

What We Are

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# What We Are

*Images of Ministry*

David Bast

***Words of HOPE***

*What We Are: Images of Ministry*

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*In memory of my father—  
faithful in ministry, faithful in life.*

*“Those that sow in tears  
shall reap with shouts of joy.”  
Psalm 126:5*



# Contents

Introduction	9
1. The Wisdom and Power of God	15
<i>1 Corinthians 1:17–31</i>	
2. We Are God’s Co-workers	27
<i>1 Corinthians 3:5–9</i>	
3. We Are Servants of Christ	39
<i>1 Corinthians 3:18–4:1a</i>	
4. We Are Stewards of God’s Mysteries	51
<i>1 Corinthians 4:1–5</i>	
5. We Are the Scum of the Earth	63
<i>1 Corinthians 4:8–13</i>	
6. We Are the Aroma of Christ	73
<i>2 Corinthians 2:12–16</i>	
7. We Are God’s Commissioned Agents	85
<i>2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:1–2</i>	
8. We Are Jars of Clay	95
<i>2 Corinthians 4:7–12</i>	
9. We Are Christ’s Ambassadors	105
<i>2 Corinthians 5:16–21</i>	
Notes	117



## Introduction

With apologies to Charles Dickens, the Christian ministry could be described as the best of jobs and the worst of jobs. It is indeed a high calling to be a minister of the Word of God. “We are Christ’s ambassadors,” the apostle Paul declares. When Christian ministers speak from the Scriptures, God himself is speaking in and through their words. When, in their proclamation of the gospel, they invite people to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, it is actually “God making his appeal through [them]” (2 Corinthians 5:20). The preaching of the Word of God *is* the Word of God, according to one Reformed statement of faith (the sixteenth-century Second Helvetic Confession). So authorized and authentic Christian ministers have the honor of pursuing the world’s most important calling. Ministers are co-workers with God himself in the great business of the salvation of the world and the building of the church. They are stewards entrusted by the Lord with the preservation and propagation of the message that gives eternal life to all who hear and obey it. They are agents commissioned by God himself to serve as his authorized representatives to humankind.

At the same time, it is often a great trial to be a minister of the Word of God. The world often holds pastors in contempt (or at least indifference), while the church often holds for them impossible expectations. Ministers are subjected to criticism and scorn; they are belittled, viewed as oddballs, sometimes overworked, often underappreciated. I, like every other pastor in the world, have often had the curious experience of watching a stranger's demeanor suddenly change when he or she learns what sort of work I do. Ministers are set apart, looked on as different—not necessarily in a good way. We seem to make people feel uncomfortable, as if we remind them of truths they would rather ignore, as if we stir in them feelings they would rather suppress. “That’s the strangest thing about this life, about being in the ministry,” says the old pastor John Ames in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*. “People change the subject when they see you coming.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps these common reactions that range from discomfort to dishonor are as they should be, for as ministers, in ourselves we are nobody special. We are the lowest and humblest kind of servants. We are mere mortals, fragile clay. “We are the scum of the earth,” says Paul (see 1 Corinthians 4:13).

Those two images—Christ’s ambassadors and the world’s garbage—are the high and low extremes among the many metaphors the apostle Paul employs in his two letters to the Corinthians to describe Christian ministry. Paul had founded the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18). After spending eighteen months preaching and teaching daily in that Greek city, the apostle had moved on to Ephesus to establish the church there. While he was working in Ephesus, reports began to reach Paul of a variety of moral problems and theological errors that had arisen back in Corinth. He responded with a series of letters and personal visits that were eventually consolidated into the New Testament books of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Paul wrote more often and at greater length to the church in Corinth than to any other congregation. The reason for all this attention can be expressed in the old proverb: “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” The Corinthian church was tolerating behavior that would be scandalous even to modern-day congregations, including incestuous sexual relationships (1 Corinthians 5) and public drunkenness at the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11). They also were promoting serious heretical teaching, such as a denial of the resurrection of the body (1 Corinthians 15). But in addition to all these issues of belief and behavior, the Corinthians were the source of another kind of problem for the apostle Paul. They subjected him to a withering storm of personal criticism. Members of the church in Corinth criticized Paul’s preaching, they criticized his daily work, they criticized his teaching, they apparently even criticized his personal appearance and demeanor. And if he had had a family, they probably would have criticized his wife and kids.

Paul’s response to all this criticism is richly instructive. He does not react defensively or by counterattacking his opponents. He does, however, explain himself carefully, giving the reasons for the way in which he chose to preach the gospel in Corinth. But more than that, Paul explains the nature of the ministry itself. The various personal attacks the apostle underwent at the hands of the Corinthian Christians prompted him to tell them just who and what true servants of Christ really are. And Paul does this by employing a series of vivid images for ministers, word pictures that paint a likeness of gospel workers and their work, of the servants themselves and the nature of the service they offer in Christ’s name.

Every Christian is called to service in Christ, to become a servant *of* Christ and a servant *for* Christ. I was visiting a church recently and was struck by the message on a large banner hung over the entrance to the sanctuary: “2005—The Year of the Minister,” it boldly proclaimed. Now that congregation

did not mean by this that they were going to be extra nice to their pastors this year. What they meant to say was that their emphasis for the year was to call all of their members to ministry of some kind, that is, to service in Christ's name in the church and throughout the world. It's the same message I've seen occasionally printed as a little notice on a church bulletin or a signboard, the one that goes—"Pastor: Rev. So-and-So; Ministers: All the people."

That captures an important truth. While some Christians are called as pastors and teachers to the specific ministry of the Word of God, all Christians are called to some kind of ministry or service. We are *all* servants of Christ. In fact, that's what the word *ministry* means. The terms *minister* and *ministry* come from the Latin word *ministrare*, which means simply "to serve." In Latin, *minister* is the equivalent of the Greek *diakonos*, both of which were originally words used to describe, among other kinds of helpers, table waiters. So to be in Christian ministry means to be serving other people in some capacity—any capacity—for the sake and in the name of Jesus Christ. And it doesn't necessarily have to be a very glamorous kind of service.

Having said this, and recognizing that what the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians on the subject of ministry will have some application to all, nevertheless it is important to recognize that most of what he says is directed specifically to ministers of the Word of God. From New Testament times the church has singled out individuals, called by God and set apart by ordination through the laying on of hands, for the pastoral office of preaching and teaching the Word (see 2 Timothy 1:6, 2:15, 4:1–2, 5). In my church this work is entrusted to those ordained to the office of Minister of the Word and Sacrament, and it is to such office-bearers that the apostle's words especially apply.

The question might be asked, Why should a layperson be interested in reading about and reflecting upon these Pauline

images that define and describe the Christian ministry? The first answer to that question is pointed out above: because every Christian is in some sense a minister of the gospel. Moreover, most Christians will fill roles where they are called to preach or teach God's Word, at least informally. As Sunday school teachers, elders or deacons, or youth leaders in the church; as parents in the home; even as friends across the coffee table or the backyard fence, most believers engage in a sort of ministry of the Word every day.

But there is a further reason why it is important for every Christian to understand what is involved in the ministry of the Word as a vocation. While fully affirming both the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and the contemporary emphasis on the universal ministry of the whole body of Christ, I submit that the health of a church will still largely be determined by the faithfulness of its vocational ministers. Luther declared famously that the doctrine of justification by faith was the basis on which a church stood or fell. But this is really another way of saying that a church lives or dies by the fidelity of its preaching and teaching to the biblical gospel. Churches whose ministers are faithful to the apostolic message and to the New Testament model of ministry will flourish. Those whose ministers are unfaithful will wither. Thus zeal for the life of the church should motivate every sincere follower of Jesus Christ to absorb the biblical description of an authentic gospel ministry in order to encourage—and pray for—his or her pastor's conformity to that picture.

Many current indications point to a crisis of morale in the ministry. Pastors are leaving their jobs in large numbers, including many in mid-career, with fifteen, twenty or twenty-five years' experience in ministry—pastors who should be at the peak of their effectiveness. Among those who stay, symptoms of stress and burnout have risen alarmingly. A profession that a generation ago was among the healthiest is now proving to be harmful to the health of those who pursue it. One church

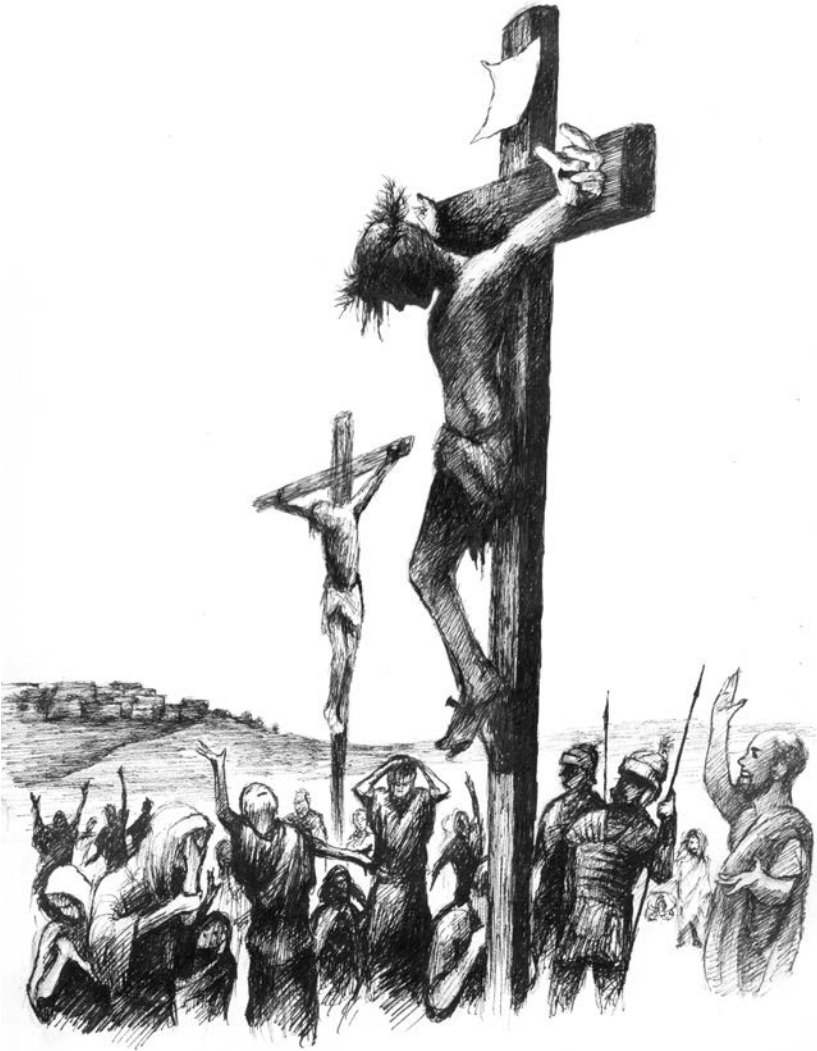
executive responsible for administering his denomination's ministerial insurance and retirement programs writes, "Clergy experience over 90 percent more stress-related disorders than other people of a similar age. Stress and stress-related illnesses are primary factors for the deterioration of health in the clergy population. Thirty years ago the clergy profession ranked as one of the healthiest in the U.S. Today the reverse is true; clergy are experiencing some of the worst health trends in the nation."<sup>2</sup>

A principal reason for this trend is the dramatic rise in the expectations of congregations for their pastoral leaders. Ministers today must not only preach and teach, comfort and care, baptize and marry and bury; they must lead, they must manage, they must counsel, they must plan, they must inspire, they must perform, they must produce. And if they don't, they're out. Coupled with this pressure is a confusion I believe many ministers feel about their identity and role. What am I, exactly, as a pastor? Am I a CEO whose job is to outperform my business competitors in order to keep my stockholders happy and attract even more investors? Am I a mental health worker seeking to ease the anxieties and heal the traumas of my clients? Am I a self-help guru offering tips for successful living or trying to market coping strategies to the frazzled competitors in the modern rat race? Am I a prophet of the Lord, anointed to thunder doom upon the comfortable, bourgeois heads of my flock? The answer, I believe, is none of the above. As a minister of the gospel I am a servant of Christ and a steward of God's mysteries; I am an ambassador for Christ entrusted with a ministry of reconciliation. My job is to open the Word to people, to explain what it says and seek to understand what it means, to speak God's message of grace *and* judgment to one and all, to worship the Lord and serve at his Table, to listen and to pray, to rejoice with those who rejoice and to weep with those who weep, and always to represent Jesus Christ.

If we all, vocational and non-vocational ministers alike, can agree on that, we all will thrive together.

# 1

## The Wisdom and Power of God



For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

1 Corinthians 1:17–31

**P**icture the world as it was two hundred years ago. A child born in 1805 came into a world where no one had ever traveled faster than a horse could gallop or a ship could sail. No one had ever seen an artificial light brighter than a candle or oil lamp. No message had ever been transmitted except by hand; no likeness of any person or place had ever been shown except by a painting; no information had ever been shared except by word of mouth or the printed page.

Fast-forward one hundred years. Our imaginary child who first saw the light of day in 1905 was born into a world where people not only drove automobiles and sailed steamships but had flown airplanes; a world of electric lights and photographs, of recorded sound and moving pictures, of telegraphs and telephones and wireless transmissions. Now picture the world of today and try to imagine what amazing technologies and astonishing devices the newborn child of 2005 will take for granted when he or she is an adult.

### **Knowledge Is Power**

We in the Western world are living in a revolutionary era—though not necessarily in a political sense; our revo-

lution is scientific and technological. Just as the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century turned society upside down and changed everyday life to an unimaginable extent, so the Technology Revolution of the late twentieth century is changing our lives and our culture in radical ways. The most basic changes that are affecting our society today have to do with the use of digital technology, especially as that applies to the gathering and transmitting of information. Satellite and cable broadcasting, personal computers, the Internet, digital audio and video production and programming, cellular telephones, wireless connectivity, laptops and iPods, email, and fax machines—all those things were unimaginable just a few years ago. Now they are not only unavoidable, they seem increasingly impossible to live without.

In one way or another all this technology has to do with the sharing and use of information. IT (information technology) has become a whole new field of human enterprise, with hundreds of thousands of jobs created and billions of dollars of wealth generated (think Bill Gates). “Knowledge is power,” the saying goes; today knowledge is also money. But money and power are nothing new in human history, and this combination usually produces arrogance: vaunting pride and ambition. We now have nearly the sum of human knowledge available to each one of us literally at our fingertips. The first tools and machines enabled humans to multiply the power of their muscles. Now we build machines—faster and smaller each year—that multiply the power of our brains. And humans, at least highly educated and extremely secularized humans, are feeling incredibly powerful as a result. The more optimistic among us are offering as serious predictions things that a few years ago were nothing more than the fantasies of science fiction. Genetic engineering, cloning, stem cell research, nanotechnology—these and other forms of knowledge will enable us (so it is claimed) to realize ever greater advances: to conquer all disease someday, to design flawless children, even

to banish death itself. Modern, post-Christian, technological man has set for himself the goal of total control over his life and world. No longer dependant upon God, no longer even believing in God, he is determined to save himself, to achieve immortality on his own, to make his heaven on earth—there to glorify himself and enjoy himself forever.

## The Wisdom and Power of God

We would do well to remember that God has a way of passing judgment upon the pretensions and humbling the arrogance of human pride. One of the earliest stories in the Bible is a tale of just such a divine thwarting of human ambition.

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. . . . Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves. . . .” And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. . . .” So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth.

Genesis 11:1–8

The building of the Tower of Babel was an expression of the persistent desire of the human race to displace God by means of knowledge and technology and to rule the world without him. But God will not be moved. He refuses to be shunted aside to allow the human usurpation of his sovereignty, and so he “scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts” (Luke 1:51).

The opening chapter of 1 Corinthians describes another example of divine judgment on human wisdom and pride.

Paul's theme in the second half of 1 Corinthians 1 is the contrast between God's wisdom and power and human wisdom and power. The world, as we have seen, defines these things quantitatively, by the accumulation of knowledge, information, wealth, power, technology, expertise, and the like. God defines wisdom and power quite differently. His definition is qualitative and consists of just two words: Jesus Christ. "Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (v. 24). Christ is God's best, fullest, most eloquent, and most powerful message to the world. He is not wisdom and power in the abstract but wisdom incarnate and power personified. Everything God wants to communicate to us about what is true and good and worthy is found in Jesus Christ. Everything God wants to do for us is gained through Jesus Christ.

