

The Cross in its Social Application

Introduction—The Corinthians were Paul’s problem children. This book is an index of the hot issues of that day: church divisions, immorality in community, lawsuits among believers, marriage questions, practices about which believers disagree, the role of women in community, abuses of the Lord’s table, the exercise of spiritual gifts, and doctrinal confusion concerning the Resurrection. A potpourri of controversy much like our own time.

The central theme of 1 Corinthians has been described by one author as “the doctrine of the cross in its social application”. The Corinthians, convinced of their own wisdom and their own ability to “have it all” right then, had developed a cross-voiding spirit. Theirs was the problem of premature exaltation, thinking that the crown of the Christian life could come without a cross.

What do we mean by the cross in its social application? How does the cross become a paradigm of our self-understanding in this earthly tent and in our community relations?

- On the cross, the Lord Jesus died as a substitute for our sin, something we could never do for ourselves, for he bore our sin and judgment. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says it this way: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
- But he also died on the cross as our representative. In our union with him, we died with him (Gal. 2:20), we were buried with him (Rom. 6:3-5), we were raised with him, we are alive in him in the power of the Spirit, we are and will be exalted with him (Eph. 2:5-7), we are heirs with him and reign with him (Rom 8:17-18). In this representative mode, the Lord commands us to take up our cross and follow him. We will follow him to glory, but our earthly trek will be one of cross-bearing.
- It is the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus which has cut us off from the old life and united with him in a renewed image of God in the new self in which we now need to live. This new self, redeemed as it is, still wrestles with a sense of our fallenness. We must both deny ourselves and affirm ourselves as illumined by the cross of Christ.
- In this backdrop, how do we obey the biblical admonition “to think of yourself with sober judgment” (Rom. 12:3). The cross supplies the answer, calling us to both self-denial and self-affirmation. That call is not to self-denigration or self-aggrandizement or self-actualization, but to self-sacrificial love in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus.

Self-denial—The Lord's invitation is plain: “If anyone would come after me, he/she must deny him/herself and take up his/her cross and follow me. (Mk. 8:34). *Every Christian is both Simon of Cyrene*, the man who carried the cross of Christ, *and Barabbas*, the murderer and insurrectionist released instead of the Lord Jesus. *Like Barabbas*, we escape the cross, for the Lord Jesus died in our place. *Like Simon of Cyrene* (Mk. 15:21), we carry the cross, for he calls us to take it up and follow him. The word deny in the original means to disown, to repudiate, to turn your back on. To deny yourself is to repudiate or turn your back on the cult of self, the idolatry of self-centeredness. There are three deaths to self and resurrections to new life for the believer:

- Death to sin and life to God. This death is a legal one. It is death to sin by our union with Christ in his death to sin and in his resurrection. He bore our penalty for us.
- Death to self, what we are calling taking up your cross, denying our self-centeredness and repudiating or mortifying the desires of our old nature. This death is a moral one. In the power of the Spirit, we put to death the old nature and its impulsive and wayward desires and the resurrection that follows leads to the new life in Christ. Romans 6 is a classic chapter that charts this path.

- Carrying about in our bodies the dying of the Lord Jesus that the life of the Lord Jesus may be revealed in them (see 2 Cor. 4:10). This is a death to safety and manifest confidence in our fleshly strength and the corresponding resurrection in the strength of the Lord Jesus made perfect in our weakness.

Self-denial in modern culture—

- A low self-image plagues many believers. Perhaps it originated in a deprived childhood, or a segment of your life's journey in which you felt unwanted and unloved. It is often exasperated in the pressures of a competitive society that can be demeaning and full of intentional and cutting put-downs. There are the issues of racial and sexual prejudice, the trauma of being declared redundant in a marketplace that seems to have forgotten essential fairness and any compassion. Technology can demote people into serial numbers punched into a card designated to travel through the bowels of a computer. A linear trail with unique identifiers. There are people out there telling us that we are nothing but animals with a bigger cerebral cortex or telling us that we are elaborate machines programmed to make automatic responses to external stimuli.
- The cult of self in modern society is an overreaction to the above reality. Be yourself, express yourself, fulfill yourself are the cries in the air all around us. Secular society has spawned something of the cult of self that has become ever more self-absorbed. It has its different twists and turns but there are common themes of the inherent goodness of human nature so richly manifest in you, the need for unconditional self-regard, an increase in intense self-awareness and self-preoccupation, self often affirmed in the context of your particular group that is so damning of the other "abusive" groups, and a preoccupation with self-actualization and self-fulfillment.

Self-affirmation—Alongside the Lord's explicit call to self-denial is his implicit call to new self-affirmation. In his teaching, his ministry manner, and his ministry mission he reflects the value and worth of humanity in the sight of God. Humanity is the crown of God's creative activity, that he made us, male and female in his own image. One young man, rebelling against the inferiority feelings derived from his background and from severe racial prejudice, said it this way: "I'm me and I'm good, 'cause God don't make junk." Poor grammar but excellent theology.

- Whatever we are by God's good creation, we affirm: our rationality, our moral obligation, our sexuality, our family lives, human aesthetic and artistic creativity, our stewardship of we have and of the earth itself, our need and hunger for love and community, our awareness of God's majesty, and our ingrained urge and need to worship him.
- However, whatever we are in our fallenness, we must deny and repudiate: our irrationality, our moral perverseness, our sexual waywardness and lack of self-control, our selfishness which spoils so much our family lives and sense of community, our lazy self-indulgence that does not diligently cultivate God's good personal gifts or our environment and societal culture, our proud autonomy, clutching our right to ourselves, and our refusal to worship the true and living God.

Upshot—Created, fallen, and redeemed and recreated in Christ—The way of the cross demands that we see ourselves in our self-understanding as created, fallen, and redeemed and recreated in the image of the Lord Jesus.

- We affirm that we are not only created in the image of God, marred by our fallenness, but recreated in the image of Christ and destined to experience the full ark of his redemptive work.
- We deny what in our fallenness we need to deny. However, God may call us to deny ourselves

in things beyond our fallenness, not wrong in themselves or attributable to the Fall, but stand in the way of doing his will.

- Neither self-denial (a repudiation of our sinfulness) nor self-affirmation (an appreciation of the Lord's gifts and ministry focus) is meant to dead-end us in self-absorption. This sober self-understanding (Rom. 12:3) is meant to lead to self-giving love and service. The community of the cross is essentially a community of self-giving service.

This last point is highlighted by the apostolic requests for greatness in the Kingdom (Mt. 20:20-28; Mk. 10:35-45). James and John want to sit on thrones in power, glory, and security. Jesus knows that he must hang on a cross in weakness, shame, and suffering. For those following the Lord Jesus—

- There is a choice between selfish ambition and sacrificial deferral. James and John are the first to begin the unholy scramble to be “da man”. The other disciples are mad because they got beat to the punch. This whole mentality is incompatible with the way of the cross.
- There is a choice between power and service. James and John want honor, but they want power too. Jesus came to serve and those who truly follow must do likewise.
- There is a choice between comfort and suffering. Insistence on security is inconsistent with the way of the cross. The request of James and John coveted honor, power, and comfortable security while the whole career of the Lord Jesus was marked by sacrifice, service, and suffering.

We'll be probing the cross as it applies to our self-understanding and to our understanding of Christian community as intended by the Lord Jesus in our study of the Corinthian correspondence.