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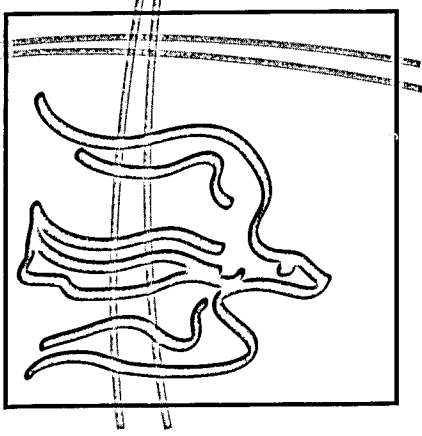
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# APOSTOLIC INSIGHTS FROM II CORINTHIANS

*Lois Malcolm*



In our day, we can no longer presuppose Christendom, an established Christian hegemony. We live in an age of competing secularizing forces and a plurality of religions and forms of spirituality. Nonetheless, in spite of secularizing forces, individuals still have pressing spiritual questions, as evidenced by the market for books on spirituality. What gives meaning to my life? Who am I? What gives me confidence? What authorities can I trust? Where do I belong? How do I discern authentic forms of spiritual power among the many counterfeits in the marketplace? Moreover, as evidenced by the plethora of books on forgiveness and reconciliation, people continue to struggle with how to get along with one another. How are we to proclaim the gospel, the good news, of the cross of Christ in our time? I recommend that we turn to the apostle Paul's letters, in particular to his correspondence with the Corinthian congregation, whose members faced issues quite similar to our own.

Much has been written on I Corinthians and its appeal for reconciliation rooted in the wisdom and power of the cross. Much less has been written on II Corinthians, a somewhat more difficult letter to decipher. For decades, scholars have argued that it is a composite of letters, debating where the divisions lie amongst its various sources. In addition, Paul uses a range of Jewish exegetical and Greco-Roman rhetorical patterns within the various sections of the letter, which creates difficulty for those of us accustomed to reading straightforward modern arguments. Finally, it is Paul's most mercurial letter. At times he is joyful and conciliatory; at others he is ironic and confrontational. His apostolic ministry is under personal attack. Apostles in competition with him have spread rumors about him, saying that he is weak and ineffectual. He is estranged from some members, and there continues to be sin and lack of repentance in the congregation. Yet it is precisely here, in the deeply personal

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character of his writing, that we find a profound statement of what the "sufferings of Christ" are all about—a statement that, I would argue, has particular pertinence for us today. In what follows, I hope to make some sense first of the opening and then of a major middle section of II Corinthians (2:14–7:4), where Paul defends his ministry with a vivid depiction of what it means to be an apostle of the "sufferings of Christ."

Instead of beginning with his usual thanksgiving, as in Romans 1:8–15 or I Corinthians 1:4–9, Paul begins this letter with a blessing he reworked from ancient Jewish liturgy. He blesses "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" for consoling us in our afflictions so that we can console others in theirs. God's means for consoling us are quite specific: the "sufferings of Christ," which are

"abundant for us." These "sufferings" refer not only to what Christ himself experienced but also to those his followers experience as they live, by faith, in the power of his death and resurrection (cf. Galatians 2:20). But, Paul goes on, if the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, then so also is our consolation abundant through Christ. Further, there is a direction to this abundance of sufferings and consolation. It is, he tells the Corinthians, "for *your* consolation, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings we are also suffering" (1:3–6).

Thus, Paul's hope for them is "unshaken" (v. 7). And the basis of this hope lies in his confidence in the God "Who raises the dead" (v. 9). Just as this God has rescued Paul from a specific affliction he experienced in Asia, where "we despaired of life itself," so God will continue to rescue us through the prayers of many on our behalf (vv. 9–11).