But the apostle Paul also uses another expression in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians to describe God's wisdom and power. Of course, these things are revealed supremely in Jesus himself, but more particularly God's wisdom and power are seen in "the gospel" (v. 17). And what, exactly, is the gospel? It is, as the word (*evangelion* = "good news") implies, an announcement or message. Specifically, the gospel is the Good News about "the cross of Christ" (v. 17). It is "the word of the cross," which "is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18). It is the message about "Christ crucified" (v. 23). It is the knowledge that Paul decided to limit himself to in preaching to the Corinthians, the knowledge of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). All those phrases from the opening verses of 1 Corinthians are synonymous expressions that define the gospel. The gospel is not some vague, sentimental generality about God's love. It is the news about the cross of Christ, hard as adamant and bright as star-fire. It is the announcement of all that a gracious God has done in Jesus Christ to reconcile sinners to himself. So God's wisdom and power are revealed not merely in the general story of Jesus—his life, his teach-

ing, the beauty of his example—but in the specific story of Jesus’ death and its saving significance. “The gospel” is “the message of the cross.” “The message of the cross” is the story of “Christ crucified”; not just *that* it happened, but what it means. The gospel is the announcement that on the cross at Golgotha Christ took our place, shouldered our guilt, and died our death as the just penalty for sin so that we could be forgiven and granted eternal life. This is the wisdom and the power of God for the salvation of his people.

### God’s Wisdom vs. Human Wisdom

Paul’s primary interest in describing this divine wisdom is to emphasize the contrast between God’s wisdom of Christ crucified and human religious wisdom. The typical human attitude, the view of what John Bunyan called “Mr. Worldly Wiseman,” is that salvation is a matter of our striving and doing. Who is God, and how do you come to know him? The world in its wisdom says through *religion*, that is, by performing rituals, prayers, and sacrifices, or through *morality*, that is, by leading a good life to the best of your ability, by being sincere, compassionate, a decent person. That seems to make sense; it appears to be wise. But it is actually foolishness because it doesn’t work.

According to the New Testament no one actually comes to know God—the real God, the living God—that way. Then how do you come to know God? Through “the foolishness of preaching,” says Paul (in the wonderful phrase with which the King James Bible translates verse 21). When you stop to think about it, it does seem kind of ridiculous. I mean, some preacher just gets up and tells the story of a man who died a criminal’s death on a cross two thousand years ago. But in God’s wisdom and through his power people are saved and their lives transformed as a result of hearing and believing this

story. “It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe” (v. 21). It is part of God’s “foolishness” to change lives not by moral exhortation but by gospel proclamation.

The early Christians, to the astonishment of their neighbors, lived a strange new kind of life—a life of honesty, of purity and of unselfishness. . . .

But how was the life produced? It might conceivably have been produced by exhortation. . . . The strange thing about Christianity was that it adopted an entirely different method. It transformed the lives of men not by appealing to the human will, but by telling a story. . . . It seemed foolish to the ancient world, and it seems foolish to liberal preachers today. But the strange thing is that it works. The effects of it appear even in this world. Where the most eloquent exhortation fails, the simple story of an event succeeds; the lives of men are transformed by a piece of news.<sup>3</sup>

Now it is true that many who hear the gospel story of salvation through faith in Christ crucified reject it out of hand. It seems ridiculous or downright offensive to them. To Jews in Paul’s day who wanted a religion of power, the notion of a crucified Messiah seemed scandalous (from *skandalon*, “stumbling block,” v. 23), an intolerable weakness. To Greeks who prized philosophical wisdom, a system of speculative knowledge and high-sounding ideals, the whole story of the gospel was ludicrous. The idea that the God of the universe came into the world as a Jew called Jesus of Nazareth and that he suffered and died on a Roman cross for the sins of the world and then rose bodily from the dead on the third day . . . well, it was simply laughable.

The New Testament proclamation of the cross is offensive. There is no getting around it without eliminating the gospel itself. The message of Christ crucified for the sin of the world offends people’s easygoing tolerance, which assumes that all religions are basically the same and everyone can pretty much

find God in his or her own way. No, says the gospel; Jesus is the only way. The message of the cross offends people's sense of self-reliance, their feeling that the true way to heaven is by trying your best to be a fairly good person. No, says the gospel again; you can't do anything to save yourself. Most of all, the message of the cross offends human pride, for the gospel of the cross declares to us that we are not the fundamentally good folks we like to think we are but rather helpless sinners who are guilty of an offense so monstrous the Son of God himself had to die to pay its just penalty.

### God Shames the World

There is a very good reason why God's wisdom and power in Christ present such a contrast to human wisdom and power. It's no accident that the cross is scandalous and offensive. God *intends* it to be just that. There is madness in God's method of salvation because there is method in his madness! God has chosen to save this way in order to humble everyone and everything, to show that his "foolishness" is wiser and his "weakness" stronger than anything the world can offer. As Paul says here in 1 Corinthians 1 in Eugene Peterson's wonderful paraphrase, "Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—*preaching*, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation" (1 Corinthians 1:21 *The Message*).

So God's wisdom and power trump ours. We don't, we can't, save ourselves; only God can save. And he does that, not through worldly power or strength but through the weakness and seeming defeat of death on a cross. Then he brings people into contact with the saving benefits of that death by the absurd means of faith that results from hearing the message of the cross proclaimed. "Jews demand signs"—they want proof

that Jesus is the Messiah—but God insists on faith. We must take him on trust. “Greeks seek wisdom” (v. 22). The worldly wise want philosophical discussions and religious roundtables to settle the truth. But God chooses to save by means of commissioned agents who proclaim the truth—the truth of the gospel of Christ crucified.

So the first way God brings down human pride is through the method he uses to save people. Just as the righteousness that justifies us in God’s sight is not earned by our works but is credited to us by faith in Christ, so even the faith that saves us does not come as a result of our own efforts but simply through the word that we hear. “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17).

A second way God judges the world’s wisdom and pride can be seen in the sort of people he chooses to save. God shames the world both by the means and the objects of salvation. “Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don’t see many of ‘the brightest and the best’ among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn’t it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these ‘nobodies’ to expose the hollow pretensions of the ‘somebodies?’” (1 Corinthians 1:26–28 *The Message*).

There weren’t many Mercedes in the parking lot of the First Church of Corinth. Few of the church’s members belonged to the local country club or served on the city commission. “Christianity is a religion of slaves,” remarked the French intellectual Simone Weil, “myself included.”<sup>4</sup> The world has many yardsticks by which it measures status, most of them involving the display of money, knowledge, or power. But however we measure it, God doesn’t think very highly of the way we go around clanging our status symbols. God takes a dim view of all the games we play to distinguish ourselves from others and convey a sense of our own superior importance. So, says the apostle, God has done something about it. He has shamed the

world by choosing as his own those whom the world considers weak, lowly, and despised.

The reason God acts this way, says Paul, is “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (v. 29). The Bible repeatedly tells us that God humbles the proud and exalts the humble; here it tells us that he humbles *everybody*.

So I ask myself: In the light of the cross, what is it that I’m so proud of? What makes me feel like I’m better than others? Is it my intellect or strength? But God has shamed the world’s wisdom and power by choosing the “foolishness” and “weakness” of the cross. Is it my accomplishments, all that I have achieved and done? But Christ had to die in order to save me even from my accomplishments. Is it my money, my possessions, my looks? No, if I must feel proud, if I must boast, let it be only of the cross of Jesus Christ. “Therefore, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord’” (v. 31).

Once we have gotten this straight, once we have renounced all our pretensions, once we have exchanged our human wisdom for God’s wisdom and power, once we have turned away from our religion and good works and accepted Christ’s provision at the cross for our salvation, then we are ready to ask what he wants us to be and do as his servants in the world. The starting point for Christian ministry is just here: to be completely and utterly humbled; to see ourselves as nothing and Christ as everything; to know that we are his and he is ours.

In 1623 a new chapel was dedicated at Lincoln’s Inn in London. Though you wouldn’t guess it from the name, Lincoln’s Inn was actually a law school where young men received a university level education in preparation for careers in law, politics, or civil service. The great poet John Donne, formerly a student at Lincoln’s Inn but lately ordained to the ministry in the Church of England, was invited to preach the dedicatory sermon. This was the prayer he offered before preaching:

In these walls to them that love Profit and Gaine, manifest Thyself as a Treasure, and fill them so; to them that love Pleasure, manifest Thyself as Marrow and Fatnesse, and fill them so; and to them that love Preferment, manifest Thyself as a Kingdome, and fill them so.<sup>5</sup>

In Jesus Christ, and only in Jesus Christ, all our wishes and desires are satisfied. He is everything we have ever hoped for or needed, our treasure, our marrow and fatness, our kingdom. Christ Jesus is our life, “our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (v. 30). The evangelical doctrine of justification—that God imputes or credits Christ’s righteousness to us when we believe in him—is sometimes criticized as a legal fiction. How can such an external transaction have any effect? How could one person’s righteousness be transferred to another’s account, while leaving that person still sinful in themselves? Is God some sort of fussy, cosmic bookkeeper, trying to make all the columns balance? But the New Testament does not teach that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers is an external transaction. It teaches that faith unites us to Christ. As a believer, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). And I live in him. It is only as we live “in Christ” by faith that we can rightly claim his benefits, because all that Christ is and does becomes ours. Christ’s sacrifice is our sacrifice; Christ’s obedience is our obedience; Christ’s worship is our worship.

And Christ’s ministry is our ministry as well.

2

## We Are God's Co-workers



What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

1 Corinthians 3:5–9

**O**f all the books in the New Testament, none speaks more often about the nature of Christian ministry than Paul's two epistles to the church in Corinth. One reason Paul says so much about ministry here—particularly his own ministry as an apostle—is because so many of the members of the church in Corinth were challenging Paul's authority and questioning his apostolic legitimacy. It was because he had so many problems with them that he wrote so much to the Corinthians on this subject. It's hard for us to imagine today that any Christians could have dared to criticize the apostle Paul. But, of course, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians he wasn't *The Apostle Paul*, and his letters weren't *The Holy Bible*. He was just Paul, the guy who brought the new Christian religion to Corinth and who attracted the first few converts to it.

The Corinthians, like all ancient Greeks, valued nothing more highly than an eloquent orator. In the Greco-Roman world a man's standing in the community and career in public life rested largely upon his ability as a public speaker. The new Christians in Corinth saw no reason to evaluate the leaders of their church any differently. As a result they were dividing along the lines of loyalty to their favorite Christian preachers. Some were shouting for Paul ("He's the teacher for me!"), while

others preferred Apollos (“I’m an Apollonian!”) or even Peter (1 Corinthians 1:12; we are not told how Peter got involved in the Corinthian church, nor does he figure in Paul’s further argument).

## Paul and Apollos

Paul takes pains to explain in the early chapters of 1 Corinthians what the true relationship is between Apollos and himself and between both of them and the Lord of the church. They were not rival party leaders, as if the church were a political system in which partisans gather around their favorite candidates and try to steamroll the opposition, where one group wins by defeating all rivals. Nor is the Christian ministry a popularity contest. Preachers don’t square off against each other like TV contestants on *American Idol*, preaching their lungs out before a panel of judges to see who can win the most votes and launch a successful career.

Well, what is the ministry then? Here is what it is: The church, says Paul, is like a field where many different workers cooperate to raise a harvest. The church is like a building where co-laborers work together to raise the walls.

Like all good writers, Paul often employs vivid metaphors—word pictures—to make his point. So here he compares the church both to a farm and a construction project: “You are God’s field, God’s building.” If we are God’s field, then our business must be to grow fruit, not to squabble with each other. And how does spiritual growth occur? It happens through the effective preaching and teaching of the Word of God by the blessing of the Holy Spirit. “I planted the word,” says Paul, for he first brought the gospel message to Corinth. “Apollos watered it,” he adds, for Apollos came after Paul and continued to pastor the young church in Corinth. “But God gave the growth.” And the conclusion Paul draws from all this? “So

neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (vv. 6–7). So grow up, Corinthians, and forget all your little sectarian cliques!

A very wise pastor named Alexander Whyte once pointed out that the besetting sin of ministers is envy. He was developing an insight by one of the greatest of all writers on pastoral theology, the Puritan Richard Baxter.

Will any workman malign another because he helpeth him to do his master's work? Yet, alas! How common is this heinous crime among men of parts and eminence in the church! They can secretly blot the reputation of those that stand cross to their own; and what they cannot for shame do in plain and open terms they will do in malicious intimations, so that it is their ordinary practice to keep down the estimation of any they dislike. . . . And some go so far, that they are unwilling that anyone who is abler than themselves should come into their pulpits, lest he should be applauded above themselves. A fearful thing, that any man that hath the least of the fear of God, should so envy God's gifts, and had rather that his hearers were unconverted and the drowsy not awakened, than that it should be done by another who may be preferred.<sup>6</sup>

We generally don't envy those who work in widely different fields from our own or whose gifts clearly surpass ours by a huge margin. I don't envy a big league ball player or an international opera singer (even though I might wish I were one!). No, what most often tempts us to envy is the person whom we consider to be our equal in status and ability (or even our inferior) who is doing the same kind of work we do but with much more success and to far greater acclaim—the pastor with a bigger church, the scholar with a better publishing deal, the executive with a higher title and a bigger salary.

In 1855 a moderately successful American lawyer wrote a note to himself like a sort of diary entry. He was reflecting on the career of a longtime rival, comparing it to his own.

Twenty two years ago [we] first became acquainted. We were both young then; he a trifle younger than I. Even then, we were both ambitious; I, perhaps, quite as much as he. With *me* the race of ambition has been a failure—a flat failure; with *him* it has been one of splendid success. His name fills the nation; and is not unknown, even, in foreign lands.

What makes this little note of continuing interest is not the unmistakable whiff of envy mixed with self pity that it conveys; that is a common enough thing. No, what makes this note interesting is that its writer was Abraham Lincoln. The rival he was referring to was Senator Stephen Douglas, the man whom Lincoln would engage in a series of political debates in 1858 that would result in Lincoln's name beginning to fill the nation and whom Lincoln would defeat for the presidency in 1860. The irony is heightened by the fact that the man whose race of ambition seemed such a flat failure has become so enormously great that Stephen Douglas is chiefly remembered today for his role as Abraham Lincoln's one-time rival.<sup>7</sup>

It would have been easy for Paul to react to Apollos with a similar kind of jealousy. After all, Paul had been the pioneer in Corinth. He had run the risks and endured the suffering to see the church planted there. Now it seemed as though Apollos had come along and was reaping most of the glory. But Paul has a clear view of the real nature of Christian ministry, the true status of ministers, and the only one to whom glory is due. So, he says, speaking of himself and Apollos, we are *nothing*. "So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (v. 7). We don't actually do the real work of ministry. When it comes to spiritual life and lasting results, God does all the heavy lifting.

As ministers we are often tempted to think that if only we had this gift or that ability, our churches would thrive and grow. If you cannot preach like Peter and you cannot pray like

Paul—as the song says—you can still wish that you could and daydream about how great you and your church would be if you did! But even Paul, with his unequaled combination of spiritual gifts and human abilities, could not add a single soul to the growth of the church. The power is in the seed, not the sower. It is the Lord who gives the increase.

Furthermore, Paul adds, speaking once again of himself and Apollos, we are *one* thing. “He who plants and he who waters are one” (v. 8). So wise up, church. Don’t make such a big deal out of your leaders, who in themselves are nothing. Don’t play them off against one another, because in their various ministries they are all engaged in a common, unified task. Referring to this passage Charles Hodge, the famous nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian, commented, “Ministers are mere instruments in the hands of God. The doctrines which they preach are not their own discoveries, and the power which renders their preaching successful is not in them. They are nothing; and therefore it is an entire perversion of their relationship to the church to make them the heads of parties.”<sup>8</sup>

## Synergy

So the church is God’s field, and ministers are merely the field hands who plant and irrigate. The church is God’s building, God’s temple, and ministers are the masons who raise its walls. As such, we cooperate with God himself in accomplishing his work. There is another beautiful image tucked into this passage, one that in a sense describes every Christian but that Paul applies specifically to himself and Apollos as ministers of the Word. “You [the church] are God’s field, God’s building.” And we apostles—and we pastors, missionaries, evangelists, preachers, teachers—“we are God’s fellow workers” (v. 9).

