

First Corinthians: A Biblical Theology and Hermeneutic for Today*

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Abstract

The proclamation of the cross lies at the heart of Paul's theology and message in 1 Corinthians. And Christians can never outgrow this message that spoke then to the competitive setting of the Corinthians, their church and society, as it speaks now to today's postmodern, media-driven society and church. Similar to Romans and Galatians, justification by grace alone through faith is strong throughout 1 Corinthians. Paul's apostolic ministry and the manifestations of spiritual gifts were themselves reflections of the theology of the cross. While the proclamation of the cross is at the heart of 1 Corinthians, Paul's reference to the cross is also contextually relevant. A consideration of the Corinthian setting is critical to understanding the message of the cross in 1 Corinthians and its relevance to today's world.

I. The Work of Christ and Salvation

The Proclamation of the Cross

Paul defines the very nature of the gospel and the gospel message in terms of the cross. The gospel message is "the proclamation of the cross," ὁ λόγος ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ, *ho logos ho tou staurou* (1 Cor 1:18). He even interrupts his greeting to the church in Galatia with the words "Christ - who gave himself for our sins to set us free ...," and comments, "If anyone proclaims to you a contrary gospel, let that person be *anathema*" (Gal 1:4; Gal 1:8). All the same, Paul knows that "the message of the cross is folly (μωρία, *mōria*) to those who are on their way to ruin" (Gal 1:18). To proclaim "a crucified Christ" (the Greek uses the anarthrous form: *Christon estaurōmenon*) is "to the Jews an *affront* (Greek, *skandalon*) and to the Gentiles *folly*" (1 Cor 1:23).

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Proclaiming the cross has never been easy. But what causes difficulties has not necessarily remained the same over the centuries. Martin Hengel's classic study of the crucifixion has brilliantly exposed the repulsive character not only of crucifixion itself, but also even of talking about crucifixion in the first century.¹ Justin, Hengel reminds us, describes the affront of such a message as madness (*mania*).² The cross was a sign of shame (*aischunē*, Heb 12:2), or, in the language of Celsus, an "ignominious" death.³ Greek and Roman historians perceived crucifixion not only as a "barbaric" form of death with its concomitant cruelties reflecting outright sadism, but as something inappropriate for thought.⁴ Hengel notes, "By the public display of a naked victim in a prominent place - at a crossroads, in the theatre, on high ground ... - crucifixion also represented his uttermost humiliation. With Deuteronomy 21:23 in the background, the Jew in particular was very aware of this."⁵

More recently L. Welborn has underlined the social stigma attached even to conversation which mentioned crucifixion or a cross. When he calls the cross "foolishness," Welborn writes, "Paul means to say that the message about the crucified Christ was regarded by the elite of his day as a coarse and vulgar joke."⁶ Yet this does not even begin to come to terms with the standard second-century response: how can a "god" die?

In the twenty-first century, as Jürgen Moltmann incisively observes, the problem is almost the reverse. The cross has been so overlaid with two thousand years of veneration that he writes (quoting H. J. Iwand): "We have surrounded the cross with roses. We have made a theory of salvation out of it. But that is not ... the bleakness inherent in it ..." ⁷ Today the problem is not quite that of the first century.

In one direction it is what Alan Richardson called the stumbling block of particularity, namely: why should the fate or salvation of *the world* hang on the words and deeds of *Jesus of Nazareth*? In another direction

¹ M. Hengel, *The Cross of the Son of God* (trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1986), which contains his separately published *Crucifixion* (London: SCM, 1976); now 93-188.

² Justin, *Apology* 1.13.4.

³ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.10.

⁴ Dio Cassius, 7.2; 11.4; 63.13.2; Tacitus, *Annals* 14.33.2; cf. Hengel, *Cross*, 114-55.

⁵ Hengel, *Cross*, 179

⁶ L. L. Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ: A Study of 1 Corinthians 1-4 in the Comic-Philosophic Tradition* (JSNTSup 293; London: Continuum, 2005), 2 and throughout.

⁷ J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1974) 36.

it is the language and logic associated with *sacrifice, judgement, expiation, and redemption*. Further there is the problem of receiving grace as against “paying my way,” a common antagonism in first-century Corinth and in our own times. The heart of the message of the cross is that Christ *has done something for us that we are incapable of doing for ourselves*.

To let someone else do for us what we cannot do is not an uncommon experience in human life. It is not specific to any single class, race, gender, or historical era, especially since everyone has been a helpless infant in need of a parent. The key theological axiom, Jüngel asserts, is: “*In the person of Jesus Christ God took our human place*” (his italics).⁸ This does not extend only to the death of Christ: “Jesus Christ’s whole being,” Jüngel adds, was and is “a substitutionary existence.”⁹ It is as true now as it was then that the cross is folly and an affront to unbelievers.

