

No Cross, No Crown: Reflections on Paul's Thoughts About Good Friday and Easter

Charles B. Cousar
Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

It was a BBC series which examined various expressions of religious life. The program I was watching presented with typical British fairness the success-story of a popular American TV preacher. The camera showed us the extravagant church he had built and the throngs that came weekly to hear his positive and affirming sermons. The preacher himself came across as a warm, engaging person who had dared to dream dreams of what God could accomplish through him and who wanted others to dream dreams about themselves.

The interviewer, a modest English woman, finally raised the critical question. "What do you think about Jesus?"

"Jesus," he replied, "was the most successful religious figure of all time. Just consider it. He began in obscure surroundings amid poverty and despair; and today his followers outnumber those of any other of the world's religions. That's astounding!"

"But I thought he ended up on a cross."

"Oh, no! He was raised from the dead. The cross was something he had to endure, as any successful person must endure hardships. But he arose from the dead. He overcame the cross and put all that behind him." With a conversation something like this, the camera moved away.

My first reaction was one of anger. The TV preacher represented a caricature of American religious life, and I did not want the British public to think we were all like that, measuring the value of truth by crass standards of success. On more sober reflection, I began to wonder about the theological issue the interviewer had raised. What is the relation between the cross and the resurrection? Did Jesus' rising from the dead mean that the horrible wrong perpetrated on Good Friday was corrected on Easter morning? Was the cross only a hardship Jesus put behind him?

I had had some trouble myself in preparing a Good Friday sermon. My own theology was oriented much more to Easter, to the triumphant Lord who conquered death and darkness. With most of the Protestant world I took pride in that the prominent symbol of the faith was an empty cross and not a crucifix. But could that be simply another expression of a success-oriented theology? Crucifixion the question, resurrection the answer; Good Friday the problem, Easter the solution. If one thinks that way, one naturally wants to stress the answer, the solution, the vindication, the success. At least, the TV preacher's preoccupation with results was consistent with how he viewed Jesus' death and resurrection.

Within the New Testament the letters to the Corinthians represent a good starting place to clarify the cross-resurrection relationship. Paul has much to say there about "Christ and him crucified" and also about the meaning of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). While it is important to note the problems plaguing the Christians in Corinth, their divisions and moral delinquencies, it is equally necessary to acknowledge their spiritual vitality. In contrast to his attitude toward the Galatians, Paul thanks God for the Corinthians: that they have been enriched in every way and are "not lacking in any spiritual gift." He recognizes their calling in Christ and is confident that in the judgment they will prove to be guiltless (1 Cor. 1:4-9). One might wonder why Paul worried over the Corinthians as he did. After all, they were alive and active. Could his harsh letters arguing precise theological points kill off their enthusiasm and turn them into another company of God's frozen people? Obviously for Paul there was no fear about that. What did worry him?

Behind the many problems at Corinth were the issues of Christology and eschatology. The Corinthians worshipped an exalted, reigning Christ. They were not really concerned with things Jesus had once done in his earthly ministry, for they were convinced that through the Spirit he manifested his power currently in and through them. That the Spirit was alive among them was a testimony to the fact they were already enjoying God's heavenly presence. They not only communicated in human language, but ecstatically spoke in "the tongues of angels." In the words of the Ephesian letter, they rejoiced that they had been raised with Christ and that they now sat with him in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6). It was the high noon of eschatological fulfillment, and they were basking in all its benefits.

This particular Christological and eschatological perspective was not inconsistent with another trend—a tendency toward an embryonic gnosticism. The Corinthian church was trapped in the body-soul dualism. The essence of a person—the soul or spirit—was eternal and to be cherished; the body or flesh was transient and evil. Some concluded on this basis that since the soul was the permanent part of the individual, only the spiritual mattered, and all sorts of sexual license were permitted. Others drew the opposite conclusion. Since the body was evil, it needed to be kept under strict control. This group chose an ascetic style of life. The result of the Christological and eschatological vision on the one hand the gnostic-like tendencies on the other hand was a community spiritually alive but plagued with elitism, partisanship, narcissism, and a lack of love.

In this context Paul affirms the crucified and risen Christ as the foundation of the church. But what part does the cross play? What part does the resurrection play? How are they related?