After the initial blessing, Paul discusses some of the immediate problems that have attenuated his relationship with the Corinthians (1:12–2:13). The main issue, however, is the Corinthians' lack of confidence in him, an issue exac-

erbed by some “super apostles” who are spotlighting his weaknesses and many adversities (10:1–13:13). Paul addresses this issue in the first part of his defense: a depiction of what it means to be “ministers of a new covenant” (3:6).

Paul begins by thanking God, Who, in Christ, leads us in a “triumphal procession,” an allusion to the famous Roman victory parades in which military leaders forced prisoners of war to march. God parades us publicly, spreading through us the “aroma of Christ,” a reference that draws on both the ancient understanding of fragrance as a sign of divine wisdom (Sirach 24:15) and Old Testament sacrificial practice (Leviticus 1:9, 13). Nonetheless, we perceive this fragrance differently, depending on our perspective. To some it merely smells of death; to others it is the fragrance of life (2:14–16a)—an echo of 1 Corinthians where Paul describes how the cross of Christ is merely a “stumbling block,” “foolishness,” and “weakness,” to those who are “perishing” but the very “wisdom” and “power” of God to those who are “being saved” (1:18–25).

With these allusions, Paul lays the groundwork for his defense. Unlike the many hucksters who merely sell God’s word for their own gain, Paul speaks as one sent by and standing before God. And unlike the “letters of recommendation” other traveling missionaries used—following the ancient Greco-Roman practice of introducing and commending friends to others by way of letters of praise—the Corinthians themselves are Paul’s letter of recommendation. Yet, although Paul had a role in their conversion, it is the Spirit of the living God Who has written this letter, on both the Corinthians’ and Paul’s hearts, as anticipated by the prophets who had hoped for a time when the Spirit would write the law on people’s hearts (Ezekiel 11:19, 36:36). Paul’s competence is from God, Who alone makes us “competent” as “ministers of a new covenant”—a covenant not of the letter, which kills, but of the

Spirit, Who gives life (2:16b–4:5; cf. Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; Jeremiah 31:31).

Paul now shifts from the Greek word for “letter” (*ἐπιστολή*) he has been using in 3:1–3 and refers now to the law (*γράμμα* in 3:6), which he often associates with death and condemnation (Romans 2:27; 7:6). And here Paul explains more fully the source of his “sufficiency”—why he speaks with such “boldness,” the frank speech that, in the ancient world, was possible only for those who were free, that is, not

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slaves. The warrant for his sufficiency lies in the contrast between Moses’ giving of the law in Exodus and Paul’s apostolic witness to Christ. Using the rabbinic exegetical practice of arguing “from the lesser to the greater” (as in “how much more”), Paul argues that the new covenant and its ministry far surpass the old in splendor (cf. Romans 5:12–21). The new, a ministry of the Spirit and of justification, is permanent; the old, a ministry of death and condemnation, has now been set aside. Why the difference between the two covenants? The law cannot give access to the face of God; it can only “veil” God’s splendor (cf. Exodus 34:33–35).

But in Christ this “veil” is set aside. When we turn to the “Lord”—the “Lord” of Exodus now being identified with Christ—the veil is removed.<sup>1</sup> How? Because the “Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (v. 17). Through the Spirit, we have the freedom (or boldness) that results from having access to the very “glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (4:4). We now with unveiled faces—seeing the

Lord’s glory “as though reflected in a mirror”—are “being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another” through the Spirit’s power (3:18).

This is the reason why apostles “refuse to practice cunning or falsify God’s word,” but instead commend themselves with an “open statement of truth.” Their very lives embody a multisensory witness to Christ, giving off not only the aroma of Christ (3:5) but also the vision of “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:5–6).

But we only have this “treasure” in “clay jars,” everyday kitchen earthenware, so that it can be clear that this “extraordinary power” belongs to God and does not come from us. In this life, we are afflicted but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed. In our bodies, we carry Jesus’ death, so that Jesus’ life may be visible in those very bodies. Death may be at work in us, Paul tells the Corinthians, but through this death, life is at work “for you.” In all this, we have faith and speak boldly because we know that the God Who raised Jesus from death will also raise us and bring us “with you” into God’s presence. Everything is “for your sake,” Paul avers, so that grace may extend to more and more people and increase thanksgiving to God’s glory.