But Paul is proclaiming the cross afresh to *Christian believers*, who have relapsed into trying to remain Christians without the cross. On one side they have relapsed into self-sufficiency. Paul warns them: “Let no one glory in human persons” (1 Cor 3:21) and “let the one who glories glory in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:31).¹⁰ On the other hand they fail to reflect the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). For the cross brings us up sharp against the affront of sheer grace as pure gift, and it exposes, further, the cruciform character of the Christian life. Welborn writes further, “Because ... in the cross of Christ God has affirmed nothings and nobodies, he [Paul] is able to embrace the role of the fool as the authentic mode of his own existence. Paul’s appropriation of the role of the fool is a profound ... manoeuvre, given the way that Jesus was executed.”¹¹

J. K. S. Reid brilliantly captures these two different sides of the cross and the atonement.¹² He writes, “On the one hand ... men participate in benefits acquired for them by Jesus Christ, and by grace they are admitted to possession of what otherwise could never be theirs ... forgiveness, or reconciliation, or simply salvation. Here is where *a rule of contrariety operates*: Christ wins those benefits for us who had himself no need of them and has himself no part in them.”¹³ Reid offers more examples: “because he [Christ] died, we live; because he suffered, we rejoice; because he was reckoned guilty, we are reckoned innocent;

⁸ E. Jüngel, *Theological Essays II* (trans. J. B. Webster; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 155

⁹ Jüngel, *Essays*, 2:156.

¹⁰ See K. Barth, *The Resurrection of the Dead* (trans. H. J. Stenning; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1933), 17-18

¹¹ Welborn, *Paul the Fool of Christ*, 250.

¹² J. K. S. Reid, *Our Life in Christ* (London: SCM, 1963), 89.

¹³ Reid, *Our Life in Christ*, 90-91.

because he was condemned, we are acquitted.”¹⁴ But there are *other* benefits, he writes, “in which our participation is subject to a quite different *rule of correspondence*: ... Because he lives, we shall live also; because he conquers, we too are in all things conquerors; because he reigns, we shall reign with him; and so on.”¹⁵ Some benefits are *for us*; others are *in us*.

For both reasons Christians can never outgrow the message of the cross. We must proclaim the cross, as Paul did, to believers and unbelievers alike. Yet churches do not always welcome such preaching any more today than in Corinth. There were special reasons why Corinthian Christians preferred a gospel of success, self-sufficiency, and triumphalism, and we shall consider these. They are reasons that afflict our consumerist, prosperous, and postmodern society today.

Some claim today that the cross is too difficult to understand. Wolfhart Pannenberg roundly asserts: “The fact that a later age may find it hard to understand traditional ideas *is not a sufficient reason for replacing them*. It simply shows how necessary it is to open up these ideas to later generations by interpretation, and thus keep their meaning alive. The problems that people have with ideas like expiation and representation in our secularized age rest less on any lack of forcefulness in the traditional terms than on the fact that those who are competent to interpret them do not explain their context with sufficient forcefulness or clarity.”¹⁶

The Affront of Grace: Justification and Resurrection as Pure Unmerited Gift

I first lectured on I Corinthians in the University of Bristol in 1963. Ever since then it has puzzled me why so many people appear to think that the Epistle to the Romans has almost a monopoly in expounding justification by grace alone through faith. I do not deny that this theme dominates Romans, but in I Corinthians it is both dominant and applied to the Corinthian situation. Self-sufficiency, success and personal achievement was the name of the game in Corinth. Hence Paul insists, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many of you were intellectuals as the world counts cleverness, not many held influence, not many were born to high status. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the clever; God chose what is weak in the world to shame positions of strength; the insignificant of the world and the despised God chose, yes, the nothings, to bring to nothing the ‘some-

¹⁴ Reid, *Our Life in Christ*, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶ W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991-1998), 2:422

bodies,' so that all kinds of persons should not pride themselves before God. It is as a gift from him that you are in Christ Jesus who became for us ... righteousness" (1 Cor 1:26-29). Here the grace of God and the cross of Christ bring about a reversal of human values. They establish the identity of what it is to be a Christian.

Hence Paul sets in contrast only the weak and the strong, the wise and the foolish, but also those who are rated as "nothings" in the eyes of the world who are "somebodies" in God's eyes, and the self-styled "somebodies" of the world who may be "nothings" in God's sight. Just as in the Greek literature of Homer, Odysseus glories in his cunning and Achilles glories in his strength, Christians find their ground for glory, delight, and confidence solely *in the Lord*, not in their own supposed achievements.¹⁷ The Corinthian tendency to glory in their local community and in their human leaders invites Paul's response: "Who sees anything different in *you*? What do you have that you did not receive? Or if you *received it*, why do you boast as if it were not a *gift*?" (1 Cor 4:7).

This pure "gift" character of justification by grace applies equally to resurrection.¹⁸ A dead person cannot contribute anything in the sense of initiating life or rendering life or survival possible as an "achievement." A creative and transforming act of God brings this new life into being. Martin Luther insists that belief in the resurrection "is surely not man's competence and power."¹⁹ In her substantial volume on resurrection Pheme Perkins makes this same point. She concludes, "Resurrection cannot be made philosophically coherent without distorting some of its fundamental commitments ... In the end the two [notions of immortality and resurrection] must part company."²⁰

If resurrection entails an act of *new creation* which lies entirely beyond the capacities of the human self to achieve, there emerges a clear and a close parallel between the grace of God which bestows new life *out of nothing*, and the grace of God which bestows a new relationship

¹⁷ This paraphrases A. C. Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Exegetical and Pastoral Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 48-49; more fully in A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 150-205.

