on the matter of eating food offered to idols, we find a situation that has significant parallels for us, even though the case given concerned idol-worship, with which we are not familiar. There was some kind of sophisticated 'knowledge' at work whereby some obviously felt free to eat food offered to idols, while others were

258. 1 Cor 12:4-7 mentions gifts, ministries, administrations, and manifestations

259. Beside, beyond, or a modification of 260. 1 Cor 6:8 261. 1 Cor 6:12; 10:23

still so aware of idols that their conscience was defiled by eating. Paul says that the liberty being taken could actually become a stumbling block (Gr. *skandalon*) for others.

Once again the curious theme of the stumbling-snare is introduced, which gives us three separate applications of this theme, in all. First of all, the cross was a *skandalon* to the Jewish spirituality. Then we learn that the proud and rebellious could be caught in their own snares and false yokes. And thirdly, in the case just mentioned, the wrong use of liberty could be a *skandalon* that would ensnare others. Clearly, the same symbol is used to show how serious the matters were.

To those who vaunted this unwise use of knowledge, Paul's response was that they knew 'nothing yet as [they] ought to know'.²⁶² In other words, they were quite ignorant, for there was another knowledge about true *koinonia* that was not yet understood. Their so-called knowledge, in causing weaker believers to stumble, Paul warns them, would actually be a 'sin against Christ'.²⁶³

Diversity not para-interests

Paul understood more than anyone, the need for diversity, and was determined to see genuine diversity raised up. First however, he had to undermine their para-interests and then illustrate true diversity.

Paul used the harmony-diversity of himself with Apollos as an illustration. He transferred, or translated, his relationship with Apollos into a figurative example of the whole Corinthian dilemma.²⁶⁴ How did he do this? He said, in effect, that *he* had planted, and *Apollos* had watered, but that neither of them was *anything*²⁶⁵ because both of these gifts came from God, and they were merely fellow workers with God. By testifying that he and Apollos were really *nothing*, he embodied the attitude and operation of the cross and undercut the

262. 1 Cor 8:2 263. 1 Cor 8:11-12 264. 1 Cor 4:6 265. 1 Cor 3:7-9

foolish practice of being ‘puffed up one against another’.²⁶⁶ While others were thinking themselves to be ‘full’ and reigning like kings, Paul highlighted that their apostle-fathers were actually fools, weak and dishonoured.²⁶⁷ Then he went further to call them *back* to his own fatherhood, and to ‘imitate’ the ways of Timothy and himself.²⁶⁸

The presbytery bringing adjustment

What was really going on in Corinth, and how should we interpret this in our own situation?

Clearly, some foremost Corinthians, probably elders and respected brethren within the local *angelos*, were sufficiently gifted as to be prominent in the eyes of new and immature believers. Paul is not disputing their gifts, but he is hotly disputing their personal culture that is becoming ‘para-church’. We need to use the expression ‘para’ here, because the net effect in the Corinthian situation was that some ministry activities were now running beside the *koinonia*.

Chapter ten likens the idolatry present at their communion gatherings to that at the golden calf²⁶⁹. Chapter eleven goes further. Their coming together is meant to be the *Lord’s* supper, and is intended to show forth the *Lord’s death*, with a discernment of the *Lord’s* body. However, none of these crucial dimensions is a reality at all. The *Lord’s* supper is now dissipating to a situation where ‘each one takes his own supper’.²⁷⁰ The point here is more than about bread and wine. There are now various agendas and sub-groupings within the *koinonia*. The focal-point of communion is no longer the *Lord’s* death, rather it is the energising of each one’s personal agenda. Instead of discerning the body, they are blind to the body and are now self-serving. Their eating is not now a participation in the flesh of Christ, and in His foolishness

266. 1Cor 4:6 267. 1 Cor 4:8-13 268. 1 Cor 4:15-17 269. 1 Cor 10:7 270. 1 Cor 11:21

and weakness as pertaining to the flesh. Instead, they are eating and drinking damnation back to themselves.²⁷¹

Integration not dissipation

Paul's aim was to arrest the dissipation and restore integration of the diverse gifts, ministries and administrations given by God.