One of the most popular buzzwords floating around business and management circles today is the word *synergy*. I typed *synergy* into an Internet search engine and found this definition: “a mutually advantageous conjunction of distinct elements.” (If you use buzzwords, I suppose you should expect jargonish definitions like that.) But synergy really isn’t that complicated a thing. Synergy simply means “working together.” And that’s the word Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians 3:9 to describe us as ministers of Christ: we are God’s co-workers, God’s partners, God’s *synergoi*. In ourselves we may be nothing, but the work we do is not nothing; it is the work of God himself. In our proclamation of the Word of God we are cooperating—*cooperation* is the Latin equivalent of the Greek *synergy*—with God in building up his church.

Now maybe that doesn’t sound like much to you, but I submit to you that this is an absolutely amazing thing to say about anyone. *Synergoi theou*—“God’s fellow-workers”—is an astonishing description to be applied to human beings. We are *God’s* co-workers. Does God actually require co-workers? Does he need a helping hand from anybody for anything? I don’t think so. After all, he created the entire universe all by himself. I seriously doubt that he needs our assistance in running it. But then why does he take us on as his partners? Decidedly junior partners, to be sure, but real partners nonetheless. If it is not for his sake, then it must be for our sake. And I think we can understand why. Have you ever let your young child, or perhaps your grandchild, help you out with a household project? You surely didn’t do it for the sake of greater efficiency. You did it because you love the child, because you delight in her company, because you want him to learn and grow and stretch himself, because you know how much joy it will give her, how important it will make him feel, to share with you in the work. Moreover, in working alongside you that child gets to know you better as well. And because God wants all these same things for his children, he shares his work with us.

Every Christian is a fellow worker with God in some way. Part of God's reason for creating and redeeming us was to give us dignity and purpose by allowing us to share in his work, for example, in his work of governing the world. Our first parents were charged with tending the garden, and God still expects the work of earth-keeping from his children. We know that he also requires his people to "do justice and love kindness" in Micah's famous words (see Micah 6:8), to be active in the work of peacemaking and the building of just and compassionate societies. Most importantly, God enlists each of us as co-workers in the great business of salvation. Obviously, God himself is the only one ultimately who can save anybody (Ephesians 2:8–10). Nevertheless, we have a real part to play in our own salvation. Paul urged the Philippians to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12–13). There is a divine-human synergy in our spiritual growth. We can do nothing without the help of God's Spirit, just as Christ is the vine in whom we must abide if we are to bear fruit (John 15:4–5). But we are the ones who must practice obedience, cultivate the spiritual disciplines, and water and feed our souls with prayer and Scripture so that we grow into Christlikeness. That's what it means to work out our own salvation.

But servants of Christ, and supremely those servants who have been called and set apart for service by the church, also have work to do in bringing salvation to other people. This is the great task of the Christian ministry. God enlists our cooperation in the work of the gospel through which people everywhere are saved and the church is built up throughout the world. Paul says a little bit later in his correspondence with the Corinthians that when he is urging them to accept the gospel, it is actually "God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). And again, the apostle concludes, "Working together with [God], then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain" (2 Corinthians 6:1).

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul expands the idea of the divine-human synergy in the salvation of the church by developing the building image further.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:10–15

This is a difficult passage, mostly because Paul's metaphorical argument isn't easy to follow. It helps in understanding what he is saying to remember that Paul is speaking throughout this paragraph not of Christians in general but of ministers in particular. When he writes, "I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it," he is saying exactly what he had stated earlier with a different metaphor: "I planted, Apollos watered." Here Paul makes three further points. First, Jesus Christ is the foundation on which the church is built. "On this rock I will build my church," as Jesus said to Peter, meaning not Peter himself but the rock of Peter's confession, the truth that Jesus is both Messiah and Christ, Savior and Lord: "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." Second, our work of seeking to build up the church through the ministry of the Word can be either good or bad, precious or worthless, and each of us is responsible for how he or she builds. Third, the quality of our work in ministry will be exposed and tested on

the day of judgment. Those who have done well will receive a reward. Those whose work has been shoddy—careless, indolent, self-centered, greedy for gain, ego-driven, unfaithful—will suffer loss. They themselves will be saved, but like a family that barely escapes a house fire with only the clothes on their backs and reeking of smoke, these poor ministers will have nothing to show for their lives and labor.

### Put Out into the Deep

No doubt employing us as his partners is a very inefficient way for God to accomplish the work of salvation. After all, God could use angels to convince everyone of the truth about Jesus. How impressive would that be! God could choose some night to rearrange the stars in the heavens so that they spelled out “Jesus is Lord!” from horizon to horizon. But he doesn’t do any of those things. He chooses instead to use us—*our* words, our sermons, our halting, faulty, often awkward witness to the truth—in order to bring salvation to the world. And in doing that he gives our lives incredible significance.

Do you recall how, early one morning, Jesus approached a tired bunch of fishermen who had just pulled their boats up on shore and were washing their nets after a night of fruitless labor. “Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch,” Jesus told Simon. He answered, “Master, we toiled [*kopiasantes*] all night and took nothing!” (Luke 5:4–5).

How many people do you know who are spending their lives toiling for something—a career, a family, a home; comfort, meaning, happiness, pleasure, love—and are coming up empty? How many people are trying desperately to persuade themselves that their lives are really great, only to awaken to the frustrating realization that they have been toiling away at dead-end pursuits? But the toil of ministry, though real and hard, often daunting, and sometimes discouraging, is never

empty. “Therefore,” Paul will encourage his friends in Corinth, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor [*kopos*, “toil”] is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Jesus invites us, on a dare, to strike out into the deep of his great purpose. “And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men’” (Luke 5:10). He invites us to do the same, to find our own significance in being co-workers with him in the ever fruitful labor of “man-fishing,” of building his church.

# 3

## We Are Servants of Christ



Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:18–4:1a

**T**he Christian church seems to be fascinated with titles. In this, as in so many things, it is more in tune with the customs and attitudes of the world than those of its Lord and Master. We may claim to live in a democratic society in which everyone is equal, but the world makes its pecking order pretty clear by the titles placed in front of important people's names, titles like Doctor, Professor, Counselor, the Honorable. Or look at the way academics stream the letters of their degrees behind their names, like so many kite tails. Or observe how the rungs on the ladder of success in the corporate world are signified by ever-advancing job titles: Assistant Vice President, Senior Vice President, Executive Vice President, President, Chairman and CEO. It's a long, daunting climb to the top! And the church really is no different. We also go in for titles and honors: Pastor, Father, Bishop; Reverend, Right Reverend, *Most* Reverend! I was making this point recently with a group of Egyptian pastors and afterwards one of them told me that when the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church is introduced in the midst of a formal worship service, his name must be preceded by a solemn recitation of no fewer than twelve exalted titles.

## Ministry in the New Testament

All the emphasis on titles in the church is rather interesting in light of Jesus' command to his disciples: "But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:8–11). I suppose one reason we leaders in the church sometimes make a big deal out of our titles despite Jesus' caution is to lend ourselves an air of greater importance and authority, perhaps in the hope that people will then listen to what we have to say.

The words the New Testament uses to describe the offices of the ministry are instructive. They are all functional words, not honorifics. The classic passage is Ephesians 4:11–12: "And he [Christ] gave the apostles [either the twelve apostles or, in a more general sense, missionaries], the prophets [or preachers], the evangelists, the pastors [or shepherds] and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ."

Another common New Testament word for a minister is *diakonos*, from which we get *deacon*. This word occurs in Acts 6 in the story of the selection of a group of assistants to help the apostles with pastoral care in the Jerusalem church. It can also be translated as "servant" or "minister." Paul uses a form of this word in the Ephesians passage just quoted to describe the collective work of all the saints and again in 2 Corinthians 4:1 to refer specifically to his own ministry, which he has by the mercy of God. Two other New Testament words for the leaders of the church are *presbuteroi*—"presbyters" or "elders"—and *episkopoi* (literally "overseers.") The English word *priest* is actually a contraction of *presbyter*. There were no priests in the New Testament church, in the sense of a

special caste of clergy appointed to offer sacrifices to God. The Greek word for priest, *hieros*, is used in the New Testament only for Jesus Christ, the great High Priest who offered the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Hebrews 4:14; 8:1–2; 9:11–12). Originally the elders were the overseers of the various congregations in the New Testament church. But with the passage of time and the growth of the church, this function came to be exercised by one individual who supervised the churches of a city or region and who was called the *episkopos*, or “bishop.” In churches with a presbyterian form of government (most Reformed denominations) the pastors are considered to be elders—“teaching elders”—and the elders may be authorized to preach and celebrate the sacraments. The oversight of the church is entrusted to these leaders collectively.

### Christ’s Servants

I like to think about the exalted titles the apostle Paul could have claimed for himself had he been so inclined: “Prince of the Apostles,” “World’s Greatest Evangelist,” “Missionary to the Gentile World,” “Founder of the Christian Church,” “Author of the New Testament”! Humanly speaking, Paul of Tarsus was all those things and more. He could, without much exaggeration, have used any of those high titles to describe himself. But he didn’t. He sometimes called himself an apostle of Jesus Christ, and when necessary he could defend his right to that title, especially if his God-ordained authority was being challenged. But there was one other title to which the apostle aspired, a title that Paul used for himself again and again, especially to introduce himself to people he didn’t know. Over and over in his letters we find Paul appending a two-word phrase to his name to explain who and what he was. Paul was a *doulos Christou*, “a servant of Christ.”

One of the basic assumptions of New Testament Christianity is that Christians don't belong to themselves any longer. "You are not your own," says Paul to the Corinthians, "for you were bought with a price" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20). It is difficult to imagine any Christian teaching that runs so contrary to popular opinion in our contemporary society. "Don't tell me what I can or can't do with my own life," people shout nowadays. "My personal life is my own business," cry our contemporaries by the million. "Keep your laws off our bodies!" the bumper stickers proclaim loudly.

But do we really belong to ourselves? If there is no such thing as God, then fine; do whatever you can get away with. But if there is a God, if the Creator of the universe is real, then he has the absolute right to tell every last one of us what we can and cannot do with our bodies, with our minds, with our whole being. For he made us. He has all the rights of ownership. God has the same authority and power over us that an artisan has over his handiwork. "Can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand" (Jeremiah 18:6).

But for Christians, God's claim goes even deeper than that. Notice that the apostle grounds God's ownership of us not in the doctrine of creation but in the fact of redemption. We are not our own, Paul says, because we were bought with a price. And the price was Christ's very own blood. "You were ransomed," wrote the apostle Peter ". . . not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:18–19). So we are not our own. We belong, body and soul, in life and death, to our faithful Savior Jesus Christ, because he has fully paid for our sins with his precious blood. And in so doing, he purchased us. He is now our Lord, our Master, and we are his servants. And if all of the redeemed of God are his servants, then those called to serve in vocational ministry are doubly so!

## Under-rowers

“So, what are we?” we might ask the apostle. And he answers, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Corinthians 4:1). I will say more about the second part of that verse, “stewards of the mysteries of God,” in the next chapter. But for now let’s focus on the first part. This is how you ought to think of us, says Paul. That is, think of me and my fellow apostles and, by extension, all leaders in the church, in these terms. For that matter, he could have said, this is how each one of you ought to think of yourselves. This is the way all Christians should see themselves—“as servants of Christ.”

But the word translated “servant” in 1 Corinthians 4:1 is not the one most often used in the New Testament for ordinary servants. It’s not Paul’s familiar *doulos Christou*. Rather, the word Paul uses here in 1 Corinthians 4:1 is the less usual term *hupēretas*. This Greek word for “servants” or “assistants” in its original sense referred to an “under-rower.”

So what is an under-rower? To understand that you need to picture the mightiest of ancient warships. They were called *triremes* because they had three tiers or banks of oars along each side. A trireme had a single mast and a square sail that it used for regular sailing, but its real strength came from all those oars. Of its crew of around two hundred men, only thirty or so were soldiers and sailors. The rest were slaves, chained to their oars below deck. (Picture Charleton Heston in *Ben Hur*.) When all these slaves rowed together, they could send the ship hurtling forward at an incredible rate over a short distance to ram and sink enemy vessels with the trireme’s iron prow.

So who are we as ministers of Christ, as leaders, or even as apostles? This is who we are. We’re not officers walking around up on the deck; we’re the *hupēretas*, the slaves down below. We’re not even in the top tier of slaves! We are Christ’s

under-rowers, right down in the bottom of the ship at the very lowest bank of oars.

## Obedience and Freedom

Now let that metaphor fill your mind and fuel your meditation. What does it suggest to you about serving Jesus Christ if even the most exalted of Christian leaders—the apostles themselves—are really nothing more than under-rowers? It isn't a very exalted or glamorous position, is it? It certainly doesn't sound appealing—not just a rower, but a *bottom-row* rower! Talk about a bad place to be! A slave like that has really only one requirement: what is demanded of him is obedience. All an under-rower had to do was to start rowing when the captain said start and stop when the captain said stop. His entire life, his total existence, was simply “a long obedience in the same direction,” in Eugene Peterson's memorable phrase describing Christian discipleship.<sup>10</sup> But it has to be *persistent* obedience. There was no hope of release for an under-rower. Galley slaves had no retirement plan. They were engaged to the death. That is hard for us to imagine in a culture where, as I read somewhere recently, the average American will change careers something like three or four times over the course of his or her working life. Not change jobs, change *careers*, start over again in an entirely different field! Increasingly the ministry is being treated the same way, as a short-term option rather than a lifelong commitment.

Here is another characteristic of a servant's obedience: it must be *trusting*. If we are under-rowers of Christ, we obey his commands. We're not in this business of ministry to get all we can out of it for ourselves. The point is not whether our ego needs are being met. We're not expected to chart the course for the church's future; we're just supposed to keep on rowing even when we don't understand where our captain is taking

us. After all, a bottom-row rower can't really see where the ship is headed. He can't see much of anything apart from the little patch of water visible out the side through his oar hole. But that should not affect the quality or intensity of his service.

John Henry Newman experienced much turmoil, controversy, and criticism during the course of a very long life and ministry that took an abrupt turn in midcourse. As a young minister Newman seemed headed for the pinnacle of success in the Church of England. Early in Queen Victoria's reign he occupied the pulpit of Great St. Mary's, the University Church in Oxford. But when Newman converted to Roman Catholicism and was ordained a priest, he lost job, friends, and admirers, and was greatly vilified by word of mouth and in print. Newman's intellect, character, and ability eventually won him widespread admiration again, and he died a cardinal in the Church of Rome, at the age of eighty-nine. One of his best-loved works is the hymn, "Lead, Kindly Light," which Newman wrote while becalmed in the Mediterranean as he struggled to return home after suffering a near-fatal illness during a journey to Sicily. The year was 1833, and Newman was convinced that God had spared his life so that he might take up the work of defending Christianity against the attacks of liberal skepticism.<sup>11</sup> As he looked ahead, Newman prayed,

Lead, kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom,  
lead thou me on!  
The night is dark, and I am far from home;  
lead thou me on!  
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
the distant scene; one step enough for me.

One step at a time, one oar stroke at a time: this is the life of an obedient servant of Jesus Christ.

## Whom Will You Serve?

We need to be clear on one more thing. The choice that is offered to us is not a choice between lowly service to Christ or lofty freedom to serve ourselves and our own interests. It's not a question of either humbling ourselves to become servants of Christ or remaining free to do whatever we want without having to answer to anyone or anything. The world simply doesn't work that way. Here is a fundamental problem with the contemporary hue and cry for personal autonomy: it's just not possible. Even if people reject belief in a God to whom they owe obedience, the idea that they are free to rule themselves is an illusion. Human nature does not allow this option, because human beings are not free agents. We have no alternative but to serve some master or other, even if it is the cruel master of our own appetites. A recent *Esquire* profile described rock musician Scott Weiland as "the quintessential junkie rock star." His life story, which featured fabulous wealth, repeated drug addiction, domestic turmoil, and prison time, was titled "The Devil Gives You the First Time for Free."<sup>12</sup>

I was preaching on a Sunday morning in a church that, like so many today, had adopted a very contemporary style of worship. In this congregation, at least on the particular Sunday I was there, "contemporary" meant "rock and roll." There was a definite hard edge to the music the band was playing. At one point in the service, the guy on bass stepped up to the microphone and, in a very creditable impersonation of a rock singer, sang a song I had never heard before. I was absolutely captivated, both by the lyrics and by the power of the music that underscored the song's message. When I got home I found a recording of the song and wrote down the words. It says something about my rather narrow listening habits that I wasn't familiar with it, because it turns out this song is by the great Bob Dylan. It's called, "Gotta Serve Somebody." Whoever you are, sings Dylan, whether rich or poor, high or low, Somebody Special

or no one in particular, “You’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody”—

Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever you may think, this is the truth: everyone has to serve something—or some One. Total freedom, absolute liberation from any power higher than our own wishes and desires, is illusory. So, as Joshua said so long ago, “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15).