¹⁸ I have developed this theme in more detail in A. C. Thiselton, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: The Collected Works and New Essays of Anthony Thiselton* (Contemporary Thinkers on Religion Series; Aldershot: Ashgate/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 769-92, esp. 771-77.

¹⁹ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol. 28:59; Weimare Ausgabe, vol. 36, 492-93

²⁰ Pheme Perkins, *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection* (London: Chapman, 1984), 438.

or of “putting to rights in righteousness,” which transcends all human capacity or competency to achieve. Paul draws this parallel explicitly in Romans 4, where he expounds the nature of Abraham’s faith as trust in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things *that do not exist*” (Rom 4:17). This “believing against hope” (Rom 4:18) entails Abraham’s self-perception that it did not lie within his own capacities or competence to actualize God’s promise, since he “was as good as *dead*” (Rom 4:19). But “fully convinced that *God was able* to do what he had promised ... his faith was ‘reckoned to him as *righteousness*’ ... It will be reckoned to us who believe in him that *raised from the dead* Jesus our Lord” (Rom 4:21, 22, 24).

To accept that one is justified by grace is part of the same logic as trusting in the promise of the God of resurrection. Resurrection transforms the believer into the image and likeness of Christ as the last Adam. This is surely why, as Barth insists, Paul makes the resurrection chapter “the very peak and crown of this essentially critical epistle.”²¹

The Three Tenses of Salvation

The first fourteen chapters of this epistle constantly make clear that the triumphalist Christians in Corinth have not yet fully achieved their salvation in every sense. In the first half of the first chapter Paul reminds them that they “wait for the public and appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will keep confirm to the end” (1 Cor 1:7-8). Strikingly Paul uses the present participles in 1 Corinthians 1:18 (Greek, *apollumenois*, to those who are perishing; and *sōzomenois*, to those who are being saved), which I have translated in both of my commentaries as respectively “those who are on their way to ruin” and “those who are on the way to the salvation” (1 Cor 1:18). The most pointed passage of all comes in 1 Corinthians 4:8-13: “Already you have been ‘made rich!’ Without us who came to ‘reign as kings!’ If only you did ‘reign as kings,’ so that we, too, could reign as kings with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display as the grand finale, as those doomed to die, because we have been made a spectacle in the eyes of the world, of angels, and of humankind” (1 Cor 4:8-9).

I have used my own translation here (found in my commentaries) to underline the force of Paul’s metaphors. “To reign as kings,” “to be rich,” and “to be glutted” with a rich food are images drawn from apocalyptic to suggest arrival in a heavenly paradise. By contrast Paul pictures the apostles as still struggling in the gladiatorial combat in the arena, while many Christians in Corinth lounge as spectators in soft

²¹ Barth, *Resurrection of the Dead*, 107.

seats giving the struggling apostles ironic applause from the gallery. Hence Paul concludes this rhetorical passage, “Up to this very moment we have become, as it were, the world’s scum, the scrapings from everyone’s shoes” (1 Cor 4:13). “Scum” and “scrapings” precisely convey the Greek (*perikatharmata*, dirt scoured off from a utensil or swept up from the floor, and *peripsēma*, dirt which people wipe off their shoes).²² Paul and the apostles led a cruciform life; many of the Corinthians led a triumphalist life. The latter, Paul insists, is premature.

Anderson Scott wrote a book on Paul’s theology some years ago, which summed up Paul’s thought under the classic “three tenses of salvation.”²³ Christian believers “were bought with a price” (the Greek uses an aorist passive, pointing to a *past* event, 1 Cor 6:20); believers are in *process* of being saved (present participle, 1 Cor 1:18); believers look *forward* to the “day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:8) and to future resurrection (1 Cor 15). The well-known analogy of the lifeboat sums it up well. Believers *have been rescued* from drowning or from a sinking ship; they are *in process of travelling* to the shore in a secure lifeboat; when they reach the end of this journey, they *will step safely* onto the solid, firm land.

II. The Holy Spirit and the Church

The Apostolicity and the Authenticity of the Church

The history of recent research on apostleship is instructive. Traditionally writers have argued that Paul uses the word *apostle* “to gain authority” (Calvin), “to affirm his authority” (Allo), to show that he has been “entrusted with authority” (Cerfaux and Ortkemper), or “to secure a leadership position” (MacDonald).²⁴ There is a measure of partial truth in this, but Paul does not assert individual authority as a human agent, as much as claim foundational significance for the apostolic tradition handed on corporately by the community of apostles as witnesses to the common pre-Pauline gospel. The importance of such pre-Pauline apostolic tradition as a basis for theology and authenticity has been well demonstrated by Anders Eriksson.²⁵

²² Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 364-65; cf. Epictetus, *Dissertations* 3.22.78.

²³ C. A. Scott, *Christianity according to St Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927).

²⁴ E.-B. Allo, *Première épître aux Corinthiens* (Paris: Gabalda, 1956), 1; L. Cerfaux, *The Church in the Theology of St Paul* (trans. G. Webb and A. Walker; Freiburg: Herder, 1959), 251; M. Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48; and F.-J. Ortkemper, *1 Korintherbrief* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1993), 9.

