

Right Relationship in Ministry: Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 2 Corinthians 1: 1-14

Today's talk is to be the first in a series over this summer looking at the letter of Paul to the church of Corinth, specifically the one we have come to know as 2nd Corinthians. As we will note further below, the letter as we have it preserved in the Bible was probably not Paul's second letter to this church; in fact it may be his fourth letter, with preserved bits of letter number three included. The worship committee chose this book for our series because in this particular letter we have much of Paul's vision of Christ-at-work-in-the-world, in other words, what it means to be the church as a transforming agent of the Redeemer-God in our society, given all the challenges and human foibles in which this work takes place. Today will be an overview of Paul and his mission, the letter[s] to the Corinthians, and an exegetical look at the first 14 verses of chapter one. A main resource will be the commentary on *2nd Corinthians* in the *Believer's Church Bible Commentary* series put out by Herald Press, written by George Shillington [1997], which all the speakers in our series will be encouraged to look at, plus I have supplemented with some other sources.

The letters to the Corinthians contain perhaps some of Paul's most emotional writing which has been preserved. Sometimes Paul exhibited a tender side in his encouragement to the churches, sometimes, like in parts of the letters to the Corinthians, his language is shrill and harsh. Here, this letter was written out of personal conflict with the church at Corinth, exhibiting deep feelings of hurt and grief. Yet always, even in his recounting of painful experiences with the church, or arguing

against the charges of his opponents, or exhorting the congregation to faithfulness Paul keeps central the grace of Jesus.¹ Paul uses rational argument, stories, word pictures, and communal memories, to call people to structure their lives together in faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Paul's passion speaks from every page.²

Paul's teachings, including what could be called his ethics, is shaped by the question: how shall we structure our lives together so as to experience as fully as possible the presence of the risen Christ in our communities?³ His ideas were not developed systematically; rather his letters were written to actual communities in time and space struggling with specific questions and circumstances. Paul did not leave a legacy of a systematic theology or ethical principles; what Paul did was to found and to help develop communities dedicated to Jesus Christ. "All of Paul's writings, including his ethical ones, were in service of that activity: the creation and on-going support of communities of persons seeking to live according to their faith in Jesus Christ... Paul's ethics are occasional, responsive to questions and situations that developed in those [early] communities."⁴

The ultimate goal framing Paul's words and interactions with the early church communities was to shape human inclinations and behaviours in such a way that they provided as large and clear a space as possible for the presence of the risen Christ. For him, this was the good of all people, no matter their ethnic background, gender or social location. Paul's ethics are relational and communal, that is forming and maintaining Christ-shaped community. Even when referring to individual behaviours, his concerns were offered in the context of and on behalf of the well-being of the

¹Shillington, *2 Corinthians*, pg 13

² Purvis, "Following Paul: Some Notes on Ethics Then and Now," *Word & World*, Vol XVI Fall 1996, p. 413.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.,p. 414.

community.⁵ “Paul connects theology and ethics. God’s in-breaking in the person of Jesus has transformed the nature of human relations with God and with each other. This connection is integral to Paul’s whole endeavor of proclaiming the new covenant brought about through Christ and establishing groups of followers who are to live their lives, individually and communally, in the light of this in-breaking God. The Corinthian letters reveal Paul’s struggle to articulate the significance of this new covenant in the context of this group of believers.”⁶

The culture in which Paul lived was no more homogeneous than our own; there can be found in his writings theological, philosophical and ethical parallels to many other Jewish and Hellenistic thinkers. Yet, in all his writing, the goal and measure by which his selection from the cultural menu of his day was made, was the manifest, powerful presence of God in the new communities which were founded on the one gospel of Jesus Christ. The early church was composed of converts who were being resocialized into new ways of being and seeing and feeling in the world, centred on the cross of Jesus, building new communities living out their new reality. This new world promised freedom from old norms and restrictions. Dietary restrictions, for example, were not part of the Christian practice as the reality and power of idols were denied and replaced by the power of the cross. Christians were free to eat the meat for sale in the market even if it had likely been part of ritual idol worship. Yet always the measure of whether an action was lawful was whether it promoted the good of the other. If eating meat at a communal meal would be offensive to someone who had not been entirely freed from the reality of idols, then the act of eating meat was considered wrong.⁷ The specific norms in Paul’s own ethical thought were never meant to

⁵ Ibid., p. 415.

⁶ Katrina Poetker, “Letters from the Ancient World: Issues of honour and shame permeate Paul’s letters,” *Sojourners Magazine*/March-April 2000.