In our case today, we do not yet have the diversity of gifts, ministries and administrations of which chapter twelve speaks. Many of these need to be restored. We do tend therefore to become preoccupied with, and limited to, specific ministry styles and cultural preferences. Then we can be blinded, as in Corinth, to the degree to which we are preoccupied with our own cultural interpretations. We may think we are promoting true diversity, when in fact we may be marshalling sub-groupings to one particular style of ministry. Whole churches then reflect these preferences. We should accept that no church culture is yet an integrated corporate body, as we would think. In fact, most church contexts today reflect only one or two priorities or diversities, depending on the leader - be it an evangelistic priority, business priority, music program, social priority, political bias, youth focus, and so on.

So let us examine Corinth more closely. Let's consider the kinds of 'wisdom' and 'power' that were beginning to exceed the cross, and which were in danger of voiding the cross of its power. This will raise relevant applications to our own situations.

The growth of cultural dispositions

1. The broad picture was that many were seeking their 'own', and not the other's, well-being.²⁷²

271. 1 Cor 11:29 272. 1 Cor 10:24

13. Corinth here and now

2. They were obviously styling themselves after apostolic ministry models.

3. They were attracting followings in terms of these religious cultures.

4. They were competing, becoming puffed up, and presenting a full, rich and kingly bearing.

5. Aspects of their 'secular' dealings were apparently creating legal implications.²⁷³ We have no specific information, but we could suppose that these legal matters involved business or other partnerships 'pertaining to this life', as chapter six says. Maintaining integrity in the fields of their secular calling is certainly addressed in chapter seven.²⁷⁴

6. Freedom of conscience was causing those of weaker conscience to stumble.²⁷⁵ We can apply this to all kinds of cultural preferences today. For example, there are believers, churches and even whole movements who are committed to certain charity and missionary programs, educational disciplines (eg Christian schools, home schools), community aid programs (drug rehabilitation, emergency accommodation), political alliances, business partnerships, even dietary regimes - a whole range of religious interests that could be called para-church. Interestingly, in terms of the strong and weak conscience argument, those with a strong and specific bias may consider themselves strong in conscience, while others are weak. And from the other side, those with a different emphasis would think the opposite. In today's church, it has become popular and essential to have a bias of some kind. In truth, the apostles believed that 'the work of God' should not be 'destroyed' over individual preferences.²⁷⁶

273. 1 Cor 6:1-8 274. 1 Cor 7:20 275. 1 Cor 8:1-12 276. Rom 14:20

Genuine gifts

The all-important question is this. How do these personal, family, secular, cultural, business, project, education and health regimes fit with Paul's passionate admonition that we all 'speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions ... but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment'?²⁷⁷ How do we make sure that *only genuine gifts* find their place in the body, each according to God's appointment?²⁷⁸ Do we even believe that God *does* appoint us to specific expressions of grace in Christ? As Paul said, 'There are diversities of *gifts*, but the same Spirit. There are differences of *ministries*, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of *administrations*, but it is the same God who works all in all.'²⁷⁹

Other 'powers' and 'wisdoms'

Using Paul's terminology again, what may occur is this. Genuine *gifts* are received from the *Holy Spirit*, diverse *ministries* are received from Christ the *Lord*, and diverse *administrations* from *God* the Father. But having been received from Him, in His name, do these overrun their limits toward liberty and licence? Do they function beside (para) the genuine expression? Or worse still, do they run ahead of the gift, or even modify the gift? Do they become alternative 'wisdoms' and 'powers'?

We would accept that the real iniquity in religious culture is not the lack of motivation, but the fact that ideals are stated, while the *actual* direction runs beside or ahead (para). At the outset, we may be yoked to Christ in our endeavours, and finding rest. Before long however, like the Corinthians, we become yoked, or snared, to our own ideals, and become the victims of our own lawlessness and even

277. 1 Cor 1:10-11 278. 1 Cor 12:18,28 279. 1 Cor 12:4-6 KJV

darkness.²⁸⁰ Note how many Christian enterprises there are that begin as an ideal, but fall short of it - still professing the ideal, and confusing others in the process. Undeniably, the Charismatic endeavours of the 1970s fell into this category - setting out to renew the New Testament vision, but dissipating once independent visions scattered the optimistic multitude. Similarly, the majority of 'restoration' groups have aimed for New Testament goals, but ended up settling for selected aspects only - such as evangelism, prophecy, gift function and worship. Truthfully for ourselves as well, we have aimed for Ephesian Pattern but ended up with collegiality; aimed for *angelos* but found ourselves with a multiple ministry structure.

