

POWER IN WEAKNESS – THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IN PAUL’S LETTERS TO THE CORINTHIANS AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT. This article gives an exposition of Paul’s theology of the cross available in the Corinthian correspondence. It is argued that Paul responds in the two Corinthian letters to challenges against his apostolic authority resulting from an erroneous understanding of power and weakness. Paul’s response is that true power does not depend on one’s wisdom or spiritual prowess but on the identification with Christ’s death and resurrection. The article closes with a few remarks regarding the implications of such theology for the believer today.

KEY WORDS: Cross of Christ, Corinthian church, power, weakness, 1 & 2 Corinthians

Introduction

The cross of Christ is unquestionably the most significant symbol of Christianity. Even though it primarily alluded to the death of Christ as recorded in the gospels, over the past two millennia of Christian history the cross has also taken on connotations that can hardly be reconciled with the object itself and its historical use as a tool of torture. What the Romans have once invented and used to perform brutal humiliating executions is now adorned as jewellery and employed as elaborate decoration in sacred places – quite an ironic twist, indeed. The symbolical meaning the cross seems to have taken on is a theme implied in some of the New Testament writings, but it is not one readily available. Anyhow, if an ancient execution device could be “domesticated” in this way over the years, is it not possible that there is also a corollary theological adaptation at work?

To answer the question above I suggest one ought to turn to the teaching of Paul the Apostle, specifically to the way he describes the significance of the cross. Just as at the cultural level Christians have taken an object and enriched its meaning to be the faith symbol it now is, so did Paul use the cross as a symbol for Christ’s self-giving sacrifice. In Paul’s theology of the cross we have a reinterpretation

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tation of “power” in terms of “weakness”. This became evident during the debate Paul had with the Corinthian Church and is available to us in the two epistles he wrote to them. By examining these two letters in the light of the historical situation to which they allude I hope to illustrate below the central role the cross played in Paul’s re-envisioning of such notions as “power” and “wisdom”.

The Context of the Corinthian Correspondence

Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians in response to several major problems that emerged within their community. Although these letters have been criticized for their lack of theological content and systematic order, it is quite evident that there is a theological thread that binds them together. I suggest that this is Paul’s theology of the cross. The letters probably mark a midway point in a longer conversation Paul has with the Corinthian believers. As such, in 1 and 2 Corinthians, Paul, who is no longer in their midst, answers questions posed by the Corinthian Christian community, questions we do not have. Given these, most of the content in the Corinthian correspondence is applied theology (Conzelmann 1975: 6-9). Therefore, to better understand Paul’s underlying theology of the cross in these letters, it is necessary to enter the discussion by considering the upfront themes Paul addresses: his apostolic authority, the Corinthians’ errant theology and the resulting aberrant value system they had adopted.

Paul’s Apostolic Authority

It has been long argued that pride, jealousy, and disobedience are the most obvious causes for the problems in Corinth (Young and Ford 1987: 47). These can be deduced from Paul’s corrective instructions, especially in regard with the divisions caused in the community (1 Corinthians 1.10-17), the improper use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12-14), and the abuse of the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11.17-34). Also, throughout 2 Corinthians, the same fallacies are implied as Paul addresses the believers’ rebellion against his apostolic authority. In fact, their opposition to Paul is so pronounced that Gordon Fee has come to suggest that it is the principal issue addressed in both letters (Fee 1987: 6). Paul remains impartial in his approach but must rebuke the Corinthian believers, who had begun to embrace alternative teachers and teaching. Hafemann (1993: 174) argues against Fee’s point, noting that Paul’s ethical instructions in 1 Corinthians 8-10 are sufficient proof that his authority and the legitimacy of his apostleship were still recognised. Nevertheless, Fee’s point is supported by other authors (e.g. Horsley and Silberman 1997: 172) who see in Paul’s rebuke of the “immoral brethren” (1 Corinthians 5.9-11) a proof that the teaching of the Apostle was slowly replaced by a gospel of “social prestige.” The inference is

that the people Paul opposes were status seeking wealthy patrons of the church in Corinth who used their financial means to gain influence and enhance their social status. Since such social advancement also required their participation in pagan social events, the message and behaviour of these “immoral brethren” was syncretistic and was leading the congregation away from the gospel preached by Paul. This is why all the ethical instructions given by the Apostle address pagan customs (e.g. 1 Corinthians 5.1-13; 8.1-13).