²⁵ A. Eriksson, *Traditions as Rhetorical Proof: Pauline Argumentation in 1 Corin-*

Many other writers from the patristic era up to today adopt what amounts to an opposite emphasis. Chrysostom, writing around AD 390, rejects notions of “self-presentation.” He writes, “Of him that calls is everything; of him that is called, nothing.”²⁶ Similarly J. B. Lightfoot anticipated more recent arguments, urging that “authorization” is not the issue for Paul here; it is that of *lack of personal merit*. Paul writes as he does because *he has to do so*, with a “feeling of self-abasement.”²⁷ Ernest Best goes further. He insists that the sign of apostleship is “Christ-like weakness,” while Schrage associates this with being “the slave of the Lord.”²⁸ The term in the NT directs attention to God’s grace: “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:9-10). Its association with lowliness also emerges in 1 Corinthians 4:9.

But if this is valid, in what sense can apostleship remain “foundational” for the Church (cf. 1 Cor 12:28)? Victor Furnish perceives that apostleship points to “the truth of the gospel,” while Barrett, Schütz, and others are right to see the “sign” of apostleship as *the living out of the gospel as a dying and being-raised with Christ*.²⁹ But should this not be the case for every committed believer? The “participatory” aspect can be shared among the community. But the “witness” aspect remains unique to the first-generation trans-local apostles as witnesses to the resurrection. They occupy a unique place in salvation-history. Hence Merklein and Schrage stress the triple themes of call, Christocentric witness, and mission or proclamation.³⁰

I therefore suggest a fresh nuance to the term *apostle*. V. H. Neufeld and others urge that witness and confession carries with it two complementary aspects in the NT: on one side, objective witness that an event has occurred; on the other side, a self-involving act of nailing one’s colours to the mast, of staking one’s life on what is witnessed as true.³¹

thians (ConBNT 29; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1998) throughout.

²⁶ Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Corinthians* 1.1

²⁷ J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (London: MacMillan, 1895), 143.

²⁸ E. Best, “Apostolic Authority,” *JSNT* 27 (1986): 11; cf. pp. 3-25 and W. Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (4 vols.; EKK VII; Neukirchen: Neukirchener/Zürich: Benziger, 1991, 1995, 1999 & 2001) 1.99-101.

²⁹ V. P. Furnish, “On Putting Paul in his Place,” *JBL* 113 (1994): 15; cf. pp. 3-17, C. K. Barrett, *The Signs of an Apostle* (London: Epworth Press, 1970), 11-84, “Paul and the ‘Pillar’ Apostles” in *Studia Paulina in Honorem J de Zwann* (ed. J. N. Sevenster; Haarlem: Bohn, 1953), 1-19; and J. H. Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*, (SNTSMS 26; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 20.

³⁰ H. Merklein, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther* (vol. 1; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1992), 67; and Schrage, *Der erste Brief*, 1.99-101.

³¹ V. H. Neufeld, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (Leiden: Brill, 1963). 13-

Hence on one side (i) *apostles witness uniquely to the “happening” of Christ’s death and resurrection* (1 Cor 15:3-9; 9:1). On the other side (ii) *apostleship entails a practical experience of sharing in the “weakness” of the cross of Christ and in the transforming power of Christ’s resurrection*. This twofold witness constitutes a necessary “sign of apostleship.” An authentic church is “apostolic” to the extent that it proclaims the one Gospel, and witnesses to this gospel lifestyle in everyday witness, by appropriating the death and resurrection of Christ in dying and being raised with Christ.

All this comes to a head in Corinth because they wanted a local, rather than apostolic, message, lifestyle, and theology. They inherited this from cultural traits from their pre-Christian culture in the city of Corinth: self-sufficiency, self-congratulation, autonomy, and “rights” to freedom.

Many wanted and expected a “*Corinthian*” spirituality that we might describe in today’s language as contextually re-defined or even constructed for Corinth. Paul has spoken of “wisdom,” “knowledge,” “Spirit,” “spiritual,” “free” and “saved”; but in Corinth these terms were used in a “local” and non-Pauline way. In his recent study *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence* David R. Hall expresses this well. He writes, “In both 1 and 2 Corinthians a contrast is drawn between two gospels and two lifestyles. Central to Paul’s gospel was the crucifixion of Jesus ... Apostles in particular were called to share the weakness and humiliation of their crucified Lord.”³² Further, a different notion of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is part of this issue. So radical are the differences, Hall continues, that they amount to appeals to “a different Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit: Gifts of the Spirit and Holiness

Paul saw the Church as one, and as a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 3:16-17; 6:19). In a very recent study (2006) Albert Hogeterp examines Paul’s language about the Temple, and concludes: “Paul’s temple imagery should in my view be interpreted as a normative model which serves a paideutic purpose of teaching the Corinthians a holy way of life.”³³ As the temple of God, the church at Corinth is “not your own” (1 Cor 6:20). The Church belongs to God, and exists to radiate God’s glory, God’s holiness, and God’s love for his world.

By contrast, Corinth demanded *freedom to choose*, whether *leaders or lifestyles, and autonomy in ethics and church practice*. For they saw themselves

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³² D. R. Hall, *The Unity of the Corinthian Correspondence* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 163.