So what happens as gifted members arise within the body? Can they be maintained in the power and wisdom of the cross, or do they begin to mislead others? Do they become so prominent that followers are forced to make a choice between one viable gift and another - as between Paul and Apollos? Do members fall in behind the dispositions that suit them, and most of all, do these enthusiastic endeavours become the measuring rod by which all other diversities are judged? What happens when specific diversities overtake the entire program and ethos of a local church? Are some members, who can't fit or relate to these diversities, seen as 'weak' in faith? Does growing awkwardness cause mutual assessments, and do these lead to relational breakdown?

Koinonia or discrimination

Let us consider a few contemporary illustrations. Are those with overseas aid programs so 'strong' in knowledge and in their conscience, that this important service is seen to be the only valid expression of the body of Christ? Must all participating members fall

280. 2 Cor 6:14

behind *these* ministry aims or else be judged as weak in faith, and in dissension from the will of Christ? Are members compelled at times to make a choice?

In the evangelistic arena, does the conscience and motivation of leaders for growth mean that the only conscionable expressions of members must always be evangelistic?

Let's consider an illustration in the business arena. Are there members who are strong and gifted in maintaining secular business callings, with a good conscience? Are they so competent in things pertaining to this life, that they judge others by these measurements?

And now consider those who are gifted toward education, toward music and public presentation skills. Are the members with gifts in utterance, speech, teaching, prayer and public worship, so self-absorbed with their own 'part' of the whole, with their own 'giving thanks well',²⁸¹ that unbelievers view them as eccentric and unbalanced?²⁸²

We must see that many modes are not 'right' or 'wrong' in themselves. The issue is how far they are projected as the only knowledge and conscience that believers should have. Then expressions that are really 'para' to the central *koinonia* of Christ's life can easily become the basis of *koinonia*, and then of discrimination, within church groups. Truthfully, until churches mature in multiple leadership and learn how to foster uniqueness across their number, these groups will adopt the style, preferences, culture and administration of their leaders. These interests will then either change regularly to keep everyone interested, or else narrow to restricted styles that do not allow for diversity.

In summing up the situation, what actually happens when we meet for the Lord's supper? To what personal cultures, agendas, interest

281. 1 Cor 14:17 282. 1 Cor 14:23

13. Corinth here and now

factions, desires and visions are we appropriating the Lord's body and blood? This is the real issue, for it is possible to eat in an unworthy manner, and so eat judgment to ourselves, instead of life.

Foolishness and weakness

Now we understand better what Paul was addressing, and it is clear how we might translate the scenario into our own setting. These are the real situations where we must apply the foolishness of God, and the weakness of God. There are all kinds of powers, public gifts, ministries and administrations that *pose* as powerful (to take the Jewish side of the equation). Paul would answer these projections with the weakness of God, for the weakness of the cross is the *only* power.

And there are all kinds of wisdoms (on the Greek side of the world view). There are wise gifts, ministries and administrations that must be undermined by the foolishness of God, so that the cross becomes the only wisdom.

Now it's clear why the presbytery must know how to yoke a local church with its *angelos*, to the yoke of Christ. Local 'multiple' ministry, on its own, will not guarantee true diversity, because it runs the risk of being a multiple collegiate structure where all the cultural biases are rationalised to an uneasy balance. The only answer is in a presbytery that knows how, and an *angelos* that learns how, to walk in the same Spirit.

Power and wisdom that arise from the cross

What we are seeking then is the power and wisdom that do indeed come from the cross. How is it to be known whether our strong, powerful expressions of gift, ministry and administration are an outflow of the cross or not? How do we know whether our wise

expressions of gift, ministry and administration arise from the cross or not? The only answer is that we must know how to align ourselves with the foolishness of preaching, and then walk in the weakness of God.

Walking in the same Spirit.