⁷Purvis, p. 417

be behavioural rules for all time, but were always to be evaluated, and re-evaluated, based on the degree to which they constructed and maintained Christ-shaped community.⁸

In the letters to the Corinthians, evidence that Paul experienced much bitter opposition is very apparent. At the heart of much of this dispute is the understanding of leadership, its character and its theological legitimization. We don't have specific information on who his opponents were, although chps 10 - 13 of 2nd Corinthians offers more insight than other passages. Scholars identify a number of groups from inferences made from Paul's arguments. There were the 'Judaizers' from Jerusalem who insisted that the Gentile converts to the Jewish Messiah, Christ, observe the regulations of the Jewish law. They seem to be portrayed as charismatic missionaries who sought to outdo Paul in missionary leadership, that is, in apostleship, insight and ministry. There were also followers of Apollos who taught a different gospel than Paul. Apollos taught initiation into a higher spiritual wisdom, a teaching adopted to an extreme by some at Corinth. Yet most hurtful to Paul was the fact that other Christian missionaries from his own religious and social world, speaking his own Greek language, wandering charismatically in mission as he does, did not respect his person and the primacy of his apostolic place in the church he founded at Corinth. Instead of supporting him and his missionary work, they criticise him. These interlopers claiming to be ministers of Christ as Paul is, carry letters of recommendation and take material support from the Corinthians; Paul did neither. Because of their vain boasting and competitive behaviour, Paul's critics are labeled as false apostles. These other missionaries, "despite their claim to have come from the same Jewish-Christian circle as Paul, have lost their grasp on the distinctive character of the gospel: the para-

⁸ Ibid., p. 418

dox of the *power* of God *in the weakness* of the cross of Jesus Christ and manifested in the apostle.”⁹

Connected to Paul’s critique of his opponents is Paul’s theological treatment of leadership which stands in sharp contrast to the prevailing view of Hellenistic society associated with the Cynics, whose reputation ran to self-proclamation and domination. In contrast to his rivals who preached themselves as masters of the congregation, Paul preaches himself not as lord but as the community’s slave. There is a profound connection in the central claim of Paul’s christology - Jesus as Lord - and the core image of his leadership, that of slave. Jesus’ lordship creates freedom, not so much *from* sin as *for* participation in the community . The believer is being transformed into the image of Christ through and within the work of the church, and through the Spirit. Note that the concept of slavery in the ancient Near East was not equated with the virtue of humility as Paul uses it here. Slavery was a socio-political reality; the labour of servants freed the master to participate in the city’s assembly, enabling the functioning of social institutions. In contrast to his rivals who seek to dominate the church, Paul becomes the community’s slave and creates freedom for the community to engage in God’s work in the world.¹⁰ Moreover, it has become clear in more recent studies of Paul and his writings that many of the problems Paul addresses in 1 and 2nd Corinthians arise from the differences between the well-to-do and the “have-nots” among the Christians in Corinth. Paul rebukes the Corinthian elite for abusing the poor in their midst and refuses to play along with the wealthy who want to sponsor him as their own special client. Again, that which is low and despised by worldly standards can be shown to be what God uses to bring about the new order.¹¹

⁹ Shillington, pp 269-72.

¹⁰ David E. Fredrickson, “No Noose is Good News: Leadership as a Theological Problem in the Corinthian Correspondence,” *Word & World*, XVI Fall 1996, pp 423 - 425.

¹¹ Neil Elliott, “No Acolyte of Rome: a new look at the Apostle Paul,” *Sojourners Magazine*/March-April 1998

In order to understand better Paul's relationship with the Corinthians, Shillington looks at Acts and the Corinthian correspondence to sketch a framework which helps us put Paul's concerns in this letter into perspective. The first contact with the recipients of these letters is on Paul's first missionary journey to Corinth where he made converts and formed a community that met in homes. From there Paul traveled to Macedonia to the north to continue his preaching ministry. He hears that the converts at Corinth have questions about how they are suppose to relate to their old friends and old way of life. He writes a letter, which did not survive but is alluded to in 1st Corinthians, which instructed them to not associate with sexually immoral persons. More questions came to Paul about the relationship between their new life in Christ and their old life in the religion and culture of Corinth, along with an oral report from Chloe's people about the divisions within the church and the problems they were having. Paul's response is what we have preserved in the First letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament.