Thus, we do not lose heart. Although our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed daily. The temporary afflictions we experience now are only preparing us for “an eternal weight of glory beyond measure.” We may “groan” in our bodies, like a mother in childbirth, but God has given us the Spirit as a guarantee, the Spirit Who groans through our very weakness, creating new life out of what appears to be mere futility (Romans 8:26). In baptism, we have been clothed with Christ’s life, which “swallows up” death with life (Galatians 3:27). Through the Spirit, we can be at home in the frail, destructible, “earthly tent” of our bodies, confident that God is preparing for

us an "eternal building" not made by human hands.

Nonetheless, Paul is not merely interested in buttressing his confidence with divine authority. He may be in ecstasy before God, but he is in his "right mind" for the Corinthians. The love of God compels his work. Thus, his overarching goal is reconciliation with them so that they may also "boast about us," and thus answer those who look only to outward appearance and not to the heart. The "ministry of the new covenant" is fundamentally a "ministry of reconciliation," and now, just as he drew on Moses' giving of the law in Exodus to depict the former, Paul will rework Isaiah's depiction of the "suffering servant" to depict the latter (Isaiah 52:13-53:12).

Paul now explains more fully why the "sufferings of Christ" are so abundant. Like Isaiah's servant, Christ is the one who has died for all—and the one through whom all have died—so that those live might no longer live for themselves but for Christ, the one who died and was raised for them (cf. Galatians 2:20). Thus, we no longer look at one another from a human standpoint, using worldly criteria. In Christ, we are a "new creation": "Everything old has passed away, behold, everything has become new!" In Christ, God has reconciled the world to Himself, not only forgiving our sins but also entrusting us with the ministry

of reconciliation. We now are Christ's "ambassadors" through whom God makes His appeal to all—on behalf of Christ—to be reconciled to Him. As in Galatians 3:13-14, where Paul describes how "Christ became a curse" so that "the promise of the Spirit" (that is, the promise given to Abraham) might come to the Gentiles, so here Paul depicts how Christ, who had not sinned, was "made to be sin" so that in him we might become God's "righteousness." We are now those who enact God's reconciling activity in the world in our very bodies and lives through our participation in Christ's death and life.

This, then, is why we declare to the world: "Now is the day of salvation!" Our very hardships—and Paul's sufferings as an apostle are many—are what commend us. Genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God (among other things) are displayed precisely amidst these difficulties. Thus, our lives are a paradox: we are treated as imposters, yet true; unknown, yet well known; dying, yet alive; punished, but not killed; sorrowful, but always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing everything.

In our time, many people hunger for belonging, for a true source of confidence and authenticity, and for a means for distinguishing real from bogus forms of spiritual power. Perhaps most deeply, many hunger for a

means of being reconciled to others and to God, the only source of any real forgiveness and reconciliation. In the face of these deep yearnings, the "sufferings of Christ" are indeed abundant for us. As we participate in them—claiming the power of God in the very vicissitudes of our own lives—we find that we are not only consoled but also become the means by which God consoles and brings salvation to others. Thus, being "theologians of the cross" in our time means nothing other than claiming the abundance we have through the "sufferings of Christ," an abundance we experience precisely in all that we undergo, both painful and pleasurable, so that our very mortal and frail lives can be an embodied, multisensory display of the aroma and vision of Christ. *LF*

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*Note*

1. I follow the traditional interpretation of "Lord" in 3:16-18 as Christ, although most modern biblical scholars now identify the "Lord" in 3:16-18 with YHWH. See James Dunn, "II Corinthians III.7—'The Lord Is the Spirit,'" *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1970): 309-20.