³³ A. L. A. Hogeterp, *Paul and God’s Temple: A Historical Interpretation of Cultic Imagery in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Leuven & Paris: Peeters, 2006), 384

as “*spiritual*” (1 Cor 3:1-3); they had “liberty to do all things” (1 Cor 6:12; 10:23); they possessed “knowledge” (1 Cor 8:1); so could choose their own preferred leaders (1 Cor 1:12). But Paul rejects this *social construction of a local theology*; they belong to one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. God called them “*together with all* who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ *in every place, both* their Lord and *our* Lord” (1 Cor 1:2). To follow a self-chosen leader isolates them from drawing on the wider resources of the catholic church (1 Cor 3:18). They cannot say, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor 12:21). The ecclesial “order” enjoined in 1 Corinthians 3-4 and 14 is a condition for the showing of love to the other elucidated in 1 Corinthians 13. Hence in several parts of the epistle *Paul re-defines* their terminology and identity again in accordance with the *received apostolic gospel*. Paul draws on common apostolic traditions, as well, as Eriksson has convincingly demonstrated.

“All of us possess ‘knowledge,’ [you say] ... but if anyone thinks he or she has achieved this ‘knowledge,’ they have not yet come ‘to know’” (1 Cor 8:1-2). “For my part, my Christian friends, *I could not address you as people of the Spirit* ... You are still *unspiritual*” (1 Cor 3:1, 3). “‘Liberty to do all things’ – but not everything is helpful” (1 Cor 6:12; cf. 10:23). Christian believers are *on the way to* salvation (1 Cor 1:18).

The Corinthian concern for “autonomy” led them to devalue the trans-local character of Christian identity. In the very opening address Paul reminds them that they are called to be a holy people together with all who call on the name of the Lord ... in every place, both their Lord and ours (1 Cor 1:2). In 1 Corinthians 4:7-8 Paul asks: Who sees everything different in you?

Some seem to imagine that the theme of love is confined to the famous thirteenth chapter. But throughout this epistle it is set in contrast to supposed knowledge (*gnōsis*) as in 1 Corinthians 8:1. *Love* remains a broad and positive theme in chapters 11 through to 14, as an expression of Christ-likeness and holiness. If holiness is radiating the presence of God, and God is love, love cannot but be the highest expression of holiness. “Knowledge” risks inflating the ego of the one who lays claim to it (1 Cor 8:1); and it also risks dividing the community of the church into the supposedly “mature,” “strong,” or “secure” in their faith and those who are supposedly less mature, “weak,” or insecure (in the sense of uncertain) in their belief-system and Christian identity. This theme dominates 1 Corinthians 8:1–11:1. Further, in 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 Paul emphasizes complementarity, reciprocity and mutuality in gender-attitudes, in contrast to assimilation of differences or uniformity. One Corinthians 11:17-34 protects the socially vulnerable in the context of the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 12:1–14:40 attacks those who use

“gifts” for self-promotion, and defends and protects those whose gifts are despised or unrecognized.

Chapter 13 on love stands at the very heart of this epistle. Virtually all the qualities ascribed to love resonate with precisely what is needed in Corinth. Karl Barth points out in this connection that chapters 13 on love and 15 on the resurrection radically relativize chapters 12 and 14 on spiritual gifts. Love and resurrection constitute permanent eschatological realities that cannot become obsolete. “Spiritual gifts” will pass away because they are circumstantial. Chapter 13, Barth writes, indicates “a great passing away of all those things that are not love.”³⁴ He goes on: “What we are really concerned with is not phenomena in themselves, but with their *whence?* And *whither?* To what do they point?”³⁵ If they are reduced to tools for mere self-affirmation or for self-fulfilment, they do not correspond with the eschatological and Christological realities to which the chapters on love and on the resurrection bear witness. It becomes a different matter when they are authentically “of God” and used and for the mutual building up of all.

I do not have space to suggest much more about gifts of the Spirit. There is a long-standing debate about whether we should translate *peri de tōn pneumatikōn* as *Now about spiritual persons*; or as *Now about spiritual gifts* (1 Cor 12:1; NRSV, NIV). Allo despairs of finding any criterion by which to reach a decision.³⁶ Paul clearly prefers to use the term *charismata* (1 Cor 12:4-11), and gives a Christomorphic criterion for what is “of the Holy Spirit.” Hence 1 Corinthians 12:1 is best conveyed in this context by translating: “*Now about freely-given gifts that come from the Spirit.*” Paul appears to envisage the possibility of a “spirituality” which may be self-induced. Vielhauer is persuasive in his suggestion that Paul’s critique of *heauton oikodomei* (“builds” [ironically] himself [only] - 1 Cor 14:4) conveys this nuance of such self-induced “spirituality.”³⁷

On the phenomenon of “glossolalia” Paul uses the generic phrase “species or *kinds* of tongues (Greek, γένη γλωσσῶν, *genē glōssōn*, 1 Cor 12:10). Within the New Testament and even in Paul’s epistles there is more than one unitary phenomenon that may be called a tongue. Hence the general question “What is speaking-in-tongues” hardly helps anyone until we specify what the term denotes in this or that context of the New Testament. In Paul, however, whereas prophetic discourse is articulate and understandable, “tongues” remain inarticulate and unintelligible unless this utterance is transposed into articulate speech. Second,

³⁴ Barth, *Resurrection of the Dead*, 76.

³⁵ Barth, *Resurrection of the Dead*, 80.