Although some have argued that the situation surrounding Paul’s second letter is quite different from that of the first, I submit that the issues Paul addresses in both letters are closely linked. A close reading of the material reveals that the problems looming in the background in 2 Corinthians are in fact anticipated in 1 Corinthians 1-4. Admittedly, the insertion of false apostles within the communityacerbates the problem – a fact evident in 2 Corinthians. However, Paul’s authority is questioned much earlier (see 1 Corinthians 4.18). Thus, the rift between Paul and the Corinthian community was already there before the arrival of the false teachers. The change in the manner Paul writes, from correction (in 1 Corinthians) to defence (in 2 Corinthians) is caused by the escalation noted above – as the threat to his authority becomes more direct, so does his defence become more personal. Thus, both letters spring out of the same situation and both tackle the theme of Apostolic authority, albeit in different ways.

Errant Theology in the Corinthian Church

Barrett (1994: 36) has proposed that the “false apostles” Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians were likely Judaizers with connections to Jerusalem who had adapted their message to suit the Corinthian audience, hence the lack of circumcision talk. Paul’s relationship with the Jewish Christians was already on the fray and this could have been an attempt to rip the church out from his care. It is difficult however to precisely determine the status of Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians, and the identity of those who sought to lead the Corinthians astray. What *is* clear is that not only did the Corinthians find it difficult to accept Paul’s authority, but also, they failed in following Paul’s teaching.

Fee (1987: 4) notes that the Corinthians had an “inordinate amount of Corinth yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviours that required radical surgery without killing the patient.” Thus, it could be that their cultural setting, coupled with issues internal to the community, worked against Paul’s attempt to teach them to live as followers of Christ. Because the Corinthians’ *Weltanschauung* was Hellenistic, they easily mixed Paul’s teaching with Hellenistic dualism. For instance, Martin (1986: xxxi) has pointed out that the Corinthians possessed an incipient Gnosticism, giving the “spiritual” a higher

value than the that of the lower physical. Because of this, the Corinthians simply misunderstood how believers partake in the power of Christ's resurrection (Ellis 1974: 74). Their spiritual (charismatic) experiences led them to believe that they had already attained a higher level of existence – hence the expression “the tongues of angels” for the *glossolalia* (1 Corinthians 13.1). By considering the Spirit's manifested presence to be the fulfilment of the eschatological promises, they probably believed that they were already living the resurrection, spiritualising it. This may be the mindset Paul sarcastically criticises in the words: “Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings...” (1 Corinthians 4.8). Such spiritualized eschatology would have led them to belittle the importance of their physical existence and therefore to “get rid” of ethical considerations when it came to the “use: of their bodies. In other words, since the eschaton was already present, it did not matter if one committed sexual immorality or ate food dedicated to idols. Christ's death and resurrection had ushered them into the new age of spiritual enlightenment (Fee 1987: 12).

Added to the above, Paul's critique of “worldly wisdom” in the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians may provide a hint to yet another issue. Grayson (1990: 22-23) has argued that in the context of Paul's argument, where “worldly wisdom” is contrasted with the “wisdom of God,” the focus is on the Corinthians' desire to be “socially acceptable”. However, Paul's opposition is not an argument in favour of social awkwardness. Rather, it is a warning against seeing God's wisdom as the typical socially acceptable rationale used to achieve social cohesion and advancement. In other words, Grayson argues, the Corinthian believers were obsessed with social acceptability, and that made them turn the message of Christ into a vehicle for personal advancement and power. This pursuit of prestige can be seen in the way the church divided, each party seeking to stake its own claim of power (Grayson 1990: 22; cf. Horsley and Silberman 1997: 172). Seen in this light, Paul's opposition to “wisdom” becomes more understandable.

Paul's Theology of the Cross – Addressing the Corinthian Problem

The theology of the cross (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.18-2:10) is the central feature of Paul's response to the Corinthian problem. The message is both, polemic and didactic, for he employs the cross, both, to teach the Corinthians about the nature of God and to deflate their errant theology and the resulting immorality. Furthermore, Paul uses it in connection with the theme of resurrection, aiming to correct the Corinthian misconception in regard with the relationship between the two (Conzelmann 1975: 40-41). In fact, 1 Corinthians is framed by these

themes – it begins with a discussion of the cross in the first two chapters and it ends with a discussion about the resurrection in the fifteenth chapter. As for Paul's specific instructions, these are placed in between.

