

Vulnerability vs. Corinthian Values: Modern Ministry Thought and Practice at Home and Abroad

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Abstract

In seeking to address ministry models and underlying value structures in the Corinthian Church, Paul reminds people in all times and settings of the hegemonic role that world cultures play—even as he paradigmatically uses both Jewish and Greek cultures as foils for the seeming weakness and foolishness of God’s gospel. While cultures change, underlying values of humanity in rebellion against God continue. Hence while Paul practiced a form of enculturation by “being all things to all men,” there was a caveat to his acculturation that was defined by the “Christ crucified.” Unfortunately, Christian ministry is all too often driven by human beings’ cultural values. These values must be evaluated by the gospel standard set by Jesus and the Cross upon which he hung.

Key Words: Christofornity, cruciform, *Theologia Crucis*, vulnerability, weakness

Introduction

Popular ministry and mission methods are often weighed pragmatically, but what is harder to evaluate are the underlying values upon which methodologies in ministry are constructed; Such values, at least in contemporary Western cultures, include strength over weakness, wealth over poverty, and visible over less-visible results. Instead of these culturally varied polarities, however, the Apostle Paul insists that the values and methodologies of gospel ministry mirror vulnerability, something which is initially unnatural to current ministry thinking and practice. As one Pauline scholar has noted, “God would flood Paul’s life and ministry with resurrection power the more he lived and ministered from weakness and embraced the social shame that inevitably came his way” and that the weakness of a crucified Christ “determined Paul’s mode of ministry,” and was “the counterintuitive way that God triumphed in Christ” (Gombis 2021, 61-62).

To accomplish both valuing weakness and evaluating cultural values’ intrusion into ministry models, Paul’s teaching, and lifestyle while in Corinth first substantiate the principle that love expressed in the crucified one (the exemplar of God’s values of weakness and foolishness) embodies *divine values* that must underlie healthy ministry/mission thinking and practice, the fruit of a *Theologia Crucis*. Second, Paul’s argument with the Corinthian Church was that they had not *critically analyzed their culture* and had let it pollute thinking and action in their church. Paul suggests that a weighing of cultural thinking and action be carried out through a *cruciform_lens* and that such cultural values and models be crucified with Christ. Third, Paul’s admonitions suggest a cairn-like way forward which involves developing *Christo-form values* in people which then become a standard or evaluative tool for ministry/mission thinking and practice—for the sender, the sent, and the receiver. The goal of all vulnerable mission and ministry then is to *cultivate a culture of Christofornity_in* our ministry/mission contexts.

What is Vulnerability?

One salient fact gleaned from the emergence of COVID 2020-202? is that humanity is frail. To truly grasp what it means to be human, we must retrieve an understanding of vulnerability in

every aspect of life, especially as it pertains to world discipleship thought and methodology. To be vulnerable is to “be exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally” (Oxford Languages 2022). The Bible expresses vulnerability in a more positive light by properly situating humanity in relation to God: he is the *ex nihilo* Creator, and we are created creatures; we need him, and he does not need us; he is uncreated and independent of us, and we are created dependent on him. Learning to appreciate our vulnerability is an affirmation not only of our purposeful created humanity but more importantly an affirmation of God’s unique divinity.

“For He Himself knows our form; He is mindful that we are nothing but dust.” (Psalm 103:14).¹ Vulnerable mission/ministry situated in created order demonstrates four pillars of the humanity/deity relationship: oneness, existence, dependence, and sustenance. Vulnerability and its relationship to humanity as dependent on God was also expressed positively by our Savior—from his temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:4) to his trial in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:39).

Understanding vulnerability according to the above-mentioned pillars helps us engage in ministry depending more on God and less on some other culturally driven value or method. In Japan, for example, I experienced vulnerability in at least two different ways. First, most missionaries to Japan are de facto vulnerable in ministry simply because the gospel has many barriers to overcome, including history, language, and people’s fear of religion. The second kind of vulnerable ministry is taking on the mantle of a learner and incarnating into the new culture. As unsettling, unfamiliar, and weak as that might seem, opportunity to develop dependence on God abounded.

Failure to understand the importance of vulnerability as a path toward more dependence on God can lead to both a rejection of hearer values and needs, and attempting ministry from a familiar cultural position of strength, whether it be one’s own language or other resources. In this case rather than taking the subservient role of a learner, one may default back to a role of teacher despite being woefully ignorant of the host culture in which they now reside.

Those who minister are sometimes unaware that they think about ministry and engage in it with values adopted unwittingly from their culture. In the case of my home culture, it was values like independence, self-reliance, safety, wealth, unlimited freedoms, and success. While in Japan these values undermined my understanding of “vulnerable ministry” and colored it negatively, a process I fear to which Christians are not readily immune. A culture shaped theology of ministry then, tends to see vulnerability because of the Fall rather than being situated in the created order.