³⁶ Allo, *Première épître*, 320.

³⁷ P. Vielhauer, *Oikodomē: Das Bild vom Bau in der Christlichen Literatur* (Karlsruhe: Harrassowitz, 1940), 91-98.

tongues are addressed by or through human persons *to God* (1 Cor 14:2); prophecy is addressed *to human persons from God* (1 Cor 14:3).

At least five distinct views about speaking-in-tongues find a place in scholarly literature. These include: (i) The notion of tongues as angelic speech; (ii) as miraculous power to speak foreign languages; (iii) as liturgical or archaic utterances; (iv) as ecstatic speech; or (v) as mechanisms that release pre-conscious longings or praise.³⁸ I have long held this last view, first publishing it in 1979. I agree with the Pentecostalist writer F. D. Macchia who, with E. Käsemann, K. Stendahl and G. Theissen, sees a very close parallel with the Spirit's speaking in or through a Christian "with sighs too deep for words" in Romans 8:26-27.³⁹ This "sighing" or "groaning" in Romans is a longing for eschatological fulfilment and completion in the light of a glimpse of what God's glory can and one day will be.

Insight, feeling, or longing, at the deepest level of the heart, however, need an outlet; they need to be "released." Theissen offers a convincing scenario. The Holy Spirit gives the capacity to plumb the depths of the unconscious as a genuine *gift*. The Holy Spirit sheds abroad the love of God (Rom 5:5). *Heart (kardia)* frequently includes what nowadays we call the unconscious (1 Cor 4:4-5). Hence "Glossolalia is language of the unconscious – language capable of consciousness," which makes "unconscious depth dimensions of life accessible."⁴⁰

Gifts for *various kinds* of healing (1 Cor 12:9b) reflect a Greek *plural* form for *both healings and gifts* (Greek, *charismata iamaton*), probably generic (like *cheeses or fruits*) *more than one kind of healing*. One of the founders of the Pentecostal movement, Donald Gee, states that whatever the verse denotes, we should "not preclude ... the merciful and manifold work of medical healing," and Bengel also insists that it does not necessarily *exclude* "natural" means of healing.⁴¹ If, *against* the meaning of this passage, healing is perceived as a *universal* gift for healers or healed, the problem of suffering or "incompleteness" for some rather than others becomes debilitating. Paul prayed no less than "three times" for God to

³⁸ The five views are listed and documented in Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 970-88.

³⁹ F. D. Macchia, "Tongues and Prophecy: A Pentecostal Perspective," *Concilium* 3 (1996): 63-69; idem, "Groans Too Deep for Words," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 1 (1998): 149-73; G. Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* (trans. J. P. Galvin; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 276-341, esp. 304-41.

⁴⁰ K. Stendahl, "Glossolalia," in *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and other essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 111; and Theissen, *Psychological Aspects*, 306; cf. esp. 59-114 and 276-341.

⁴¹ J. A. Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti* (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1866), 652.

remove his “thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor 12:7), but God gave him “sufficient grace” to be content with “weakness” (2 Cor 12:6-10). I have used up too much space, regrettably, to comment on other *charismata*.

*The Holy Spirit Nurtures Habits of Christ-likeness
and Intimate “Belonging” to God*

Paul seeks to disengage the Corinthians’ thought about the Spirit from “phenomena” and to lead them to focus on Christ-likeness. He introduces the concept in 1 Corinthians 2:10-16. The Spirit is not innate human “spirituality,” but transcendently “proceeds” or “comes forth” from God (Greek, *ta pneuma to ek tou Theou*, 1 Cor 2:10-11), who promotes “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). In 1 Corinthians 12:3 the earliest Christian creed finds expression in clear terms: “No-one is able to declare ‘Jesus is Lord’ except through the agency of the Holy Spirit.” If, as many claim, Paul regards this as a litmus test for what identifies or constitutes being a Christian, clearly this expresses more than a purely intellectual belief about the status of Jesus Christ as Lord. To confess Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*) involves the whole self in an *attitude* of trust, obedience, commitment, loyalty and reverence to Jesus as the Lord who has the care of one’s life.

What most clearly exhibits the cash-currency of confessing Jesus as Lord is the speaker’s acknowledgement that he or she is the *slave* of Jesus Christ. The Christian believer has been “bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20) in order *to belong to Jesus*. In the world of Paul’s day, to acknowledge someone as Lord was either, in the case of the confession “Caesar is Lord,” to express total allegiance, loyalty and obedience, or, as in the case of allegiance to the “lord” of the household, to express the unqualified trust, dependence and obedience of a slave who is *at the disposal of the one to whom he or she belongs*.

Adolf Deissmann set New Testament scholarship off in the wrong direction in the early years of the twentieth century. He explained “redemption” along the lines of portrayals of pagan deities through whose agency slaves were “freed.” But as Dale Martin and many others have pointed out, Paul nowhere suggests that Christ redeems slaves to autonomous freedom, but redeems them out of bondage to evil forces to be his own possession.⁴² The new believer “belongs” to Jesus. Indeed depending on who was his lord, and for what purpose he had been “purchased” (1 Cor 6:19-20), a person would be better protected, better honoured, and more secure as the slave of a great lord, than as a free-lance,

⁴² D. B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) throughout.

independent, individual. Otherwise, why would some have chosen to sell themselves as slaves without necessary economic or social compulsion?