He then made a second personal visit, where a member of the congregation deeply insulted Paul and apparently was not rebuked by the community. Paul left humiliated and sorrowful. A "letter of tears" instructing the congregation to discipline this offending member was carried back to them by Titus. The letter is lost but Titus apparently returned to Paul with a good report of their repentance and obedience, along with news of the Corinthian's reception of traveling missionaries who were carrying letters of recommendation. Paul responded with a letter of reconciliation, but he also expressed some concern regarding the intrusion of apostles who boast about testimonial letters. This correspondence is essentially what we have in chapters 1 through 9. However, the congregation was behind in the collecting the support they had promised for the church in Jerusalem. Titus and two others took the letter with

them, along with Paul's writing which encouraged them to complete the gift. It is likely that Titus carried back news of the way the competing missionaries were questioning the genuineness of Paul's apostleship, even causing the Corinthians to question Paul's motive for not allowing them to give material support to Paul. A severe letter of defense followed, which seems to be the last section of our present version of this book of the Bible. He promises there a third visit, which is likely the time during which he wrote his letter to the Romans, before leaving to bring the collection to the church at Jerusalem.¹² Shillington estimates all these letters and visits would have taken place over approximately 18 months.

Let's take a look at the opening verses of 2 Corinthians:

2 Corinthians 1: 1 - 14

Typical of letters of that day, the letter begins with a three part salutation: sender, receiver, and greeting. He uses a singular name, Paul, but what follows is critical, the title of "apostle of Christ Jesus". As we shall learn later in his letter, the primacy of Paul's apostleship was being called into question by his competitors and some members of the congregation at Corinth. At that time, an apostle was one commissioned by a superior to carry a message. In a special way the twelve who had been with Jesus in the flesh and who witnessed the first Easter were apostles of the first order. Paul could not make a claim to be their equal; in 1st Corinthians he describes himself as "the least of the apostles" [1 Cor 15:8-9], but Paul is an apostle nonetheless. Paul accepts the responsibility under God [not under human authority] of bringing the good news of God's salvation in Christ crucified and raised to the Gentile

¹² Shillington, pp 17 - 19.

world. His call and ministry are thus by the will of God.¹³

The recipients lived in the area in and around Corinth, the Greek capital of Achaia. They probably met in the houses of certain members, presumably those wealthy enough to accommodate as many as 30 people in their home. They may come from various groups with diverse needs and backgrounds, but their identity is now one: they are a people called out of the old order of society to belong to God through Christ.

Grace and peace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word “grace” was a common word in Greek speaking culture, meaning good will, favour, gracious act. Here Paul intends it as the good gift of God revealed in the person and action of Christ. The term “peace” in Paul’s formula likely has its roots in the Jewish greeting *shalom*. God as a source of peace would be a typical Jewish thought. “Our Father,” however, brings Paul’s greeting into the realm of the familial. Paul highlights both his apostolic and his family relationship to the Corinthians by calling on the witness of the broader community of Achaian believers.¹⁴ Shillington notes that it is surprising that more has not been made of Paul’s consistent peace-wish in his opening and closing greeting to his churches, especially by Anabaptists.¹⁵ Modern Christians living in a culture built on competition and in some respects enmity, need to remind themselves repeatedly why Paul incorporated the term *peace* [well-being, harmony, life] into his greeting. For Paul the suffering work of Jesus brought new meaning to the word peace. All worldly status which may come to him by virtue of his position as apostle means little apart from the *grace and peace* which

¹³ Ibid., pp. 30 - 31.

¹⁴ BibleGateway.com, Resources - Commentaries - 2 Corinthians - Chapter 1 - exegesis. “A Personal Greeting” *IVP New Testament Commentaries*, 1995-2007.

¹⁵ Shillington, p. 33.

flow from God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The word church, *ekklesia*, in that day also had a preexisting meaning in Greek society to designate the political assembly of the Roman city where loyal citizens would be regaled with the news of the triumphs of the emperor, the lord and sovereign of the world. Paul has taken this political term and turned it over to designate heavenly citizenship being lived out in Christian communities under the lordship of Christ, locally and the wider body throughout the world.¹⁶

The thanksgiving section, vv 3 - 7, is typical of what follows the salutation in first-century letters. Paul gives here a marvelous expression of praise to the God who consoles the afflicted. The section is almost liturgical as it lays out in three movements themes which will under gird the first nine chapters of our book: a) God is the source and giver of consolation, vs 3, and Paul and company, that is we, benefit purposefully, vs 4, b) God's agent, Christ suffered abundantly, v. 5a, and Paul and company, we, are consoled abundantly, vs 5b, c) Paul's ministry of consolation is borne in affliction, vs 6a, and the Corinthians are consoled as they join Paul's ministry, vs 6b.¹⁷

God is the author of salvation and consolation; the benefits we experience in this life spring exclusively from God's mercies and compassion, not from human goodness nor from affliction as such. Jesus as the designated agent of the mercies of God in the world is the one who ultimately re-creates humanity and the world. To console is to "call alongside, help, support, encourage and/or comfort." The purpose of such consolation is given plainly: that we may be able to console those who are in affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God. God does not intend this encouragement and strength to end with our personal benefit. Its further purpose is to enable us to become God's agents in extending God's comfort to

¹⁶ Elliott, p. 3.