But here’s the really interesting thing. The paradox of the gospel is that Christ’s service is perfect freedom. If you will submit to becoming his servant, you will discover that you are truly free for the first time in your life. When we take Christ’s yoke upon us, when we sit down at our bench and accept our identity as his under-rowers, he sets us free—free from our addictions and fears, free from the clamorous demand to prove to ourselves and everybody else that we are worth something. We are set free both *from* and *for*: freed from the tyranny of the devil, freed for the service of Christ. In Christ we find that we are free to be ourselves, the very selves that God meant us to be.

All we have to do is give up what we imagine now to be our “freedom” and to accept his easy yoke. Of course that means our lives will henceforth be devoted to carrying out his will rather than our own. There is just this one thing about being a servant: you do have to *serve*.

I wonder why, as I look at myself and other Christian leaders, it seems like so few of us are actually living as servants. Could it be we don’t know our place?



# 4

## We Are Stewards of God's Mysteries



This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

1 Corinthians 4:1–5

**T**his is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” Here is the way you should picture me and my colleagues, says Paul to the Corinthians. A Christian leader isn’t a big shot, a CEO, a spiritual celebrity, an ecclesiastical power broker. No, we are servants of Christ, under-rowers on the ship that is steered and captained by the Lord. A minister of Jesus Christ is nobody special; there is no reason for any of us to put on airs or lord it over others.

### Stewards . . .

But that is not the whole story. For at the same time Christian ministers are very special people, not necessarily in ourselves but because of the importance of the task that has been entrusted to us. Martin Luther expressed a similar paradox, one that applies to every Christian, in his treatise on “The Freedom of a Christian”:

A Christian man is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian man is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one.<sup>14</sup>

Yes, we are slaves of Christ. But we are also “stewards of God’s mysteries.” Here is another of the apostle Paul’s meaning-laden metaphors for Christian ministry.

The chief servant on an ancient estate, second only to the owner himself, was the steward, the *oikonomos* (from which we get the words *economy* and *economics*). The steward was the overseer of the master’s property, the manager or administrator of the entire estate. This word picture balances the first one, for if the position of an “under-rower” or servant is very humble indeed, that of a steward is extremely valuable and important. As ministers of Christ we are not nothings and nobodies. God has honored us with a high calling and entrusted to us a position of vast responsibility. He has given us meaningful work, in the deepest sense of the term: real work that is also really significant.

### . . . Of the Mysteries of God

What is it, exactly, that we are responsible for as God’s managers? Notice what the apostle says. He doesn’t say that Christ’s ministers are stewards of the church, as though our primary responsibility was to build up a religious institution. He doesn’t say that we are stewards of our resources and wealth, which is the way Christians usually employ the concept of stewardship. He doesn’t say we are stewards of the world or the earth or the environment, though no one would want to deny that all Christians do have a responsibility for earth-keeping. No, what Paul says here, speaking specifically of the role of Christian ministers, is that we are stewards of the *mysteries of God*.

Paul’s use of the term “mystery” is well-known to anyone familiar with his writings. In the biblical sense of the word a mystery is not a “whodunit.” It’s not a crime we have to solve or a puzzle we must figure out. In fact, in the New Testament

a mystery is a truth we never could have learned on our own. It's something that God has to make known—has in fact made known—to us. The great mystery, in the Pauline sense, is the once-hidden but now openly revealed truth about God's plan to save the world through Jesus Christ, creating in the process a new community of the reconciled, comprising people from every race, language, and background. So Paul speaks in various places about “the mystery of [God's] will” which is “to unite all things in [Christ]” (Ephesians 1:9–10), and “the mystery of Christ”—namely “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body” (Ephesians 3:4, 6), and “the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:19), and “God's mystery, which is Christ” (Colossians 2:2; see also 4:3) or “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27), and finally, “the mystery of the faith” (1 Timothy 3:9).

In all these passages that make reference to the “mysteries of God,” it is the same basic message that Paul is thinking of, the gospel that he proclaimed: that God is redeeming from sin and death all those who are united to Christ by faith, and that God is creating in Christ the new, multicultural community of his body, the church. To put it simply, the “mysteries of God” means the gospel, the Good News about Christ's reconciling, all-embracing salvation.

### The Chief Requirement

Now we are told this staggering truth. God has entrusted this mystery, this good news, to our stewardship. We have been given the awesome responsibility of protecting, preserving, and promoting the growth of the gospel, the only way of salvation for the world. And what does that trust demand from us? Well, there's just one absolute requirement for stewards. As the key thing for a servant is obedience, so the supreme need for stewards is *faithfulness*. “It is required of stewards that

they be found trustworthy” (v. 2). This truth is at once both comforting and challenging. As a minister of the gospel, I don’t have to be brilliant or original, I don’t have to be impressive, I don’t have to be perfect, I don’t even have to be successful (as the world defines success). But I do have to be faithful.

Perhaps you recall the character in Jesus’ parable, the man known as the Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1–9). Though Jesus commended him (surprisingly!) for his shrewdness, the larger truth about this fellow was that he was sacked for dishonesty. He used his position of trust to cheat his master by stealing from him—the one unpardonable fault in a steward. A more positive biblical example of stewardship is Joseph. Young Joseph, sold into slavery in Egypt, was soon made steward over the household of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. When this Egyptian officer saw how Joseph managed his affairs, the Bible says, “He left all that he had in Joseph’s charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate” (Genesis 39:6). In the same way our Master ought to be able to entrust his affairs to our management, confident of our honesty and integrity.

So let’s think about what it means to be faithful in our stewardship of the gospel. It seems to me that two things are required of those who would be trustworthy stewards of the mysteries of God.

The first is to be faithful to the gospel message itself, that is, faithful in our doctrine or teaching of New Testament truth. It was said of the early church in Jerusalem that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). I remember hearing the great evangelical leader John Stott once remark in a lecture that if he had to decide whether to accept the latest views of a liberal clergyman on the hot topic of the day or the teaching of the apostle Paul, the choice would not be difficult for him! The opinions of theologians of any era do not carry equal weight with the clear doctrine of the apostles of Jesus Christ. The first obligation of all true ministers of the

gospel is fidelity to the authoritative record of the apostolic teaching, preserved for us in written form in the books of the New Testament.

When Jesus offered to go along with the Roman centurion who had asked him to heal his servant, the soldier quickly demurred. "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority" (Matthew 8:8–9). I love that reply. I want to say the same: I too am a man under authority, the authority of the Word of God. In order to have authority as a minister of Christ you must first be under authority to the Scriptures.

The letters of Paul contain many warnings about false teachers who twist and distort the gospel. The authentic New Testament message is that we are saved by God's grace alone, through faith in Christ crucified alone, and for the purpose of glorifying and thanking God with lives devoted to doing good (Ephesians 2:8–10). But there is a constant tendency to chip away at this bedrock truth, to reshape the message into something more compatible with the spirit of our age.

Numerous cultural forces put pressure on ministers to compromise their fidelity to the apostolic tradition. Materialism, consumerism, individualism, jingoistic patriotism, celebrity worship, and the cult of entertainment all threaten our adherence to authentic Christianity. But it is still theological liberalism that represents the gravest threat to the gospel and the ministry today. The liberal project to redefine Christian doctrine and reinterpret Christian ethics has been going on since the late nineteenth century, and the results are obvious in seminaries, divinity schools, and vast stretches of the church, where a different religion has been substituted for the historic Christian faith. The classic description of this process is still J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, written more than eighty years ago but as accurate and relevant as ever (see endnote 23). Writing in the journal *First Things*, theologian

Philip Turner, formerly dean of the Berkley School of Divinity at Yale, offers a contemporary illustration of the same process. Turner argues that the working theology of contemporary liberalism is all about “radical inclusion,” and points out how different this is from traditional Christianity.

This unofficial doctrine of radical inclusion . . . plays out in two directions. In respect to God, it produces a quasi-deist theology that posits a benevolent God who favors love and justice as inclusion but acts neither to save us from our sins nor to raise us to new life after the pattern of Christ. In respect to human beings, it produces an ethic of tolerant affirmation that carries with it no call to conversion and radical holiness.

The deep division in the church today, Turner asserts, is not due to different opinions on the issues. It is rather the result of a fundamental difference of belief.

This isn't an ethical divide about the rightness or wrongness of homosexuality and same-sex marriage. It's a theological chasm—one that separates those who hold a theology of divine *acceptance* from those who hold a theology of divine *redemption*.<sup>15</sup>

Paul warned the church in Galatia about false teachers who would proclaim a different gospel (Galatians 1:6). He told his young protégé Timothy that “in later times some will depart from the faith” (1 Timothy 4:1), and he charged Timothy solemnly to “preach the word . . . reprove, rebuke and exhort. . . . For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth” (2 Timothy 4:2–4). Ministers who abandon the apostolic message of redemption through the

cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are unfaithful stewards who have betrayed their trust.

Here is a second way in which Christian stewards must be faithful. They must be faithful in striving to lead lives that faithfully reflect the gospel values of the message they proclaim. Modern politicians may argue that their private behavior has no effect on their public service, but such a sorry excuse will not do for the Christian minister. Nobody should expect perfection from any of Christ's servants. They are, after all, jars of clay. But we can expect that what Chaucer said of the faithful parson in *The Canterbury Tales* would be true of every minister of the gospel—

Christ's lore, and his apostles' twelve  
He taught; but first he followed it himself.<sup>16</sup>

Probably the single most important book on the nature and work of the ministry of the Word, at least from a Reformed perspective, is Richard Baxter's *Reformed Pastor*. In it Baxter writes of the need for ministers to pay attention to their lives as well as their work:

Do well as well as say well. Be zealous of good works. Spare not any cost, if it may promote your Master's work. Maintain your innocence and walk without offence. Let your lives condemn sin and persuade men to duty.<sup>17</sup>

So we must be faithful in life as well as faithful in doctrine. It's not enough just to be able to accurately reproduce all the details of New Testament theology in our teaching if we do not also reproduce the details of Christ's life in our living. You can probably think of examples, as can I, of ministers who would never dream of holding—let alone teaching—any unorthodox doctrine but whose personal behavior offers a stark contrast to the Jesus way. All too often we deny by our

actions what we proclaim in our pulpits. Here is another of Paul's admonitions to Timothy:

But as for you, O man of God, flee these [sins]. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 6:11–14

But faithfulness of life for ministers means more than just pursuing the “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). It also means working hard at our job, improving our skills, pursuing our calling with discipline and diligence. In 2005 Lance Armstrong won an unprecedented seventh consecutive Tour d’France. What every commentator noted about Armstrong was not just the natural ability or competitive instincts that enabled him to excel, but his relentless pursuit of excellence and unparalleled commitment to hard training. It was Armstrong’s drive, his focused determination to be a champion, that was most responsible for his incredible performance. We see the same thing in every field of human endeavor, not only athletics, but business, academics, politics, medicine, science, and the arts. Why should we expect the ministry to be any different, as though doing just enough to get by there is good enough? Indeed, if people can sacrifice comfort and ease to win a laurel wreath or championship ring,<sup>18</sup> if they can work hard to acquire basic skills and then train harder to hone them, if they can push themselves for long hours over many years to serve their patients or clients or customers or constituents, why can’t

ministers of the Word do the same? Considering what's at stake, why can't we do more?

## Judgment

As stewards of the mysteries of God, ministers of the gospel have a heavy responsibility to bear, and we will be held accountable for our faithfulness. But I don't think the first question at this point should be, "Hmmm, I wonder how well my pastor (or my colleague) is measuring up. Let's critique him." Grading ministers—often with failing marks—is one of the church's oldest customs. This is hardly a phenomenon confined to the New Testament era; it remains the common experience of every minister I have ever heard of. From the apostle Paul to the most recent seminary graduate, pastors are constantly being judged by those whom they serve. Their preaching is criticized, their leadership ability, their pastoral care, their work habits, their social life, their families, their personal appearance—in short, everything pastors are and do becomes the subject of judgment.

Some judgments don't really matter, while others matter a very great deal. And the apostle speaks to this point as well in the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians. Everything that Paul has been saying in this passage is in one way or another his response to the varied criticism that has been leveled against him in the church of Corinth. It is in this context that Paul writes a verse I have found comforting on occasion. Speaking as a pastor to a congregation that had been very harsh in its assessment of him, Paul says, "It is a very small thing that I should be judged by you" (v. 3).

Paul can dismiss the adverse opinions the Corinthians had of him for two reasons. First, because he has examined his own conscience and is honestly convinced that their criticisms of him are unwarranted: "I am not aware of anything against myself"

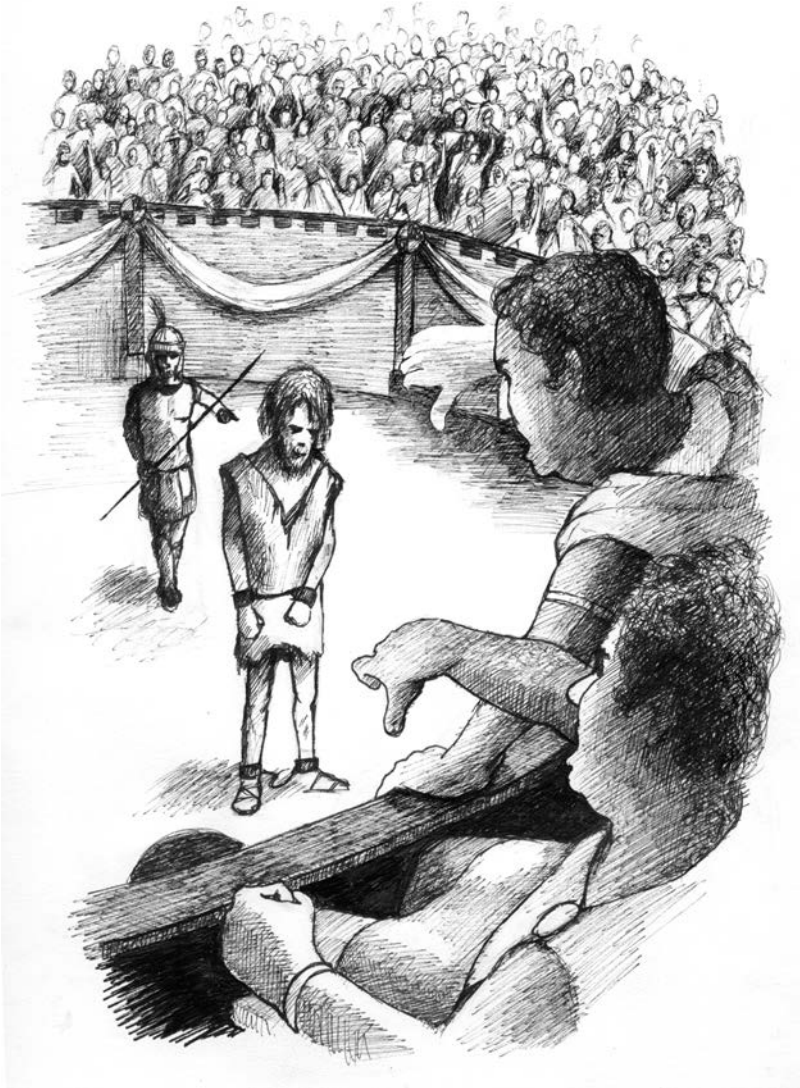
(v. 4). But more importantly, the Corinthians' criticism is a small thing to Paul because human judgments don't count for very much in the end. None of the adverse judgments that are made against us ultimately matter, not even those criticisms that tend to be the harshest of all—the ones we level against ourselves—in view of the final judgment that lies ahead of us all. "I care very little," says the apostle, "if I am judged by you or any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself . . . but that does not make me innocent" (vv. 3–4 TNIV).