Admittedly the slave was a mere “object” or “thing” (Latin, *res*), the *property* of the master. Paul uses this language to depict slavery to sin and the law. However, sensitive, caring “lords” took *responsibility* for the *welfare* and *protection* of their slave. *Belonging* to a “good” lord brought security, and invited confident trust as the slave ceased to bear personal anxiety for that which his or her lord has taken into his own hands. The popular Christian song “Now I belong to Jesus; Jesus belongs to me,” captures some of the daring boldness and trust that goes along with ceasing to carry the burden of self-care.

This freedom to “let go of the self” trustfully lies at the heart of the gospel. Paul applies the word *kyrios*, Lord, some 220 times in his letters. The confession of Jesus as Lord occurs at the climax of some key arguments or reflections (e.g. in Rom 10:9; 14:9; Phil 2:11; 1 Cor 8:5-6; and Eph 4:5). The acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord does carry with it a belief about a state of affairs. God has enthroned him as Lord at the resurrection (Rom 1:4) or his exaltation (Phil 2:9-11). “If we live, we live *to the Lord*; if we die, we die *to the Lord*; whether we live or die we belong *to the Lord*” (Rom 14:7).

Bruce Winter has shed light on the very difficult negative statement in the other part of 1 Corinthians 12:3: “No one by the Spirit can say, ‘Jesus [be] cursed.’” There have been previous attempts, mainly four, to explain it, but none is fully satisfactory.⁴³ (i) Oscar Cullmann attributes it to a *persecution* setting. Jesus, rather than Caesar, is Lord. Christians may have suffered pressure to blaspheme the name of Jesus as a sign of their renouncing their faith. (ii) Some suggest that “Jesus is accursed” might have been uttered in a trance-like frenzy of *ecstatic “spirituality”* (M. Thrall, W. Schmithals, J. Weiss). (iii) A variant of this view suggests that “spiritual” people rejected any reference to the historical earthly Jesus in contrast to the risen “spiritual” Christ. (iv) W.C. van Unnik suggests that the allusion is to the atonement theology according to which Jesus bore the “curse” for human sin (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13). But it fails to extend such a faith to trust in the living Jesus Christ of the resurrection. Such a reduced faith does not come from the Holy Spirit.

Winter points out that the Greek Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς (*anathema Iēsous*) *need* not be translated as “Jesus is a curse” or “*is* accursed”; it may be “Jesus *grants* a curse.” There is no verb in the Greek. In recent years some twenty-seven ancient curse tablets made of lead have been unearthed in

⁴³ For documentation of the four views, see Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 916-26.

or around Corinth (fourteen on the slopes of Acrocorinth in the precincts of pagan temples), and these witness to the practice of appealing to pagan deities to “curse” rivals or competitors in business, love, litigation or sport. In the light of 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 6:1-8, and other passages, it is plausible to suggest that some Christians could claim to be “spiritual people” while at the same time asking Jesus to impose some “curse” against those who had earned their envy. Paul declares that this would *contradict* any claim that the Holy Spirit is manifest in their life. This harmonizes with 1 Corinthians 3:1-3: Paul cannot call them “people of the Spirit” where there is jealousy and strife among them.

III. The Gospel and the World

*The Cultural and Social Ethos of the City of Corinth*⁴⁴

Wealth, Consumerism and Self-sufficiency

Ancient Corinth was situated on a narrow neck of land with a harbour on each side of it. On the East side the harbour of Cenchreae faces across the sea to the Roman Province of Asia and Ephesus. On the West side the port of Lechaemum faces Italy and ultimately Rome. Yet at the narrowest point of the isthmus the distance between the two sea coasts is barely nine kilometers, or less than six miles. Corinth was thus a major centre for international East-West trade.

This favoured location for East-West trade was matched by an equally favoured position between Northern and Southern Greece. Corinth stood at the cross-roads, or intersection, between North and South and between East and West for business and trade. In Paul’s time it had become a busy, bustling, cosmopolitan business-centre.

Business people, traders and especially many with entrepreneurial skills or ambitions visited this hub of opportunity for new commercial contacts and ventures. Corinth offered new possibilities of employment, quick deals of person-to-person agreements or transactions, and a large cosmopolitan pool of potential consumers. This had been its ethos from its re-foundation in 44 B.C. as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar. In 44 B.C. veterans from the legions, freedpersons, businessmen and traders saw unparalleled opportunities for self-improvement and possible wealth.

⁴⁴ I am largely summarizing the two accounts in the Introductions to my commentaries. See Thiselton, *1 Corinthians: A Shorter Commentary*, 1-23 for a lively, readable, account; and Thiselton, *First Epistle*, 1-54 for a more detailed account with full sources and documentation.

Tourists flocked to Corinth not least for the famous Isthmian Games, which were held every two years. Second only to the Olympic Games, the Isthmian Games were among the three great games-festivals of the whole of Greece. These visitors brought money to rent rooms; to buy necessary or exotic products; to hire dockers, porters, secretaries, accountants, guides, bodyguards, blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, house-keepers, and both literate and menial slaves. They sought to employ or to hire managers, craftsmen, and people who could repair wagons, tents, ships, or chariots.