Paul said, ‘Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus, and sent our brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in *the same spirit*? Did we not walk in the same steps?’²⁸³ The only answer to *dissension*, and the only way to *integration*, is to walk in the same Spirit, and more specifically, in the same steps.

Toward the end of his second letter, Paul sums up what has been his overall mode across the two letters. He has sought to be of one spirit with his fellow-workers, and has urged the Corinthians to this same attitude of one Spirit. As he said in chapter twelve of the first letter, ‘there are diversities of gifts, but the *same Spirit*. There are differences of ministries but the *same Lord*.’ And he adds that there were diverse operations, or administrations, but the same Father. Paul is saying, ‘Whatever gifts are genuine, come from the same Spirit’. They operate by the one and same Holy Spirit, they are all portions of the Spirit of Christ the Lord, and their actual appointment within the overall administration is from the source, the Father of lights.

So Paul says, ‘Did we not walk in the same Spirit?’ Diversity is born of God. There is to be diversity, and we *can* cope with diversity. In fact, ‘those members who seem to be weaker are necessary’.²⁸⁴ We are to be of the same Spirit, walking in the same mind and in the same judgement, which can only come as we embrace the cross and find resurrection power to *serve the interests of others*.

283. 2 Cor 12:17-18 284. 1 Cor 12:22

13. Corinth here and now

As Paul said of the others that he sent, such as Titus, the presbytery did *not* take advantage of the Corinthians. What could this mean? It means that genuine presbyters, as with Paul himself, were not biased one way or another. The presbytery fathers were of the same mind in seeking *only what came from the Lord Himself*. They did not come with personal biases or preferences, as if they were seeking advantage by favouring one style against another. There was power in the cross, and there was wisdom in the cross. Not one of the leaders was afraid to lay the 'axe at the root'²⁸⁵ of a family cultural disposition, for example, for true disciples would willingly hate mother and father so that the life of Christ Himself could be established. The 'axe' could equally strike the sophistication of those with knowledge, those with secular acumen, those with a confidence to walk amidst idolatrous pollution, those with public presentation gifts and so on. Then as true disciples, they could properly 'hate' family, knowledge, business or public gifts, in the sense that none of these ministries would be permitted to dictate the entire culture of the church.

Lordship

The Lord was the focus. There were differences of ministries but the *same Lord*. It is useful to find mention here of the Lord, the Lord Jesus, the Son. Lordship is the key to maintaining diversity without dissension and dissipation. When Christ is Lord, the message of foolishness reduces everything to its base reality. All native and cultural motivations, all religious and idealistic motivations, can find a new motivation arising from the power and wisdom of the cross. This is the Corinthian lesson. Integration, harmony, rest, edification!

From our natural birth, we all have diverse abilities, created by God. Then as we proceed to redemption and incarnation, 'minas',

285. Using the expression from Matthew 3:10

'talents', deposits of grace, are added to us according to these abilities. There is a work of the cross that 'births' us into the capacity of God Himself, where all these abilities harmonise, and we bring forth fruit as we were ordained to do. The question for us is, 'How does the preaching of the cross work to this end?'

There is a way that the preached word puts everything to death so that 'no flesh should glory in His presence'.²⁸⁶ What remains must be of Christ; it must *be* Christ, for 'of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who *became for us* wisdom from God ...'.²⁸⁷ Christ became! He became everything, from God, for us: wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. Nothing can be added to the fullness that He is. To exceed Him, Paul is saying, to exceed His weakness and His foolishness, is to turn the power of inclusion into the knife of exclusion. This is the only way He can be all in all.

Restoration

Concluding our study then, perhaps we can begin to see from this discussion how the future lampstand-church in each locality will be established. Paul's Corinthian solution will be needed. How else will believers and whole groups be restored to unity, when their long-time ministry preferences need to be balanced and integrated alongside facets in which their conscience has previously been weak? Naturally, many activities that are para-church and not connected to the vine, won't survive the restoration call. The foolishness of God and the weakness of God, expressed through a presbytery, will bring everything to naught so that only genuine gifts, ministries and administrations can remain. This is the lesson of Corinth.

286. 1 Cor 1:29 287. 1 Cor 1:30