The fact that as ministers we may be feeling good about ourselves despite some occasional bad-mouthing doesn't let us off the hook. For there is one Critic whose opinion *does* matter, and we must all answer to him. "It is the Lord who judges me" (v. 4). One day our ministries will be evaluated by the Lord himself. When we appear before him he will not ask how famous we were, or how wealthy, or how successful, or how popular. He will not measure the size of our church or the budget of our ministry. He will only ask, "Were you faithful with the gospel treasure I entrusted to you?" And we will have to answer him. You will recall that the unfaithful man in Jesus' parable of the talents was the one who didn't try to do anything with the great treasure his Lord had entrusted to him, who just buried it in the ground instead of investing everything he was and had to multiply it for the sake of the kingdom (Matthew 25:14–30).

It's a game we play all the time. Who's the greatest evangelist in the world? Who's the best preacher in the city? Who's the most faithful Christian in our church? Who knows? Don't judge too quickly, Paul counsels, "before the time, before the Lord comes" (v. 5). Only God knows the full truth, the God "who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart" (v. 5). On that day of full disclosure only one thing will matter to any of us, and that is to hear him say, "Well done, good and *faithful* servant" (Matthew 25:21).

5

We Are the Scum of the Earth



Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you! For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

1 Corinthians 4:8–13 TNIV

**A**mong all the other troubles in the Corinthian church—and the place was alive with moral failure and doctrinal error—Paul had to deal with the problem of personal criticism. It is hard for us to imagine that there were those in the early church who had the audacity to pass judgment on the great apostle to the Gentiles, but such was the case. Trying to figure out everything the Corinthians had been saying about Paul is a bit like trying to reconstruct all the juicy details of an intriguing phone conversation when you can only eavesdrop on one side of it. So, reading between the lines of 1 Corinthians—to vary the figure of speech—we can compile a list of the complaints the Christians of that city felt free to express toward their founding pastor.

They said Paul was unimpressive and uninspiring, that he was no real apostle. They compared him unfavorably with Apollos, who apparently demonstrated many of the qualities of wisdom, eloquence, and power that Paul lacked. Apollos would have qualified for one of contemporary evangelicalism's favorite adjectives: *dynamic*. Paul, by contrast, seemed to the Corinthians to be a pretty poor excuse for a Christian leader. He was physically unimposing, oratorically unimpressive, materially poor, supporting himself by manual labor (in a culture that despised such work as fit only for slaves), and continually

being knocked about by the authorities, as happened in city after city. On top of everything else, the Corinthians seem to have been irritated by the rebukes Paul delivered to them in urging them to address the immoral behavior of some of their members.

### The Theology of the Cross vs. the Theology of Glory

The reason the church in Corinth treated Paul with such disdain had to do in large part with their theological views. Lest we think that theology is basically irrelevant to a church's life and health, consider the way bad doctrine led the Corinthians into bad practice. There are a number of tensions that must be held together in a mature understanding of the Christian faith. There is, for example, the tension between being in the world but not of it. There's the tension between the flesh and the Spirit, that is, between our old sinful nature and the new life that comes with the new birth. And there is the tension between what theologians call "the already and the not yet," a tension produced by the time gap between Christ's first advent and his second one. Because Jesus Christ has already invaded our world on a mission to save, we already have life and hope and power through faith in him. But we do not yet experience these things in their fullness. We still fall sick, grow old, and die. We still sin, lacking the strength to consistently resist temptation. We still wait for the full enjoyment of the not-yet-arrived final victory of God. That will only be experienced at the consummation of all things with the fulfillment of what Paul calls "our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13).

It is hard to keep the tension between the *already* and the *not yet* in balance in the Christian life. Too much emphasis on the *not yet* leads to a defeatist attitude and a joyless, powerless, fruitless faith. But the Corinthians had fallen into the opposite

error. They overemphasized the *already*. To put it in rather technical theological terms, they suffered from an overly realized eschatology. The Christians in Corinth had come to adopt a triumphalist version of Christianity, one which taught that believers have already experienced total spiritual victory, up to and even including the final resurrection from the dead—an event which they interpreted in a purely spiritual sense.

Paul responds to this Corinthian triumphalism with something approaching sarcasm. In an eloquent passage at the end of 1 Corinthians 4 he speaks of the shame and weakness and suffering that are the lot of the true apostle, and not of the true apostle only but also of all those ministers who truly follow Jesus Christ.

The apostolic gospel offers what Luther called “a theology of the cross,” as opposed to the triumphalist “theology of glory” that many Christians find irresistible. It is true that there is great glory in store for all who belong to Jesus Christ. It is true that incalculable riches are ours in Christ. But our full enjoyment of this glory must wait for our Lord’s glorious return. Meanwhile, the cross comes before the crown, and suffering with and for our Master is the common lot of all faithful believers. It should come as no surprise to the followers of a Messiah who was mocked, scourged, and finally crucified by the powers that be that this world is no friend to grace and that total victory over sin and suffering is not to be ours until the consummation in the world to come.

## The Potato Peelings of the World

In their enthusiasm for spiritual power and “victorious living,” the Corinthians had forgotten this basic truth. They were denying the theology of the cross. The apostle Paul enumerates their mistakes here in 1 Corinthians 4:8. *You have all you want*: That is, you think you already have everything that God

has to offer here and now, that there's nothing more that you must wait for until the kingdom comes in its fullness and glory on the day of the Lord. *Already you have become rich:* You think you are rich, not in the sense that every Christian is (i.e., rich in grace and mercy), but you want to be rich in worldly terms, rich in power, wealth, and pleasure. *You have begun to reign:* You think you can just claim victory over all adverse circumstances and that there is no need to endure sufferings and setbacks here and now. I wish you did reign, the apostle adds sarcastically—then maybe you could share some of your power with me!

Well, Paul says, you're wrong on every point. He then goes on to describe himself in terms of the greatest contrast in order to offer a true picture of the life of the servant of Christ here and now in this world. What is the status of Christian ministers serving in "the church under the cross" (the phrase used by Protestants in the Netherlands to describe their life under Spanish occupation during the Reformation)?

Paul begins with an image drawn from the arena. The Roman world, like ours, went in for sex and violence in their choice of entertainment. Their spectator sports included the gruesome spectacle of gladiator combats. Fights would be staged between men, between animals, and between men and animals. Usually there would be a carefully arranged, escalating level of bloodshed, climaxing in a killing or two at the end of the show. So the opening fights might last only until first blood was drawn, but the last ones would go straight on to the death. Or, if no gladiators were to be killed in a given entertainment (after all, gladiators were valuable property), then the grand finale might be the spectacle of feeding some condemned prisoners to the lions. These miserable wretches would be brought into the arena last of all, for the whole crowd to jeer at.

That is who we are, says Paul. "God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to

die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe” (v. 9 TNIV). Everyone seems to get in on the sport of mistreating and mocking the apostles of Jesus Christ. And then Paul follows with a whole list of adjectives, alternating blows that hammer out his theology of the cross in contrast to the Corinthians’ theology of glory: you are wise, we are fools; you are strong, we are weak; you are honored, we are shamed . . . hungry . . . thirsty . . . ragged . . . abused . . . homeless. This is an astonishing catalog, and all the more startling for us to hear in a context like our own society today, where so many celebrity ministers are living lives of scandalous luxury and conspicuous consumption.

And Paul isn’t finished yet. He has one more metaphor for Christian ministry—the most powerful and repulsive of all. “We have become the scum of the earth,” he says, “the garbage of the world—right up to this moment” (v. 13 TNIV). As Eugene Peterson memorably puts it in *The Message*, we ministers are the “potato peelings from the culture’s kitchen.” To society’s elite, Christ’s servants are like the garbage you scrape off your plate and wash down the disposal—unwanted, disgusting; something from which sophisticated and refined folks avert their eyes; people at whose approach those with sensitive tastes hold their noses.

Could anything point more clearly to the life of poverty, suffering, and shame that true servants of Christ must endure?

Does anything contrast more starkly with my own comfortable, respectable, middle-class existence?

## Who Needs It?

Now if this is what life was really like for the apostle Paul in his day and what life is like for many Christians in many parts of the world in this day, I have one simple question: why would anyone in their right mind want to be a Christian? If

this is how the apostles were treated, why would you want to be a Christian at all, let alone a minister of the gospel? Paul doesn't seem to offer a very compelling case for embracing a life of service to Christ.

But there is just this one thing. You see, all along Paul has been describing things from the world's point of view. This is how the ungodly culture sees us, he says, this is how Christ's faithful servants are viewed by the world (and even sometimes by the church, when it has its theology skewed).

But there is another point of view that must be taken into account. A bit earlier Paul had written, "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God" (v. 5).

In the end, human judgments really don't matter. Only God's assessment matters. What he condemns will be destroyed, and what he commends will be blessed. And we may be certain that the Lord has a radically different view of the ministry than the world does. On the day of judgment God will expose the follies and pretensions and false estimates of the godless, and "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the LORD shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2:4 KJV). Then the decision of the One who endured the cross, despising the shame, for the sake of the joy and the glory that was before him will finally and forever be publicly vindicated. Then the value and worth in God's eyes of every person who was willing to join his Son in accepting the abuse and scorn of the world will be made clear to the whole creation.

The book of Hebrews ends with a poignant encouragement. Drawing one last time on the symbolism of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the writer reminds his readers that the bodies of the animals whose blood was sprinkled on altar and ark in the wilderness tabernacle had to be taken outside the camp to be burned. As with every other element of this

divinely ordered worship, this detail also pointed to Christ. “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12). Even the fact that the hill of Golgotha was located outside the city gate of Jerusalem had symbolic significance, and a spiritual application. “Therefore,” the writer to the Hebrews urges his readers, “let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured” (13:13).

We all know the story of Moses—the baby in the basket, raised by Pharaoh’s daughter, forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the burning bush, the exodus, Mt. Sinai, forty more years of wandering, a vision of glory from Pisgah. What we don’t always notice is that Moses’ whole life and career turned upon a single decision he made one fateful day, the day he decided to get into a fight with an Egyptian slave driver. That looks to us like the act of an impulsive man, and we wonder whether Moses was justified in resorting to violence. But the biblical writer sees it as an eternally significant choice of faith.

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

Hebrews 11:24–26

And if we, by faith, make the same choice, then one day our decision to join Moses, and Paul, and every other faithful minister in accepting the reproach of Christ will also be rewarded.



# 6

## We Are the Aroma of Christ



When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

2 Corinthians 2:12–16

**I**n the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians (vv. 15–22) we find yet another criticism that has been leveled against the apostle Paul by some members of the church in Corinth. Apparently Paul had sent word to the Corinthians that he planned to visit them soon and then later changed his mind and canceled the trip. As a result a new wave of accusations broke out against him. To the lengthy catalog of complaints recorded by the church in Corinth—that Paul was weak, unimpressive, working class, and all the rest—was added the charge that he was vacillating. The apostle was unreliable, they were saying. You couldn’t trust Paul to keep his word; his yes meant “no” and his no meant “yes.”

### Self-defense

Paul responds to this charge—which could have undermined people’s confidence in the trustworthiness of everything Paul said—in two ways. First, he explains his reason for canceling the visit to Corinth. “But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. . . . For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you” (2 Corinthians 1:23; 2:1). Paul does not mention or

describe this “painful visit” anywhere else. We presume that it was a quick trip from Ephesus to Corinth that Paul made at some point after he wrote 1 Corinthians (from Ephesus) and prior to his writing 2 Corinthians (from Macedonia). We also can assume that the visit was the apostle’s attempt to straighten out in person the moral and doctrinal problems he had addressed in his first epistle, and furthermore, that he was not very successful. That’s why the visit was painful (for him? for them? probably for everyone concerned!). So Paul decided to give the Corinthian Christians a little more time to get their act together.

The second way Paul responds to the accusation of being wishy-washy is to describe his recent actions and movements in some detail. If he did not visit Corinth, where did he go? Well, he went to a place called Troas, a seaport on the coast of Asia Minor just south of the site of ancient Troy and opposite Macedonia in northern Greece. He went there for the same reason he went anywhere: to preach the gospel. And he enjoyed great success there; “a door was opened for me in the Lord,” he writes (v. 12). But Paul also had another reason for going to Troas. When the apostle decided not to visit Corinth himself, he had apparently sent his friend and co-worker Titus there to find out the condition of the church. Paul was hoping to meet Titus in Troas and hear his report on the spiritual state of the Corinthians.

You can imagine Paul’s anxiety. Had the church in Corinth turned against him completely? Were they embracing the heresies of the false teachers who had sprung up in Paul’s absence? Did they choose to go on ignoring his apostolic counsel and advice? Were they abandoning Christian holiness in order to indulge sexual immorality? Later on in 2 Corinthians Paul offers a rare glimpse into the sufferings he had endured throughout his career as a missionary and church planter (2 Corinthians 11:23–29). It is a remarkable catalog of hardship and torture: beatings, stoning, shipwreck, danger on land and sea, toil,

sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, and cold. But at the end, as if to say, “This is the worst thing of all,” the apostle adds, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches” (v. 28). Paul was anxious about the Corinthian church, but he had no way of knowing what was happening there. He didn’t find Titus in Troas, and there was no fresh news there from Corinth.

Poor Paul! No telephones, no postal service, no email! (How did the church ever survive without email?) What could Paul do? He could do what in fact he did do. He caught a ship for Greece in search of Titus and tidings of the Corinthian situation. “My spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia” (2 Corinthians 2:13).

### **But Thanks Be to God**

At this point there’s a very abrupt change in the tone and atmosphere of the second chapter of 2 Corinthians, where Paul has been recounting this whole story. In the middle of all the worry and frustration we can read into Paul’s account of his movements—the anxious days of waiting in Ephesus; more worry on the road to Troas; the failure to hear news from or about Titus, which robbed Paul of the joy of his successful ministry there; finally the sea voyage to Macedonia—there comes an unexpected outburst of praise. Like a single shaft of sunlight suddenly piercing through a gloomy overcast, Paul breaks out into doxology: “But thanks be to God!” (v. 14).

What happened? Well, one thing that happened, as we learn later on in 2 Corinthians, is that Paul did meet Titus in Macedonia and heard from him the good news that the Corinthians had responded to Paul’s counsel and teaching. “For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without

and fear within. But God . . . comforted us by the coming of Titus . . . as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me” (2 Corinthians 7:5–7).

## A Triumphal Procession

Another reason Paul was overcome with thanks by the news he received from Titus was because it reminded him that the success of the gospel was ultimately not his responsibility. Christian ministry is, as they say nowadays, a God-thing. We do our best to preach, teach, and counsel, but in the end, it is the Lord who must build and preserve his church. And he will. There is no doubt about the ultimate success of this work. “This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes” (Psalm 118:23).

Paul expresses his confidence in this great truth by employing one of his most complex and interesting images for the nature and work of Christian ministers: “But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:14–16).

The picture Paul sketches here was based on a real-life experience in ancient Rome. When a Roman general won a new province for the empire, the Senate might award him its highest public honor, a “Triumph.” William Barclay has a colorful and detailed description of all that was involved in a Roman Triumph.

The highest honour which could be given to a victorious Roman general was a Triumph. . . . In an actual Triumph

the procession of the victorious general marched through the streets of Rome to the Capitol in the following order. First, there came the state officials and the senate. Then there came the trumpeters. Then there were carried the spoils taken from the conquered land. . . . Then there walked the wretched captives, the enemy princes, leaders and generals in chains, shortly to be flung into prison and in all probability almost immediately to be executed. Then there came the lictors bearing their rods, followed by the musicians with their lyres. Then there came the priests swinging their censers with the sweet-smelling incense burning in them. And then there came the general himself. He stood in a chariot drawn by four horses. He was clad in a purple tunic embroidered with golden palm leaves, and over it a purple toga marked out with golden stars. In his hand he held an ivory sceptre with the Roman eagle at the top of it, and over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter. After him there rode his family, and finally there came the army wearing all their decorations and shouting *Io triumphe!* their cry of triumph. . . . That is the picture that is in Paul's mind. He sees the conquering Christ marching in triumph throughout the world, and himself in that conquering train.<sup>19</sup>

The progress of the gospel throughout the world is like a gigantic victory parade led by Christ himself. And we are part of it! We are marching with the Lord Jesus to the ends of the earth in triumph. He's the one who wins the victory, the conqueror who receives all the glory, but we are right there too as part of the procession. In one sense we are his vanquished prisoners, those whom Christ has taken captive, conquered not by force of arms but by his great love, with the result for us being not death but life, not bondage but freedom. In another sense we are Christ's loyal soldiers, serving to spread the news of his victory and the offer of its blessings to all peoples everywhere.