It has been suggested that the structure of the letter is important because it reveals Paul's purpose. For instance, Karl Barth argued that 1 Corinthians is mainly about the resurrection because it climaxes with it in the fifteenth chapter (cf. Beker 1980: 176). However, Käsemann (1970: 177) rightly notes that in Paul's formulation of the gospel, it is the cross that gives meaning to the resurrection. Thus, the resurrected Christ is the crucified Christ, for he would not need to be resurrected had he not been crucified. The cross defines the nature of the resurrected One and of his followers, and not the other way around. In this way Paul teaches the Corinthian believers the correct relation to eschatology in the now. Paul does specify that the resurrection is a future reality (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.7-8). However, "in the present life [Christians] are called to actualize the crucifixion with Christ" (Ellis 1974: 74). This is how Paul counteracts their over-realized eschatology and at the same time offers a model for the Christian life in the present.

It is evident from the way Paul argues his case that the Corinthians understood "salvation" as a *spiritual* reality, which was ushered in by the Spirit through the resurrection of Christ (Beker 1980: 165). This gave them the "freedom" to "escape" bodily and worldly entrapment. However, Paul declares that such eschatology is utterly wrong, for believers ought to expect a bodily resurrection as the eschatological fulfilment of Christ's work. As for the present, they are to live in the shadow of the cross. Only then will they partake in the resurrection power of Christ. In Dunn's words, "the new creation is not possible without the crucifixion of me to the world and the world to me" (Dunn 1998: 412).

An important aspect of Paul's argument is the contrast between worldly wisdom and the message of the cross. He writes to the Corinthians:

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1.17-18)

It is probable that the term "wisdom" is a catch word in Corinth, for Paul gives it a considerable amount of space in his letter (Conzelmann 1975: 37). As previously noted, though, in the context of Paul's argument, "wisdom" does not refer to general knowledge, but to a particular attitude or outlook on life. Hafemann (1993: 165) notes that it is practical wisdom, focused on accomplishments and

extravagant lifestyle, that resulted in “addiction to power, prestige, and pride.” In the light of this, Paul’s message about a crucified Messiah, in the context of the Greco-Roman culture, seems like nonsense – a “socially destructive stupidity” (Grayson 1990: 22), for it did not meet the requirements of wisdom. Wisdom, they thought, brought social cohesion and advancement to its possessor. The result was a festival of boasting among the Corinthians concerning who was wiser, who was associated with the wiser leader (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.12), and who was most in touch with the source of wisdom – the Spirit.

Paul does not oppose wisdom *per se*. Instead, he proves that the Corinthians do not know its true meaning. For him true wisdom is the crucified Messiah himself, rather than any human notion of social success. The juxtaposition of “Messiah” and “crucified” is paradoxical because the first denotes victorious salvation while the second absolute humiliating failure (Cousar 1990a: 29). To the Jew, therefore, Paul’s message would have been scandalous (Käsemann 1970: 156) and to the Greek foolish. Paul has a disturbing announcement, though. The crucified Christ is necessarily the wisdom and power of God. Thus, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has overturned the standards of wisdom and power in the world (Green 1993: 203). What once was wise and strong has now become weakness while that which was foolish, and failure has become the power of God (1 Corinthians 1.20, 25). Salvation, then, cannot be found through human efforts, for the wisdom of the world failed to acknowledge God (1 Corinthians 1.21). There is nothing left for humans to boast about except the Lord (1 Corinthians 1.31).

To conclude, the horrifying death of Jesus Christ on the cross was not an obstacle that was overcome through the resurrection (Cousar 1990b: 172). Rather, it was, and is, the revelation of God’s identity and plan of salvation for the creation. It is precisely God, Paul argues, that is revealed in the face of the crucified Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 4.4). Therefore, to neglect the cross was to abandon Christ himself.