1. First, Paul defines the gospel as "the word of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18). The phrase turns out to be not one description among others, but *the* decisive understanding of the Christian message. In Corinth "wisdom" was highly valued. It was not just intelligence or shrewdness or prudence, but the deeper understanding of reality possessed by the spiritually gifted and hidden from the ordinary believer. It was the religious perspective which led the Corinthians to assume they were already a part of the heavenly world in company with

the exalted Christ.

In opposition, Paul argues that the only vantage point for believers is "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). The cross represents a fundamental contradiction to the "worldly wisdom" treasured in Corinth. It shows wisdom's power to be nothing but weakness and its profound mysteries to be sheer foolishness. As if to goad the Corinthians slightly, Paul reminds them that they themselves came from rather unpretentious circumstances—poorly educated, weak people as they were, from undistinguished families. Yet, they illustrate in their Christian vocation that God uses the weak to confound the mighty (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Rather than pushing Jesus' death into the shadow of his exaltation, what Paul has done is to make the cross the fundamental criterion for Christian thought and experience. The vulnerability God demonstrated in giving up Jesus to be crucified, though scandalous to the religious logic of the day, becomes the canon by which that very logic is judged. It defines what it means to be Christian. Ernst Kasemann, who has written so perceptively about the Corinthian problem, comments, "Paul emphasizes that the core of his doctrine of resurrection remains the cross. The point is that resurrection is one aspect of the message of the cross, not that the cross is simply one chapter in a book of resurrection dogmatics."¹

2. Paul clarifies what this means Christologically. His initial readers with all their spiritual vitality shared with the modern TV preacher the conviction that the death of Jesus was a redemptive event, but an event which was superseded by the exaltation of Jesus. Their Christological paradigm was the risen, triumphant Christ. The result was a scandal-less cross, a cross that was only a piece of past history. For Paul, however, the Lord of all is none other than the crucified Jesus. Kasemann has written further:

Christ, exalted above the cross in his sublimity, is misunderstood if one separates the exaltation from the cross, and so reduces their relationship to that of two merely consecutive events. The risen and exalted One remains the crucified One; and his sovereignty is not understood and acknowledged if the cross is merely made the last station on his earthly way as is in fact done by the enthusiasts . . . There are plenty of risen gods in the history of religion, especially in the sphere of Hellenism; and there, too, the way is by a journey through hell. If the cross is simply the gloomy entrance to heaven, the final and the utmost obstacle to triumph, the Christian message does not fundamentally differ from what can be said by competing religions.²

This Christological clarification runs throughout both Corinthian letters. It is, for example, evident in Paul's response to the sacramental chaos in the community. Having recited the received liturgy of the Lord's Supper, he begins his exposition by saying, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26). As C. K. Barrett has noted, the absence of any mention of the resurrection is striking.³ The resurrection confirmed the faith of those sharing the meal, but it did not alter the fact that they ate in the circumstances of "shame" and looked forward to a

future they had not yet experienced.

3. What function, then, does the resurrection have in Paul's theology? J.C. Beker,⁴ following the stimulus of Kasemann,⁵ has pointed out that Paul essentially is an apocalyptic theologian and views Jesus' resurrection as an apocalyptic event. The long and somewhat circuitous argument of 1 Corinthians 15 is specifically directed at those Corinthians who say that there is no general resurrection of the dead since salvation in its fullness is already now.⁶ Paul replies that Christ is but "the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:20); only in the parousia will those who belong to Christ be raised with him (1 Cor. 15:23). Easter is God's promise that in the end death will not prevail, that the last enemy will be finally destroyed (1 Cor. 15:24-28). While the hope of the future is affirmed, a rein is put on the enthusiasm of the Corinthians who assume that as citizens of heaven they have it all now.⁷

For Paul, then, Jesus' resurrection is not so much the closure event for the incarnation, confirming his divine status, as it is an inaugural event for the age to come. It marks the beginning of the new creation, yet, as Beker points out, "it is provisional because it looks forward to the consummation of that beginning."⁸ It is a reminder both to the Corinthians and to the TV preacher of the not-yet dimension of the faith, and as such provides no rationale for removing or toning down the scandalous character of the crucifixion.