## The Aroma of Christ

The thing that Paul most dwells upon in developing this extended image of a Roman Triumph is the sense of smell. He keeps coming back to the odors of the experience. Through us Christ “spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.” “We are the aroma of Christ to God.” We are the “fragrance from death to death” or “from life to life” to those who are either perishing or being saved (vv. 14–16). What does the apostle mean by all these references? What’s up with all those smells?

One reason Paul focuses on this aspect of the image probably is because the smells must have been overwhelming to anyone viewing or participating in an actual Roman Triumph. We can read about such a spectacle and perhaps even try to picture something of what it must have looked like. But we can’t really imagine the odors and aromas that would have filled the streets of Rome—not only from all those marching men and animals or the vast crowds of spectators, but all along the route, all over the city, from the clouds of smoke that would be rising from burning incense and sacrificial offerings.

But there is more to it than that. Paul is using certain characteristics of our sense of smell to convey metaphorically some truths about the gospel ministry and its effects. Researchers have observed, for example, that smell is the one of our five senses most closely linked to memory. Smell is the most *evocative* of our senses. It can most readily call to mind places or persons or experiences from the past.

I was sitting on an airplane once, and the man next to me struck up a conversation. He asked me what I did, and when I told him I was a minister he responded that he was a Presbyterian. With our mutual *bona fides* thus established, the conversation expanded. Where was I headed? I was headed to preach in a church in Florida (a Presbyterian church!). Great! What was I going to preach on? Well, as it turns out, I was

going to preach on this kind of complicated passage from 2 Corinthians 2:12–16. What was I going to say? By now I was starting to warm to my subject, and it's possible that I may have gone into a little too much detail about the contents of the sermon. But when I began to explain about how smell can so readily trigger memories, my seatmate's eyes lit up in recognition, and he immediately exclaimed, "Aqua Net!" "Aqua Net?" I responded. "Yes, Aqua Net," he said. "When we were first married that was the brand of hair spray my wife used, and to this day whenever I catch a whiff of it I see my bride again." That's exactly it—smell is evocative.

And what about us? We are, says the apostle, the aroma of *Christ to God*. Let that amazing thought sink in for a moment. When the Father sees us and the effect the gospel has had on our lives, he catches a scent of his beloved Son. And God is well pleased. As those who are accepted in the Beloved, we are not only clothed in Christ's righteousness, we are perfumed with the sweet scent of his aroma. This is what makes us so pleasing to God. When God looks at us he sees us—and smells us—not as we are in ourselves but as we are in Christ.<sup>20</sup>

## The Smell of Life and Death

But the gospel that is at work in and through us not only affects God; it affects the world as well. In addition to being the most evocative of our senses, smell is also the most *reactive* sense. It's not just tied most closely to memory, it is also linked directly to our digestive systems. No other sense produces such a strong reaction in us, either positive or negative. As you well know, nothing can make your mouth water like the right smell, and nothing can turn your stomach faster than the wrong one. And amazingly, sometimes the same smell can do both, depending on time, place, and circumstances. Just think about how differently you respond to the dinnertime smells

wafting out of the kitchen when you're down with the flu as opposed to when you walk in the house ravenously hungry after a long, hard day.

That's the idea Paul is getting at when he says that the ministry of the gospel is the smell of life to those who are being saved and of death to those who are perishing. The message of the cross, of Christ crucified for the sake of lost sinners, is proclaimed throughout the world. Some hear it and are attracted by it. They turn to Christ in faith and are saved. To them the gospel is the smell of life: of fresh-baked bread, of new-mown grass, of coffee brewing in the morning, of a baby just out of its bath, freshly powdered and diapered. Such people love the gospel and inhale it.

But to others this very same Good News smells like death, like filth, like garbage, like a rotting corpse. They are repulsed by the gospel message. They find it disgusting. Such folk laugh at the gospel. They mock those who believe it and often persecute those who serve it.

Think of the two men who died next to Jesus. Their crosses flanked his; each saw and heard exactly the same things that Good Friday on Golgotha. One criminal joined in the crowd's mockery; the other turned to Jesus in prayer and faith. One perished; the other received eternal life. Those are the only two destinies open to any human being. When the apostle speaks of those who are perishing and those who are being saved, he encompasses the whole human race in these two—and only these two—categories. There is no third alternative. And the determining factor for which category you or I will be in is our response of faith or unbelief to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## Two Questions

All of this prompts me to ask myself two questions. The first is this: how does Jesus Christ smell to me? It's significant

that Paul uses a present continuous tense when he refers to the life and death issue of our response to the message of the cross. That is, he speaks of those who “are perishing” and those who “are being saved.” In other words, these processes are still going on. Neither the salvation nor the destruction have been completed; the respective final destinations have not yet been reached. This suggests that for those who are perishing, it’s still not too late to become those who are being saved. But those of us who are being saved are not yet finished either. Saving faith is not a once-upon-a-time decision to accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is a living union with him. Today, and every day, I must be drawn to Christ by the smell of life, I must renew my commitment to him, I must savor him more deeply. Constant, growing love for Jesus Christ is not only the key to saving faith, it is the key to faithful ministry. When the risen Jesus restored Peter to his apostolic office following Peter’s denial, he did so with a simple question asked three time over: “Do you love me?” One of the greatest dangers of the ministry is to allow our own love for Jesus Christ to grow cold and our faith to become cynical as we turn the service of holy things into “church work.” “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed” (1 Corinthians 16:22). The antidote to this coldness of heart is to be drawn again and again to him who is our Treasure, our Marrow and Fatness, our Kingdom. “Oh, taste [and smell!] and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him” (Psalm 34:8). Here is Richard Baxter one more time:

Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish, while you call upon others to take heed of perishing; and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare their food. . . . Many a tailor goes in rags, that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes. . . . Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you *be* that which you persuade them daily to believe;

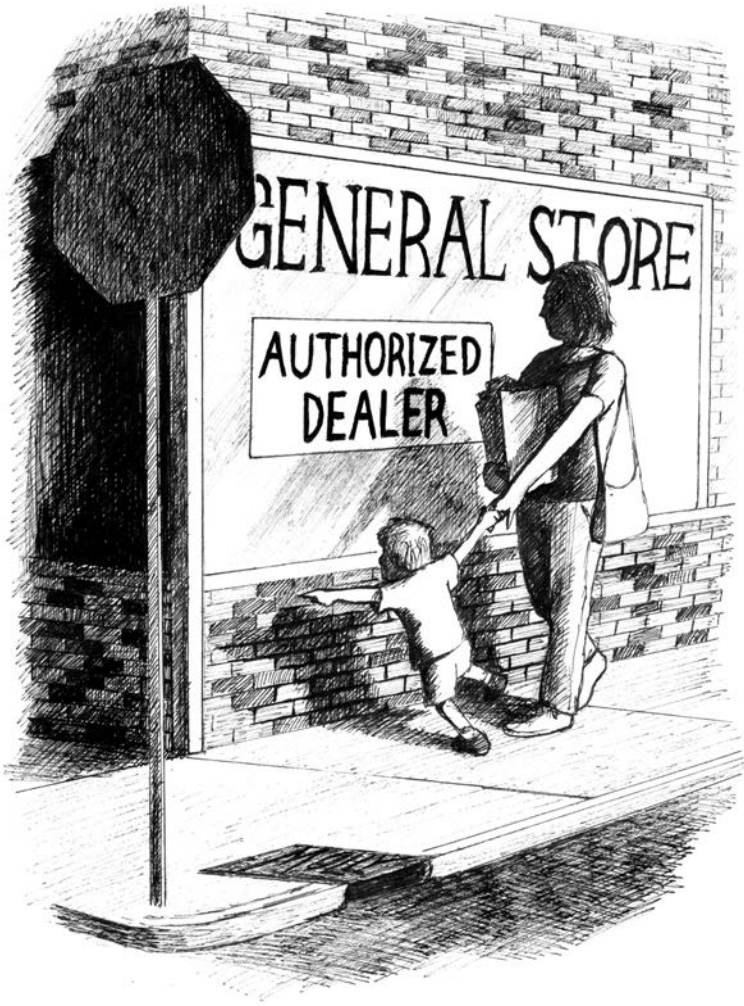
and have heartily entertained that Christ and Spirit which you offer unto others.<sup>21</sup>

Now the second question: how does my life smell to others? People's eternal destiny will be forever determined by their response to the person and work of Christ, to the promises and demands Jesus Christ makes. But it is very difficult for anyone to separate such a personal message from the personal character of the messenger who delivers it. The fact is, Paul does not say here that *the gospel* is the smell of life or death to the saved and the perishing; he says that *we* are.

It is one thing for someone to consider the claims of Christ and reject them, or to find the message of the cross foolish or offensive. That person has made his or her choice. But what if people are so turned off by what they see in the lives of Christ's servants that they never pay serious attention to Christ himself? What if what we are—our hypocrisy, our prejudice, our indifference, our insensitivity—speaks so loudly people can't hear what we are saying when we preach? Wouldn't that make us at least partly responsible for their perishing?

No wonder Paul asks, "Who is sufficient for these things?" (v. 16). May God give us grace to match the life-giving message of the gospel with lives that are equally aromatic and appealing.

We Are God's  
Commissioned Agents



For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

2 Corinthians 2:17

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.

2 Corinthians 4:1-2

**I**n 2 Corinthians 2:15–16 the apostle Paul has just been describing himself and his fellow ministers of the gospel as the fragrance of Christ in the world. Christian preachers and their message are the aroma of life to those who hear and believe the gospel, who turn to Jesus Christ in faith and receive salvation. And at the same time they are the smell of death, the harbinger of destruction, to those who reject Christ. “Who is sufficient for these things?” Paul concludes (2 Corinthians 2:16). Indeed, who could possibly feel adequate, knowing that how people respond to the message of the cross that we proclaim to them will determine their eternal destiny? The ministry of the gospel is a serious business, as serious as life and death.

And Paul takes it seriously. “For we are not,” he goes on to write, “like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2:17). This is what genuine ministers of Jesus Christ are: not peddlers of God’s Word, but men and women of sincerity, God’s commissioned agents, who speak truthfully, openly, sincerely, as those laboring under the very eye of the Lord.

## Peddlers of the Word

There are two fine metaphors in this brief statement in 2 Corinthians 2:17 by which Paul describes the character and work of Christian ministry. One is negative, the other positive. We are not peddlers of the Word, says the apostle; rather, we are duly commissioned and authorized by God himself to share the gospel with the world.

A few months back I was walking through a marketplace in Khartoum, the capital of Sudan. The streets were crowded and dusty, the sidewalks lined with little booths and shops selling all sorts of things: food, clothes, shoes, household items, toys, and trinkets—in other words, peddlers' goods. As I passed down the street I heard a voice call out to me, "Hey, white man!" It was pretty clear what the fellow thought. I was obviously foreign. I didn't belong there, which meant I could be assumed to be gullible, naive, a pigeon ripe for the plucking. Peddlers—whether they are shady salesmen in America or street vendors in Khartoum—are the same the world over. Without wishing to malign any individual's character, let's just say that peddlers have a well-deserved reputation for sharp practice. You would be ill-advised to assume that the merchandise a peddler offers you is 100 percent genuine or that the price quoted is always fair. Peddlers have a well-known tendency to prey upon the innocent, to cheat their customers, to play fast and loose with the truth. This is a universal trait of human nature, true in every time and place. So much so it even gave rise to a proverb that goes all the way back to ancient Rome: *Caveat emptor*; "Let the buyer beware."

Well, this is not what we ministers of the gospel are, says the apostle. We are *not* peddlers of the Word of God. Paul develops this negative picture of ministry with a further statement in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians: "We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word" (v. 2). One of the disgraceful

ways a peddler cheats customers is by what's called the "bait and switch," where the valuable item shown to the customer is replaced with a phony, cheaper substitute after the sale has been agreed to. That can literally be an "underhanded" trick, if the switch is made by sleight of hand.

Another common form of cheating involves adulterating the product on sale. When Paul states that authentic ministers of Christ "refuse to practice cunning or tamper with" the gospel, he uses a word that referred to the practice of watering down wine after it had been sold to an unsuspecting customer. A friend of mine who came originally from a Middle Eastern country always picks through the baskets of fruit that he buys, because the street vendors where he grew up were in the habit of hiding rotten fruit under an appealing-looking top layer. That's what "tampering with" the product means. And none of these cunning practices is worthy of the authentic Christian ministry.

"We are not, *like so many*, peddlers of God's word." In our day, as in the apostle's, there are many who preach the gospel in a dishonest, underhanded fashion. Think of the proponents of the prosperity gospel, for example, who proclaim that if you only have enough faith or give enough money, you will automatically receive health and wealth in return—as if the followers of a suffering, crucified Savior could expect nothing but pleasure and comfort in this life. There are churches who train their adherents to chant prayers in unison—"I claim the blessing!" "I *will not* be poor!" "I'm going to be rich today!"—as if prayer in the name of Jesus were a success mantra, as if faith in Christ were some sort of business transaction. The Bible does not teach that an all-wise God is obliged to give to his believing children whatever they happen to ask for if only they shout long and loud enough. That is not biblical faith; it's Baal worship. Or consider the bait and switch tactics of preachers who offer what sounds like a gospel of grace but enforce a legalistic religion of rules-keeping and insist that people follow

the customs and traditions of their little group down to a *T* in order to be considered “real Christians.” Or think of the adulteration of the historic Christian faith by so many today who no longer believe the truth of the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ but who nevertheless lack the integrity to leave the Christian church and its ministry.

Recently a retired bishop from a mainline denomination came to the city where I live and preached in one of the prominent churches here. The speech was reported in our local newspaper, and the article featured a picture of the bishop standing in the pulpit wearing an embroidered robe decorated with a cross and dove. But despite the traditional Christian symbols, the bishop’s message was sharply at odds with Christian teaching. He used the occasion to attack basic Christian beliefs, doctrines such as the deity of Christ, Jesus’ virgin birth, and his physical resurrection from the dead. The Bible is not the Word *of* God, the bishop confidently asserted, it is merely words *about* God; Christians should not worship Jesus, they should simply follow him. And the bishop presented his message as a courageous championing of the authentic gospel, a bold declaration of true Christianity, as opposed to the outmoded mythology of all those benighted fundamentalists who are threatening to take over the church.<sup>22</sup>

In fact, this liberal message of a merely human, exemplary Jesus is nothing but the watered-down, counterfeit theology that has dominated so-called “progressive” thought for the past 150 years. It is Unitarianism masquerading as Christian faith. Such theological posturing may have been cutting edge in the 1800s, but today it is merely a tired-out, dishonest, underhanded sort of tampering with the Word of God. The message of liberal Christianity is an adulteration of the apostolic tradition, and those who preach it are peddling a counterfeit gospel.<sup>23</sup>

## Authorized Dealers

If we join the apostle Paul in renouncing all these disgraceful ways of preaching the gospel, what should we practice in their place? If we are not, like so many, peddlers of the Word, what then are we? To grasp Paul's answer, picture another kind of salesperson. Imagine you are walking or driving down the street and you see a sign in a storefront window. It is the brand name and logo of a well-known, reputable company: *Sony*, it says . . . *Phillips* . . . *Apple*. You look more closely and see a little trademark symbol by the name, and then down below the words *Authorized Dealer*. Immediately you know a great deal about this store, its products, and its sales staff. You know that the goods being sold there are going to be genuine and that the company and the dealer will both stand behind their product. You know that the prices are probably accurate and fair. You know that the person selling to you is going to know what he or she is talking about. You will expect certain standards of service, both during and after the sale. You've come, after all, to an authorized dealer, and if what you buy costs a little more, you know that you will receive value for your money.