Paul’s Theology of the Cross – Implications

It follows from the above that the message of the cross is an ultimate criticism of human knowledge and expectation (cf. Lampe 1990: 122). In the act of Christ on the cross God contradicts everything that humans would expect from a god to do. Paul admits that the cross is the weakness and foolishness of God (1 Corinthians 1.25) and that the exalted Messiah himself was crucified in weakness (2 Corinthians 13.5). In Christ, then, God announces power as weakness and

weakness as power – a message that also fits Isaiah’s vision of God’s perfect reign (cf. Măcelaru 2016: 131-146). This is not simply scandalous; this is a complete deconstruction of what humanity knows and believes to be wisdom and power.

Being that it defies human expectation, the gospel demands a drastic change in the perception of the hearer in order to be seen as it truly is: God’s wisdom and power for salvation. Thus, whosoever has seen Christ’s “act of apparent weakness as the expression of God’s power to save has entered into a new way of perceiving power” (Brown 1998: 270). Through the cross of Christ God begins a transition into a new age (Hays 1996: 27), one that breaks into the old one to both judge and destroy it. The cross is at the same time a negation of the present order, and an affirmation in the form of an invitation into a new order. Paul recognized that the concepts of power and wisdom the Corinthians were operating with worked to maintain the *status quo* of the present age – a project God opposed. This is why Paul refuses to employ human wisdom to preach the gospel, for to do so would undermine God’s intentions and betray God’s methods. The gospel of the cross dismantles structures and pretensions built upon false power and wisdom (cf. 2 Corinthians 10.3-5) while at the same time it creates a new reality (cf. 2 Corinthians 5.16-17). As Grayson (1990: 51) concludes, “to those who are sharing in God’s transformation [the gospel] is a powerful agent of change.”

By presenting weakness as strength and strength as weakness, Paul radically reinterprets the meaning of power. This language is, of course, employed polemically. It helps with correcting the self-seeking mindset and immoral practices of the Corinthians. Nevertheless, it is also more than that. Moving from the cross to power, in his defence, Paul rethinks his personal experiences. Weakness, failure, and humiliation, instead of being occasions for resignation, become reasons for boasting, for they are “a vehicle of God’s power” (Peterson 1998: 262). Weakness does not disqualify Paul as an apostle. Rather, it sets him in opposition to the lifestyle and pride of the false teachers that invaded the Corinthian church. Paul is the antithesis of what these teachers were representing: rhetorically polished speeches (2 Corinthians 11.6), good religious connections (2 Corinthians 11.22), and financial stability at the expense of the Corinthian believers (2 Corinthians 11.7-11). Paul does not boast in his strengths and accomplishments, for to do so would undercut the gospel that he preaches. All self-sufficiency, pride, and power mongering had been thrown out at the cross. The true servant of God can only boast in his weaknesses. This is scandalous, for it contradicts everything that the world sees as valuable and desirable.

The implications of Paul’s defence address not only the Corinthian church but also the contemporary one. There is an important correlation between Paul’s self-defence and his soteriology. The divine humiliation and self-giving at the

cross form a paradigm for salvation. Even though Jesus Christ was rich, he became poor so that humanity could have a part in his riches (2 Corinthians 8.9). Salvation therefore requires participation in Christ, in his death and resurrection, and thus participation in his weakness (Black 1984: 86). And this is not only about one's conversion but is in fact a paradigm for the entirety of Christian life. The Christian, therefore, is to emulate the weakness of Christ by identifying with his death on the cross, but also expecting God to release his power amid weakness. What does this mean concretely? It is not that Christians should seek to suffer for the sake of suffering, but that they are to adopt the mind and attitude of Christ. Therefore, the message of the cross calls Christ's followers to sacrificial love. Those who have received life through the death and resurrection of Jesus "should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them" (2 Corinthians 5.15). This is a "new economy" that requires the Christian to become a servant of others for the sake of Christ.

Conclusions

The peculiar adaptation over the centuries of the symbol of the cross has a theological corollary. Attempts to domesticate the gospel of Christ into a justification for the structures of the passing present order, which God has already judged, are as unacceptable and foreign to the true meaning of the Christ event as is the transformation nowadays of an ancient instrument of torture into a decorative object. The Corinthians were guilty of treating the gospel as a means for social enhancement and advantageous positioning. Paul's response to this is "the message of the cross," which is a scandalous foolishness for the nonbeliever, but power for the one approaching God by faith.

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