Corinth was a cosmopolitan international centre under secure Roman government. This guaranteed order, with excellent shipping routes, a plentiful supply of natural resources for manufacturing, and a vibrant business culture where quick success was part of the cultural ethos. Everything generated a culture of *competition, patronage, consumerism and multiform layers and levels of success*. The Peirene Fountains, still to be seen today, provided not only the domestic needs of a large, vibrant, expanding, city, but also a necessary component for the manufacture of bricks, pottery, roof-tiles, terra-cotta ornaments and utensils. They were *self-sufficient* and independent of others. The witness of extant archaeological remains confirms this picture.

Competitive Self-Promotion, Pluralism, Hunger for Status and Recognition

Temple-dedications to Apollo, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Asklepios and other Graeco-Roman deities bring home the *pluralism* of religious life. Paul would have been amazed at today's appeals to "pluralism" in some quarters as an explanation for difficulties in Christian proclamation.

Corinthian culture hungered for status and was self-promoting. One example is that of Gnaeus Babbius Philinus. He longed for recognition. Hence he did everything possible to ensure the he was not only a civic benefactor but known as such. He ensured his own promotion as Duovir of the City, in order to guarantee approval of his own benefactions. He used rhetoricians and inscriptions to proclaim his generosity to the City. The use of rhetoricians in Corinth in some measure anticipated manipulative uses of media today. Two types of rhetoric flourished in the first-century Empire. Classical rhetoric, as practiced by Cicero and Quintilian, used rhetoric to sift and to present truth. But the rhetoric that flourished in Corinth was manipulative, like that of the Sophists. Competitive rhetoric sought more to "win" than to find truth, often seeking to move an audience to agree with a rationally impossible argument. Quintilian expresses serious disquiet about rhetoricians who separate truth-content from rhetorical effect. Some "shout on all and every

occasion and bellow their utterance ‘with uplifted hand,’ dashing this way and that, panting and gesticulating wildly ... with all the frenzy of people out of their minds.”⁴⁵ Their aim is solely to win praise from the audience.

In my commentaries I have compared this with a postmodern outlook. Truth has been assimilated into perception and interpretation. All that matters is the audience ratings. Stephen Pogoloff, Andrew Clarke, and John Moores have provided an excellent exposé of all this.⁴⁶ The assimilation of truth into techniques of persuasion evaluated by audience or consumers betrays a different “world-view” which stands “in contrast to modernist epistemologies.”⁴⁷ The very word “recognition,” so highly prized in Corinth, confirms this point. It is the audience or “consumer” who grants or withholds *recognition*, irrespective of whether it is deserved or corresponds with the truth. The fame of media stars and sports heroes is *contrived and constructed* by audience votes and consumer-purchases in the marketplace. Value is determined by a consumer market. But the consumer-market is not “free” or value-neutral. It is manipulated and shaped by sophistic rhetoricians in ancient Corinth, and by the “spin” of mass media in the postmodern world. Do teenagers freely “choose” an item of designer clothing, or do mass advertising and peer-group pressure determine what they buy? Sophist rhetoricians were like the mass media of today: they did *not* describe truth; they promoted attitudes through seductive strategies of presentation.

When Paul carried the gospel to Corinth, he viewed the responsibility with fear and trembling (1 Cor 2:3). The gospel of a humiliated, crucified Christ was *an affront* to people who cherished *success* and who loved winners. Yet he refused to use the manipulative rhetoric of Corinth, deciding only to proclaim a crucified Christ (1 Cor 2:2).

What Kind of Gospel for the World?

The ethos of Corinth is like that of our own day. Paul proclaimed the reversals of the cross, which offered Corinth a new value-system at every level. Yet the wider church in Corinth, to judge from our Epistle, must have almost broken Paul’s heart in spite of, or perhaps all the more because of, his love for them and hopes for them.

⁴⁵ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2:11:9-11.

⁴⁶ S. Pogoloff, *Logos and Sophia: The Rhetorical Situation in 1 Corinthians* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); A. D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); and J. D. Moores, *Wrestling with Rationality in Paul* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴⁷ Moores, *Wrestling*, 133.

Rather than witnessing to a contrasting lifestyle defined by Christ and the Gospel, the church according to our epistle contained many examples of the competitive attitudes of the City: “Where jealousy (*zēlos*) and strife (*eris*) prevail among you, are you not centred on yourselves and behaving like any merely human person?” (1 Cor 3:3). Paul appeals to them “that there be no splits among you” (1 Cor 1:10). These were due to a power struggle, not to theological controversy. Competitive comparisons lead to “putting down” others, and to bragging about personal achievements. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you.’” “Love does not brag; it is not inflated with its own importance” (1 Cor 13:4).

How can this cohere with the message of the *cross*? *Even those who had become Christians needed to assimilate and appropriate the preaching of the cross once again.* Paul appeals to scripture, to reason, and to common apostolic traditions as the basis on which to promote truth. He never suggests that it is the audience that constructs what counts as “gospel.” The *message* is in no sense determined by those at the receiving end. It is rather *their* identity that is determined by their response.⁴⁸ This is the Apostolic preaching of the Gospel both to the church and to the world.

⁴⁸ Moores, *Wrestling*, 134.