This is who we are as servants of Jesus Christ and ministers of his gospel. We are not peddlers of the Word, says Paul, we are "commissioned by God" (2 Corinthians 2:17). We have "this ministry by the mercy of God," as he puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:1. God has commissioned us to serve him in this way; God himself has given us our ministry. The apostles—and all those who follow faithfully in their footsteps and proclaim with integrity the same message they preached and taught—are authorized dealers of the gospel. In contrast to all the trickery and dishonesty of those who peddle the Word of God, God's commissioned agents preach and teach the biblical message with integrity. Having renounced all underhanded methods and tricks and having refused to practice cunning or to tam-

per with God's Word, this is how we proceed, declares the apostle Paul: "By the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Corinthians 4:2).

Look at the methodology Paul describes here. An authentic ministry of the Word of God proceeds by the open statement of the truth. Disdaining gimmicks or sensationalism, not trying to impress anybody with big words or awe them with rhetorical power, not shouting at people or bullying them, not trying to play on people's emotions, not manipulating them in any way or fashion, the apostle simply and openly told his listeners the truth: the truth about God, the truth about sin, the truth about Jesus and the cross, the truth about grace, faith, gratitude, obedience, and holiness. Like witnesses in a court of law, Christ's ministers must swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Notice also the target of Paul's preaching. It isn't only the mind, as if preaching were merely an intellectual exercise. It isn't only the heart, as if the preacher's aim is to move the audience to tears or give them a good belly laugh. The apostle Paul aimed at the conscience of his listeners, because the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel is not just to make us feel something or think something or buy something. It is to make us believe something and then live differently as a result of our faith.

So this is how God's commissioned agents share the Word of God with the world.

We don't take God's Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap. We stand in Christ's presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can. . . . We refuse to wear masks and play games. We don't maneuver and manipulate behind the scenes. And we don't twist God's Word to suit ourselves. Rather, we keep everything we do

and say out in the open, the whole truth on display, so that those who want to can see and judge for themselves in the presence of God.

2 Corinthians 2:17; 4:2 *The Message*

One last, important question: how can those who are looking for a church to join and who want to be sure of finding the real thing go about finding an “authorized dealer” of the Christian faith? How can you tell whether any given minister is a duly commissioned agent of Christ or the counterfeit peddler of a false gospel? Unfortunately, it is no longer possible just to look for the logo in the window (or, in this case, on the church signboard). For one thing, so many churches today are generic; you can't tell anything about them from their names. For another, a lot of the old “name-brand” churches have drifted away from apostolic Christianity and no longer preach or teach it.

Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican churches all base their claims to authenticity on what they call “apostolic succession.” The idea is that Jesus' apostles directly ordained leaders (bishops) as their successors, who, in turn, ordained others, and so on down in an unbroken chain to the present. In order to be considered an authentic minister, one has to have received ordination at the hands of a bishop in this apostolic line of succession. The problem with this view, apart from the fact that it rests on rather shaky historical ground (at least in the first few generations of church history), is that it does not work in practice. This “apostolic succession” has not always preserved the apostolic teaching in the churches that boast it. Witness the moral corruption and doctrinal error in the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation or the views on sexual ethics that dominate the U.S. Episcopal Church today.

The true successors of Christ's apostles are those ministers who preach and teach the same apostolic gospel they did. Like Paul, such men and women "have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations" (Romans 1:5). In order to identify such ministers, you must first know New Testament doctrine yourself and then measure what you hear and read against that standard. Billy Graham once told the story of an occasion where his wife Ruth happened to sit next to an officer from Scotland Yard whose job was identifying counterfeit currency. "How interesting! You must spend a lot of time studying funny money," Ruth Graham said. "Oh no, I never study the counterfeit," the agent replied, "I only study the genuine article—that's how you learn to spot the fakes."

In John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the classic Puritan account of the Christian life, Christian sees a portrait of an authentic gospel minister hanging in the house of the Interpreter.

It had eyes lift up to Heaven, the best of books in its hand, the law of truth was written upon its lips, the world was behind its back; it stood as if it pleaded with men, and a crown of gold did hang over its head.<sup>24</sup>

May God give to his church such ministers, and may his church prize them as it ought.

8

We Are Jars of Clay



But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you.

2 Corinthians 4:7–12

**T**he apostle Paul has been describing the characteristics of an authentic gospel ministry to the believers of the church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 2:17 Paul says that he is not, like so many, a peddler of God's Word, but that he speaks sincerely, as in God's sight. The apostle goes on to explain in chapter 4 that he has rejected underhanded methods of ministry. Paul would not operate in any questionable or shameful ways. He refused to practice deception or trickery; he rejected the sort of "do-anything-ism" that many used in order to win followers. We have renounced all that, the apostle asserts. Paul also refused to distort or tamper with the Word of God, that is, he would neither add to the Word things people wanted to hear nor take from it things they didn't want to hear. Rather, his practice was to set forth the truth plainly and so commend himself to each person's conscience.

So the outstanding characteristic of an authentic gospel ministry is honesty. It matters not only *what* you are doing for the Lord Jesus but *how* you do it as well. The end, even the great end of saving souls, does not justify unworthy methods of ministry.

We who seek to serve Christ by following in the footsteps of his apostles must also reject anything and everything that smacks of dishonesty. We too will refuse to use manipulative techniques in order to "win friends and influence people."

Those who will not join Paul in renouncing all such peddlers' tricks do not deserve to be called ministers of Christ.

## Earthenware Vessels

Now in the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul turns from the work to the person, from a description of the Christian ministry to an image of the Christian minister: "But we have this treasure,"—that is to say, the gospel, the Word of God—"in jars of clay"—that is, in our fragile, fallible, sinful human natures. The point of the apostle's metaphor in verse 7 lies in the stark contrast between the preciousness, beauty, and perfection of the treasure and the plainness, weakness, and imperfection of the container in which it is held and through which it is transmitted. The gospel is extraordinary, but the ministers who serve it are ordinary; the message is divine, but the messengers are human; the Word of God is infallible, but the preachers of the Word are very fallible indeed!

Recall the occasion shortly before Jesus' suffering and death when he was dining at the home of Simon the leper in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. The Gospel writers relate that "a woman came up to [Jesus] with an alabaster flask of very expensive ointment, and she poured it on his head as he reclined at table" (Matthew 26:7), and "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume" (John 12:3). That is exactly the sort of thing we would expect. This precious ointment, a kind of perfume worth a whole year's wages (John 12:5), was held in an equally precious and beautiful jar made of translucent alabaster.

But here Paul says that the gospel—an even more precious treasure—is transported throughout the world and conveyed to the human race in extremely ordinary vessels. Jars of clay, clay pots, ceramic dishes—these were for everyday use in ancient times. They were the pots and pans of that era, the plastic containers and paper plates and disposable bottles. Dishes and

bowls made of other more valuable materials would have been used for fancy occasions, but clay jars were the workaday dishes. In a wealthy home it would be gold, silver, and stoneware in the dining room but earthenware in the kitchen. Moreover, clay jars were quite fragile, easily cracked, often broken. But no matter, they were just as easily replaced. And that is what we, as servants of Christ, are: we are all jars of clay, every last one of us.

### **Glory for God, Assurance for Us**

There is a reason why God has chosen to entrust the ministry of the gospel to frail and imperfect human beings. For one thing, that's the only kind there are! If God insisted on using only perfectly flawless messengers to deliver his flawlessly perfect message, he would find himself with an extremely limited number to choose from; in fact, he would have none at all.

But there is another, more important reason for using these temporary human vessels to convey the treasures of his eternal gospel, and the apostle tells us what it is. "We have this treasure in jars of clay," Paul writes, "to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (v. 7). Earlier he had written something similar to the believers in Corinth: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (1 Corinthians 2:2-5). Saving faith in Christ does not rest in the wisdom (or eloquence or persuasiveness) of human beings but in the power of God. Any real results that happen from the ministry of God's Word, any lasting changes that come when the gospel touches people's lives, are God's doing, not ours. The power is in the contents, not the container! The life is in the seed, not the sower.

This truth has an important practical application for every Christian believer. The Bible tells us this for our assurance, so that if we have come to have faith in Jesus Christ, we may be sure it isn't because some preacher convinced us or because some argument persuaded us. That would mean that our faith was based on human eloquence and human reason, which might also mean that it would last only until some more powerful preacher or more convincing argument came along. No, if we believe in "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2), it is because God himself has worked this faith within us by his Spirit through the message of the gospel. Faith comes "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Corinthians 2:4). That leads us to give all the glory for our salvation to God and to put all our hope and confidence for the future in him, since "he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

Every pastor has dealt with believers who were anxious about their salvation. Like the weaker members of John Bunyan's pilgrim congregation—Mr. Fearing, Mr. Ready-to-Halt, Mr. Despondency, and his daughter Much-Afraid—these are good people, "though much down in spirit" (in Bunyan's phrase from the prologue of part 2 of *Pilgrim's Progress*). The key to having an assurance of your eternal security is not to seek some supernatural sign that would prove you really have the Spirit of God, but simply to go on trusting and following Christ. Faith itself, even fearful, faltering, ready-to-halt faith, is the surest sign that God has begun his good work of salvation within you. And if he has begun it, he will surely finish it.

### **Lessons for Ministers**

The fact that we have this gospel treasure in jars of clay also offers a couple of useful lessons to us specifically as ministers of Christ. The first is a reminder: the Christian ministry is not

about us. We're just the vessel, not the contents. Once and for all, the gospel is about Jesus Christ, not anyone or anything else. "For what we preach is not ourselves," Paul says, "but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Corinthians 4:5 TNIV). Any personality-centered ministry cannot be a true gospel ministry. The ministry of the Word of God is no ego trip. It's not *my* ideas, *my* experience, *my* insights, *my* personality that I preach, says Paul; these are not really important. In an evangelical subculture dominated by megachurches boasting food courts and health clubs, and led by pastors who often look, sound, and act like infomercial stars, how certain are we that our focus is on the substance of the gospel and not the style of the container?

The business of the ministry is to preach Jesus Christ as Lord: to proclaim that he is Lord, to explain how and why he is Lord, and to spell out what his lordship means for all of life, beginning with the preacher's own life. And here's the greatest implication of Jesus' lordship for those who identify themselves as his followers. It turns each and every one of us into a servant: "What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5). The ministry is not a glamour profession for egotists; it is a calling for those who are willing to serve. Happy the church with such a ministry!

Here's a second lesson for ministers of Jesus Christ. Seeing ourselves as jars of clay can be greatly encouraging to us because it means that despite our weakness and failures, God's work will go on through us. Every servant of Christ is going to make mistakes and commit sins. We will stumble, crack, even occasionally break. Every minister will struggle with weakness, discouragement, and a sense of personal inadequacy. But that does not really affect the truth and the reality and even the power of the gospel itself.

We must be very clear that this does not in any way condone the sin of ministers. We cannot plead our weakness as an excuse for grievous moral failure. The gospel is often brought

into terrible disrepute by the scandalous behavior of those who bear the name of Christ. Especially harmful and damaging are the public or notorious sins of ministers, who have an added burden of responsibility as leaders to live a life worthy of the gospel (Philippians 1:27). We must do everything in our power to follow the Jesus way. And if and when we stumble and fall, we must be willing to pay the consequences, up to and including, if the church so determines, removal from the ministry.

But if this truth that we carry the treasure of the gospel in our frail and imperfect human natures does not excuse the sin of ministers, neither does it invalidate the ministry of sinners. Our spiritual and moral failures, our weaknesses and our sins, do not and cannot finally negate what God chooses to do through us. This was a key issue confronting the church in North Africa in the time of Augustine, during the fourth and fifth centuries. The last great outbreak of persecution before the Roman Empire became officially Christian had caused some bishops in Africa to deny the faith. Later, when the situation changed, some of these bishops sought to be restored. The question was, should they be allowed back into the ministry? A group called the Donatists (after one of their early leaders, a bishop named Donatus) argued against it. In fact, the Donatists took a very hard line and said that not only were these bishops bogus, but anyone ordained by any of them was not a genuine minister, and the sacraments administered by such a person were invalid. This controversy split the African church, and the Donatists eventually set up an entire parallel system to the Catholic Church. Long after the original parties were dead and gone, it fell to Augustine to make the conclusive case against the Donatist position.

Augustine's argument, which came to be the orthodox view, was that God's grace was not invalidated by a minister's personal shortcomings because Christ is always the real minister who speaks and acts through the human servant. The Lord himself is at work in his minister's words and actions. The key

issue is not the character of the minister but the character of the gospel. If ministers are revealed to be seriously flawed, this does not negate the work God might choose to do through them. Those they baptize are really baptized; those who in faith receive communion from their hands really receive Christ; those who respond in sincere repentance to their preaching of the gospel are really saved. The fact that the clay jar is cracked does not mean the medicine it contains can't make you well.

What this means for me personally is the encouragement of knowing that I don't have to be perfect in order to serve Christ. When I was preparing to enter seminary, I was overcome at one point by a sense of my own sinfulness and shame. I thought perhaps that, despite my conviction that God had called me to the ministry, I should do something else. My sin disqualified me from becoming a minister of the gospel. Just at this time I went to church one Sunday evening and heard a sermon called, "God Gives Second Chances." It was a message based on the life of John Mark, who as a young man failed the apostle Paul and deserted the ministry (Acts 15:37–38) but in later years wrote the Gospel that bears his name and became Paul's trusted assistant once more (2 Timothy 4:11). Now more than thirty years later, I don't remember much about that sermon besides its title, but I know from experience that it is true. God does give second chances, and many more than that, to us his ministers who stumble, fall, repent, and get up and get serving again.

### **So We Do Not Lose Heart**

The apostle's practical application of this truth about gospel treasure in jars of clay comes in a phrase of encouragement that rings out both at the beginning and toward the end of 2 Corinthians 4: "Therefore . . . we do not lose heart" (vv. 1, 16). Paul knew what it was to be disappointed and discouraged.

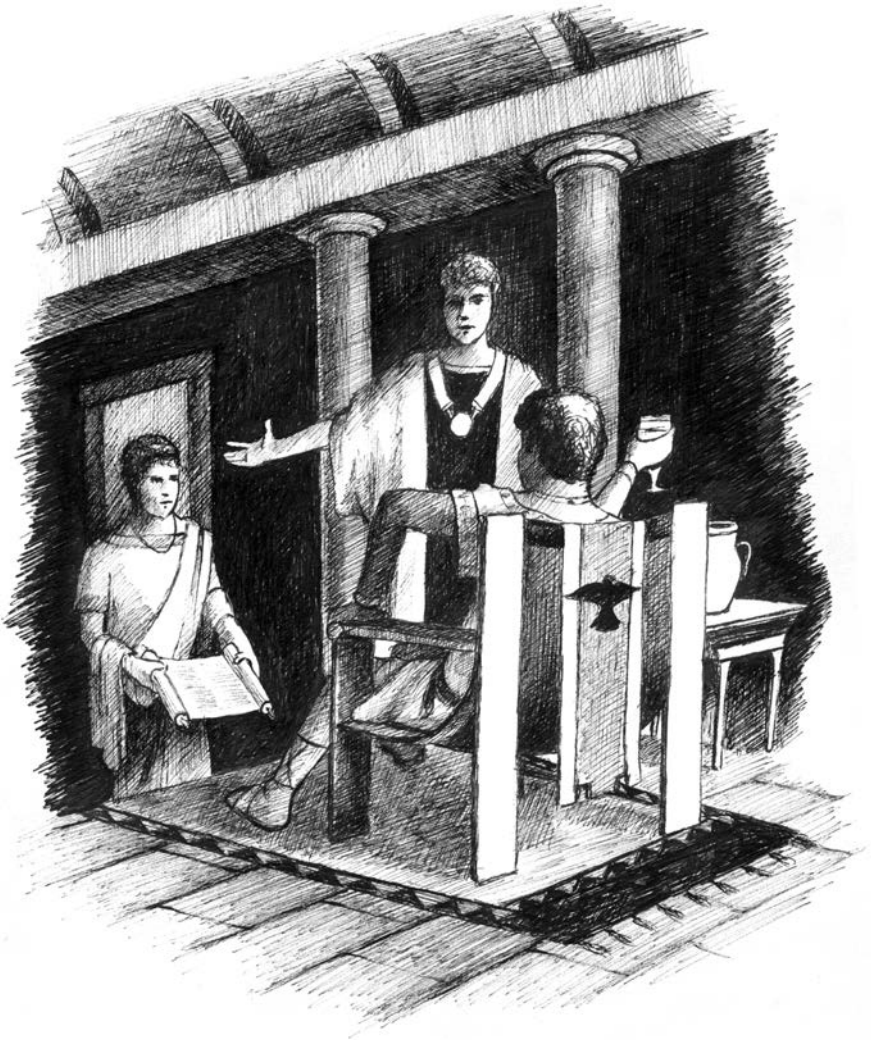
Neither the Christian life nor the gospel ministry was a cakewalk for him. Paul's heart was broken often and his spirit crushed when friends failed him, when colleagues betrayed him, when enemies criticized and slandered him, when hearers rejected him. But it never made him quit. He never said, "That's it, I've had it. That's enough!" Instead he said this: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (vv. 8–10).