4. If Jesus' resurrection is understood as an apocalyptic event, then it is not surprising that when Paul moves from Christology to the nature of Christian experience, he affirms that believers have died with Christ but reserves for the future their resurrection with Christ. The Corinthians held that baptism signified not only their death but also their resurrection with Christ and lifted them into the spiritual heights above and beyond the troubling dilemmas of human existence. They understandably had little concern for incidents of incest or prostitution or for scruples about eating food offered to idols. Mere earthly issues were of small consequence. Paul, however, argues that the resurrection is a promise. "Knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence" (2 Cor. 4:14).

This is the same "eschatological reservation" found in the other undisputed letters of Paul. "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." "But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him" (Rom. 6:5, 8; cf. Phil. 3:10-11).⁹ For the present, believers find themselves very much involved in the ambiguities of human life, and their orientation to the future is their grounds for optimism (cf. Rom. 8:18-25).

5. This relationship of cross and resurrection becomes the basis for the understanding of Christian ministry developed in 2 Corinthians. The present for believers is shaped by and lived under the shadow of the cross. Ministry means sharing the afflictions and anguish of troubled people and communicating the sufferings and comfort of Christ (2 Cor. 1:3-7). Paul relates his own experience of desolation that led him to despair of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8-11). His ministry entails a "carrying in the body the death of Jesus," "always being given up to death for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:10-11). To die with Christ means to live no longer for oneself but for the Christ who died and was raised (2 Cor.

5:14-15). When Paul is maligned by the "superlative apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5, 12:11), he presents a curious defense, acknowledging his weaknesses and anxieties because in them he has found a partnership with the Christ who "was crucified in weakness" (2 Cor. 13:4).

At the same time, the promise of the coming resurrection undergirds Paul's ministry and enables him to hope. In the affliction experienced in Asia he came to rely on "God who raises the dead." "He delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us" (2 Cor. 1:9-10). His confidence in the final triumph of God prevents sheer despair (2 Cor. 4:7-15) and enables him to expect that the power of God will be present in the midst of human weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10). It becomes the generating source of "good courage" (2 Cor. 5:6, 8).

V. P. Furnish rightly notes:

We have evidence that Paul specifically refused to adopt a style of ministry that could in any sense be termed "heroic." His refusal to conform to such a model, even in Corinth where for many people apostolic legitimacy seemed to depend on religious heroics, shows how deeply committed he was to another understanding of ministry. Paul's own understanding of ministry grew out of his commitment to the gospel as "the word of the cross" and out of his perception that "the power of the cross" is the power of self-giving, serving love.¹⁰

In our American context where the pressure to succeed is an ever-present one and the gospel of health and well-being is preached on every street corner, Paul's message sounds foreign and unrealistic. It is foreign not merely to the positive-thinkers who operate on the human hunger for glory and offer tidings of self-esteem, inner security, and a scandal-less cross. It is unrealistic not only for those exploiting capitalists who like the Biblical figure are driven by inner forces to build bigger and bigger barns. The whole church is challenged by such a message to re-think its reason for being. What are our criteria for success? Who are our heroes? How do we measure our spiritual health? How does the church grow? In an era of declining membership the temptation is always strong to declare a faith that gives little or no offense. Paul's words to the church at Corinth with its spiritual enthusiasm but its cross-less Christianity remind us that to do so is to forsake the gospel. Our hope lies in an Easter that illumines but never negates Good Friday.

NOTES

1. Ernst Kasemann, *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 67-68.
2. Kasemann, 67.
3. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 271-272.
4. J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).
5. Ernst Kasemann, "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 108-137.
6. The problem was not limited to Corinth. cf. 2 Tim. 2:18.
7. Caught as they were in a body-spirit dualism, the Corinthians also found it impossible to conceive of a bodily resurrection.

8. Beker, p. 159.

9. Only in Ephesians, whose immediate authorship by Paul is questioned, is the "eschatological reservation" removed (Eph. 2:5-6). In Colossians, baptism also involves being raised with Christ, but the resulting life is "hid with Christ in God" and believers still await the parousia (Col. 3:1-4).

10. Victor Paul Furnish, "Theology and Ministry in the Pauline Letters," *A Biblical Basis for Ministry*, ed. by Earl E. Shelp and Ronald Sunderland (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 142.