¹⁷ Shillington, pp. 34 - 35.

others in their afflictions.¹⁸ The saving effect of the Christ of the the new creation energizes Paul in his ministry of the new covenant. Later in this letter, we will see that the Corinthians did not always appreciate the afflictions Paul had been enduring in his ministry for them. Some of them had even concluded that such experiences were not appropriate for one who was an apostle. Paul's affliction on behalf of the Corinthians, however, is marked by the same new covenant affliction of Christ who gave his life as "a ransom for many." The effect of this is that the Corinthians become the beneficiaries of both Paul's affliction and his consolation. Paul preaches a paradox: redemptive consolation comes through suffering, not apart from it.¹⁹

In the next six verses, which is as far as we will be going today, Paul begins to address the accusations of some Corinthians against him. Mainly these critics denounce him because one, they think he has broken his word about a return visit and is therefore insincere, and two, the lack of clarity in what he writes. Paul wishes to regain their confidence in him and his apostolic ministry. His opening salvo is typical judicial rhetoric, a quick narration of events, here the perilous Asian ministry, to establish the defendant's character, followed by a short proposal of the case to gain sympathy of the audience. The terse narration of the situation without detail is sufficient to set the defense on course: the place was Asia; the condition was affliction; he felt personal injury, even despairing of life itself; Paul felt the sentence of death in himself; God who raises the dead rescued him. Paul ties his deliverance closely to the prayers of the Corinthians on his behalf. God has delivered and will continue to deliver, provided the Corinthians pray for him. The answer to their prayers will in turn cause thanksgiving to overflow on the part of believers everywhere for God's gracious

¹⁸ Dr Thomas Constable, "Notes on 2 Corinthians:" Sonic Light, 2005: <http://www,soniclight.com/>

¹⁹ Shillington, pp 35 -37.

dealings on behalf of Paul and his coworkers.²⁰

2 Corinthians 1: 12 - 14

Paul appeals to the Corinthians on the grounds of his boast, witnessed by his own conscience and the fact that the Corinthians have found the way to salvation through the ministry of Paul among them. Paul's detractors also boast, but in their own achievements. When Paul boasts, as here, he attributes the achievement in his ministry to the *grace of God*²¹, not to *earthly wisdom*. He is not writing in order to mislead them; they merely need to read and understand. Paul does not engage in boasting in order to make himself look good, but is pushed to it by the Corinthians who place great store in such things, and by his opponents, who enjoy flaunting their credentials. The credentials which Paul puts forward are job related, from the standpoint of his office, not his person. He doesn't boast in his achievements and accomplishments but in the hardships, struggles and trials as an itinerant missionary.²²

Today's reflections are just a very brief introduction to this book and to the themes of 2 Corinthians. Pervading Paul's letter is the theme of the meaning of apostleship, or by extension, the meaning of Christian ministry. Paul emphasizes that Christian ministry is always in service of the gospel of God's reconciling love as present in Christ. Against rival apostles, Paul states that special knowledge or ecstatic experiences are not the measure of a true apostle. Rather, the important question is whether, in one's serving of the gospel, is the saving death and resurrection of Jesus evident.²³ We can ask ourselves, what are the concrete needs of our neighbours in the concrete situations of their lives? What is required of our communities in order to experience as fully as possible the presence of the risen Christ? How shall we struc-

²⁰ BibleGateway.com, Commentary "News of a Near-Death Experience in Asia"

²¹ Shillington, pp. 39 -340.

²² BibleGateway.com, Commentary "The Corinthians' Complaints"

²³ <http://www.bibletexts.com>, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Outline/Introduction 2 Corinthians

ture our lives together according to the cross of Jesus Christ?²⁴ Paul throughout his writings uses metaphors of interdependence to describe his relationship to the Corinthians, their inter-relationships, their spiritual condition, and their connectedness to the church around the world. In the context of their diversity and division, Paul urges his readers to the highest calling of love. This love reveals itself in action: overcoming factions and divisions within the community, respecting all members, ending discrimination on the basis of social class, participating in the global body of Christ; seeking together to build each other up and to live prophetically in such ways that outsiders will see Christ's life among them. We, just like the early church, can be torn apart by the difficulties of living as a diverse group within stratified, competitive society where resources and power are not equally distributed.²⁵ The new covenant transforms these forces of society and we the church can demonstrate such renewal in our communities through the love of Christ-at-work-in-the-world.

²⁴ Purvis, p.419.

²⁵ Poetker, pp.48.