Our service for Christ, just like our life in Christ, is a continual balancing act. It's like riding a teeter totter, bouncing repeatedly from death to life and back again. We are alive in Christ; we have been raised with him, and our life is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1, 3). But we have also been united with Christ in death and buried with him in baptism (Romans 6:3–4). So for us daily life and ministry in union with Christ always means both death and life. I don't think Paul is making the simple point that we're sometimes up and sometimes down, sometimes happy and sometimes sad, sometimes experiencing blessing and sometimes suffering. What he means is that even in the midst of death, we still have the life of Jesus within us, and even in our highest and happiest moments, we still carry his death inside. So all of our joys and successes are qualified by the "not yet" of the gospel. We still live in a world of death. But none of the crushing blows, the perplexing problems, the discouraging setbacks, or the painful attacks that assail us can overcome us. Though struck down we are not destroyed because Christ still lives in us.

So we do not lose heart. We refuse to quit. Clay jars though we are, we keep on proclaiming Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants for Christ's sake. And that means life for those whom we serve. "So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit" (Galatians 6:9 *The Message*).

# 9

## We Are Christ's Ambassadors



From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16–21

**A**n ambassador is definitely a VIP, no question about it. Not long ago I happened to travel to India. We arrived in the middle of the night, dead tired after seemingly endless hours of flying, only to discover three or four other jumbo jets disgorging their passengers at the same time ours unloaded. It created a huge jam of people in front of the immigration control desks, and as we shuffled, zombie-like, slowly forward through the long queue I looked with envy at the empty line marked “Diplomatic Passports Only.”

### **Authority and Responsibility**

But an ambassador’s life is about more than just enjoying all the perks and privileges of rank or socializing with other “very important people.” Ambassadors exercise real authority and have a tremendous responsibility. The ambassador is the highest official of his or her country in a foreign land. But more even than that, the ambassador speaks authoritatively on behalf of the government of which he or she is the accredited representative.

In our world of instantaneous communication, that function has diminished somewhat in importance. But in the

ancient world, where no communication was possible except by personal messenger and where letters could take weeks or even months to travel from one country to another, the role of the ambassador was essential. He had both the right and the responsibility to represent the views of his king to a foreign power. His role was to declare the will of his own ruler to those to whom he had been sent, both to potential friends and potential enemies. In order to discharge this duty faithfully, the ambassador had to be very sure he knew what his own master thought and wanted, so that his message would accurately convey the mind of the ruler in whose name he spoke. An ambassador was never free to simply “wing it,” making up his own message, or advancing her own personal views.

### **Christ’s Ambassadors**

Who are we as servants of Jesus Christ? What is the role of ministers of the gospel? Here is another answer given by Paul to the church in Corinth: we are Christ’s ambassadors. The apostle uses this image in a memorable passage from 2 Corinthians 5, one of the richest sections not just of the Corinthian letters but of the whole New Testament:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2 Corinthians 5:17–20

What a privilege is ours as ministers of the gospel! How highly God has honored us! Many of the images Paul has used throughout his Corinthian correspondence to illuminate the characteristics of Christian ministers and the ministry are humble, even humiliating. We are servants, under-rowers, clay jars; we are even the scum of the earth! But this image more than counterbalances all the others. We are Christ's ambassadors, personal representatives of the sovereign Ruler of the universe, sent in his name and with his authority to declare his message to the world. The Lord's words in calling the prophet Jeremiah apply equally to all ministers of the Word: "To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. . . . Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:7, 9–10).

A young Scottish minister, on the day of his ordination, confided to his diary, "I have this day been given as much honor as it is possible for any human being to receive." The great preacher Charles Spurgeon used to remark that he would not give up his ministry to become King of England, for that would be to accept a demotion.

### **The Message of Reconciliation**

We are Christ's ambassadors, declares Paul. The point of this metaphor is that we are both authorized and required to represent Jesus Christ and to proclaim his will to the lands and peoples to whom he sends us, to speak for him to friend and foe alike. We have been fully briefed for this great commission. We know the mind and heart of our sovereign; he has told us what his message to the world is. And what is the message? It is, says the apostle, "The message of reconciliation," namely, that "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ"

(v. 19 TNIV). That's as concise a statement of the gospel as you can find anywhere. The gospel is all about reconciliation, that is, repairing the breach, closing the gap, healing the estrangement, restoring the relationship between God and humanity. So central is this concept that Paul can summarize his whole ministry as one of reconciliation: "God," he writes, "gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (v. 18).

Reconciliation implies a prior brokenness or alienation. You reconcile people when you mend a relationship that had been fractured, when you renew a broken friendship, when you restore harmony between those who have quarreled. The reconciliation that Paul is talking about here is first and foremost a reconciliation between God and humanity. This comes as a shock to many. Reconciliation with God? Many people wonder why that is an issue. The average person today thinks he or she deserves some kind of reward just for believing in God—as if favoring the deity with the acknowledgment of his existence were a virtue. To suggest that there is a problem in the relationship between God and humankind strikes many people as absurd. When the French skeptic Voltaire was asked on his deathbed whether he had made his peace with God, he quipped, "I was not aware that we had quarreled." Somehow I don't think he remained flippant for very long after he breathed his last.

The fact is, we *have* quarreled with God, and the quarrel is called sin. We have rebelled against our Creator and Ruler, and the result is a rupture, an estrangement between us. After their fall into sin Adam and Eve no longer enjoyed a face-to-face relationship with the Lord God in the Garden of Eden, but instead they had to hide from him in their shame. As C. S. Lewis put it in *Mere Christianity*, we are now rebels living in enemy-occupied territory.

And the problem is not just with us, on our side of the relationship. It is true that we, like the Prodigal Son, have wandered far from our Father's house and have learned to live

without him. We need to be converted, literally to turn around, to change the direction of our lives, to have our hearts turned toward God again and our feet set in the way back home. But that's not all there is to it. We do need to be reconciled to God, but God also needs to be reconciled with us.

If the problem were only on our side, then God would not have needed the cross, and Christ would not have had to die. After all, if it were just a matter of winning us back, God could have done that in a hundred ways: by revealing his heart-stopping beauty to us, by offering us a taste of his inexhaustible goodness, by allowing us a glimpse of his indescribable glory, by giving us some faint hint of the pleasures in store for those who love him. Any one of those things would have wooed us back.

But there is a deeper issue. There is also an obstacle to reconciliation on God's side. It takes more to close the gap, to heal the breach, to restore the relationship than just a decision on God's part or even a change of heart on ours. Reconciliation requires more than just adjusting *attitudes*; it requires dealing with *facts*. And the stubborn fact that stands between God and us is the fact of sin. You cannot simply snap your fingers and make sin go away. Even God can't do that.

When you're playing in the backyard with your small child, you lob the ball as slowly and carefully as you can. Your child takes a big swing and misses. "That's OK," you say, "we won't count that one." But you can't play that way in Wrigley Field when the game is real. And God can't play that way with our sins. He can't dismiss our wrong decisions and wayward actions as if they didn't count. That would mean they were not real, which would mean our lives weren't real. If our lives don't really count, then we don't really count. If God is going to save us, if he is to be reconciled with us, then God has to deal with the fact of our sin.

How God does deal with the fact of our sin is the core message of the gospel. It is the story of the cross. God deals with it in and through Jesus Christ. "In Christ God was rec-

onciling the world to himself” (v. 19). When we look at the life and especially the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, what we see is not merely the acts of a great and good man. We see God himself at work; not indirectly, the way we mean it when we think of God synergistically working through us, but directly and personally.

In the death of the man Jesus of Nazareth, the one true God of heaven and earth was reconciling the world to himself by paying the penalty of the world’s sin. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,” writes Paul, “so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (v. 21 TNIV). This is the great exchange: God counts our sin against Christ, and he counts Christ’s righteousness against us, and because of that he can say that our sins no longer count against us—“not counting people’s sins against them” (v. 19 TNIV). And because Christ has paid the full price, God can “dis-count” our sins without saying that we don’t count.

### **The Ministry of Reconciliation**

The work of reconciliation is God’s alone to accomplish. We can do nothing to reconcile ourselves to God or God to ourselves. Listen once more to Paul’s ringing declaration of the gospel message: “*God* . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ”; “*God* was reconciling the world to himself” (vv. 18–19 TNIV). Critics of the evangelical view of the atonement argue that the idea of God insisting on being pacified by a blood offering is unworthy of him. It conjures up an image of some bloodthirsty deity demanding that his worshipers buy him off. But notice: God is the subject of all these statements. He’s the one who has undertaken the work that only he could accomplish. If a holy God demands a sacrifice for sin—and who are we to dismiss this as primitive and crude and unnecessary?!—then that same God is also the one who

pays the price. It is God's own great act of sacrifice—Christ's death on the cross—that clears the way to restored fellowship between sinners and himself. Through the cross God's righteousness and justice are revealed. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:23–26). At the cross God's love for sinners is conclusively demonstrated. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

But there is something we have to do in order to actually benefit from Christ's death. The *ministry* of reconciliation begins by proclaiming the *message* of reconciliation: namely, what God has done to deal with the problem of our sin and remove the barrier on his side. This brings us full circle, back to 1 Corinthians 1:18 and "the word of the cross." But then the ministry of reconciliation goes on from there to appeal to sinners to respond to this message. No real minister of the gospel simply rehearses these truths matter-of-factly, like a business reporter giving the latest stock quotes. Not on your life! No, we conclude the gospel message with a passionate appeal for response, for conversion. "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20 TNIV).

What does the apostle mean by appealing to people to be reconciled to God? We have already seen that there's nothing we can do to effect our reconciliation with God; that is a work only he can perform, and he has done it at the cross. So why does Paul plead with us now to be reconciled? Objectively speaking, God has done everything necessary to reconcile us to himself. But subjectively speaking, we still need to be reconciled to him. It's true there is nothing we can do in the

sense of paying the price. But it's also true that we must hear and accept the news about what God has done on our behalf. We must believe the gospel. We must trust in Jesus Christ and him alone for salvation. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). But if anyone remains outside of Christ, there is nothing new, just the same old guilt and sin and death. And the only way to get "in" Christ is through faith, by believing in him with all your heart and trusting in what he has done for you as the ground of your salvation. This is the last step in the process of reconciliation.

### What Function Is So Noble?

Well, almost the last step. For if you have accepted the gospel, if you have become a "new creation" in Jesus Christ, then he also has a commission for you. It is a lofty position. Whoever you are, whatever your age or vocation, Christ wants you to become one of his ambassadors, proclaiming in his name and with his authority his reconciling message to the world.

The world will not necessarily honor you as an ambassador of Christ. Just at the end of his letter to the Ephesians Paul makes a wry allusion to his worldly status. Pray for me, Paul writes, "that words may be given to me . . . boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains" (Ephesians 6:19–20). "An ambassador in chains"—not the golden chain of rank and high office that distinguished an earthly ambassador, but the iron manacles of a man who is a prisoner for Jesus' sake. Christ's ambassadors are still imprisoned in some places today, and they are scorned in many more. But no matter; as John Donne asks,

Why doth the foolish world scorn that profession,  
Whose joys pass speech? . . .

What function is so noble, as to be  
Ambassador to God and destiny?  
To open life, to give kingdoms to more  
Than kings give dignities, to keep heaven's door?<sup>25</sup>

When we proclaim the gospel, we speak for the King. It is not just us preaching; it is "God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). In our ministry of reconciliation we open the way to life for those who are dead in trespasses and sins; we give kingdoms to the poor and powerless. As men and women commissioned to proclaim the message of reconciliation, we keep the very door of heaven.

The Reformers interpreted Jesus' statement that he was entrusting the keys of the kingdom of heaven to his disciples (Matthew 16:19) as applying not to the power of priests or prelates to bind or loose souls but to the preaching of the gospel. John Calvin commented on this verse:

It is a great honour that we are God's interpreters to bear witness to the world of His salvation. The highest majesty of the Gospel is that it is called the ambassadorship of the mutual reconciliation between God and men. And finally, it is a wonderful consolation to godly souls that they know that the news of salvation brought to them by some little mortal man is ratified before God.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking as a little mortal man, and on behalf of all the other little mortals whose calling is to proclaim that news of salvation to the world, I would say that God's ratification of our message and ministry is a wonderful consolation to us as well.

"What function is so noble, as to be an Ambassador to God, and destiny?" What greater or more significant work could there be than to swing wide the door to eternal life and invite people to enter? Whatever the world may think, eternity will reveal the answer: Nothing on earth is more important than the ministry of the gospel.



# Notes

1. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 6.
2. Woody Bedell, RCA Newsletter, *Together*, Spring 2005, 2.
3. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (New York, MacMillan, 1930), 47–48.
4. The exact quote, from a letter of Simone Weil, is as follows: “There the conviction was suddenly borne in upon me that Christianity is pre-eminently the religion of slaves, that slaves cannot help belonging to it, and I among others.” Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classic, 2002), 26.
5. Quoted in David L. Edwards, *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001), 120.
6. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, ed. John T. Wilkinson (orig. pub. 1656; 1939; repr. London, Epworth, 1950), 97. Citations are to the 1950 reprint of the 1939 edition.
7. This point about envy is made, and the Lincoln extract quoted, in the fine biography by William Lee Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 328ff.
8. Comment by Charles Hodge on 1 Corinthians 3:5, quoted in Geoffrey B. Williams, *1 Corinthians—A Digest of Reformed Comment* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1971), 52.
9. For a discussion of the meaning of the various terms for ministers in the New Testament, see G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 81ff.
10. This is the title of Peterson’s exposition of the Psalms of Ascent, published by InterVarsity in 1980.
11. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (London: Catholic Book Club, 1946), 23.
12. Scott Weiland, as told to Mike Sager, *Esquire*, April 2005, 133.
13. Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” *Slow Train Coming*. Columbia Records © 1979 Special Rider Music.

## Notes

14. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian, Part Two" quoted in *Faith and Freedom, an Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 3.
15. Philip Turner, "An Unworkable Theology," *First Things*, no. 154 (June/July 2005): 10–12.
16. Geoffrey Chaucer, *Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), 22.
17. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 143.
18. The apostle Paul makes this same point using the same athletic analogy in 1 Corinthians 9:24–27: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified."
19. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1954), 204–6.
20. I owe this insight about smell and memory linking us to God in Christ to a sermon by Jack Roeda, pastor of the Church of the Servant in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
21. Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 158–59.
22. "Retired Bishop's Nontraditional Beliefs Cause Stir," *Grand Rapids Press*, March 19, 2005.
23. This is the thesis of J. Gresham Machen's book *Christianity and Liberalism*, which more than eighty years ago proved the truth of this statement unequivocally and, I believe, irrefutably.
24. John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 60.
25. John Donne, "To Mr. Tilman," quoted in Edwards, *John Donne: Man of Flesh and Spirit*, 115.
26. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Gospels*, vol. 2, trans. T. H. L. Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 188.

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# ***Words of HOPE***

## **A Vision for Growing a Global Church**

Words of Hope exists for one purpose—to share the good news of Jesus Christ, the world’s one Savior. The ministry broadcasts the gospel in over forty languages around the world through programs developed and broadcast by indigenous producers.

### *Distinctive features of our mission include:*

- An ongoing commitment to broadcast the gospel to those peoples who are the hardest to reach and have the least opportunity to hear it.
- Providing printed and Internet-accessible Christian messages, devotionals, and books for personal spiritual growth.
- An effort to link broadcasting to church planting and church growth among each language group in which we work.



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