Vulnerability in Paul’s Gospel Ministry: The Church at Corinth

Paul verbalizes vulnerability in ministry as “positive” weakness, demonstrating how God favors it and adorns it in the shape of the Cross. Paul not only adopted a weakness ministry model but also genuinely saw himself as weak (1 Corinthians 4:9-13; 2 Corinthians 4:7-12). As one self-aware Bible student has said, “Except for the Holy Trinity, every character in the Bible is a failure—a loser.... yet God’s choice is perfect [*and*] those he has chosen to do the kingdom work are the perfect ones to do it. And yet they are always flawed individuals, losers” (Hochhalter 2014, 31).

Accordingly, in his Corinthian letters Paul describes and demonstrates his ministry as *cross shaped* among the Corinthians and how ministry needs to continue to be accomplished through cross-shaped weakness, both in attitude and methodology. As Carson has rightly observed, “If we view the cross as the means of our salvation only... we shall fail to see how the cross stands

as the test and the standard of all vital Christian ministry,” and that “the cross not only establishes what we are to preach but how we are to preach” (Carson 1993, 9). Paul undoubtedly had both a theology and application of ministry in mind for the Corinthians when he wrote, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:2). As one New Testament scholar has asserted, “In this one sentence from I Corinthians we have an indication not only of Pauline Christology, but also of Pauline theology proper, pneumatology, ministry, ecclesiology, spirituality, epistemology, and morality—at least” (Gorman 2013, 64).

Paul begins his first letter to Corinth explaining God’s choice of a paradoxical and ironic weakness metaphor for gospel and mission ministry by setting up two cultures as foils. Greeks valued wisdom (gleaned by human experience and thinking), while Jews valued signs or powerful demonstration of divine endorsement. For both, veracity came by proof. Instead, God’s wisdom message cuts across the ways which seem right to a man within his culture (I Corinthians 1:21) and offers them Christ, who is both the power and wisdom of God. Paul acknowledges the cross as what makes God’s wisdom and Paul’s gospel preaching a foolish story to the Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews (I Corinthians 1:23).

Cultural Values at Odds with Paul’s Ministry Values: Then and Now

Jews demanded a sign. In one sense their expectation was reasonable. Their whole history, from the calling of Abraham, had been one of visible manifestations of God, painstakingly repeated and recorded. Yet demanding a sign for proof before they would believe is a far cry from having your faith tested and strengthened by God—who may or may not provide a visible experience. As Carson has commented, “As long as people are assessing him (Christ), they are in a superior position. This demand for signs becomes a prototype of every condition human beings raise as a barrier to being open to God” (Carson 1993, 21). This same tendency is prevalent today both in cultures and religious denominations. One way this is seen on the mission field is to measure numbers or crowd size at events and see greater numbers as proof of God’s blessing (presence). In places like Japan where the percentage of Christianity has not changed much in almost 500 years, Jesus’s suffering alone in the garden, and his abandonment at his trial, are more representative of the presence of Christ than huge cathedrals.

Gentiles, especially Greeks, valued wisdom which Carson defined as different from “proverbial wisdom” or “personal intuition and street smarts.” The Greeks had “created entire structures of thought so as to maintain the delusion that they can explain everything.” Whether they were Sophists or Platonists, Stoics or Epicureans, they all boasted in a well-articulated world view including choices and priorities which they claimed made sense of the world (Carson 1993, 21).

To understand something was to be able to control it. That notion was, and still is, a powerful cultural model. Watching the actions, responses, and thinking of many of today’s economically, politically, and militarily dominant cultures during the pandemic of 2020 effectively promoted science and technology as the saviors of humanity apart from the need for divine assistance. Others have also noticed the lies perpetuated by dominant cultures: “Mesopotamian power and Egyptian wisdom were strength and intelligence divorced from God, put to the wrong ends, and producing all the wrong results” (Peterson 1980, 27).

The problem of humankind’s cultural values when it comes to power and wisdom is that those values leave little room for the opposite. Hence Paul’s rhetorical questions in I Corinthians 1:20 (“Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?”) indicate that the wisdom of world systems does not include the cross. When it comes to mission methodology, missionaries too

often look for what works, something measurable, something we can control and understand. Not so for Paul, as he saw life and ministry faithfulness measured by how closely it resembled Jesus dying on a cross: “Paul ministered from a posture of vulnerability... if that resulted in social shame, he embraced it, If he attempted to minister from some other posture or approach, he would not be drawing upon God’s resurrection power” (Gombis 2021, 61). Perhaps a good present practice for ministry method evaluation would be to use Paul’s question or similar questions before borrowing yet another “successful” ministry method from another cultural context.

Necessary Divine Values: *Theologia Crucis*

The Roman cross was a tool and a symbol of suffering, weakness, and death. In *Theologica Crucis* we are reminded that we are called to imitate Christ. Imitating Christ takes place not only in power moments and victorious parades but—chiefly—in suffering, vulnerability, and weakness. Why? “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9). *Theologia Crucis* informs us of God’s plan to use weakness to accomplish his goals. This was clearly demonstrated by the life of Christ. As the epistle to the Hebrews puts it, “it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the originator of their salvation *through suffering*” (Hebrews 2:10; emphasis mine). Therefore, Paul longs for sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 3:10). “For Paul.... being weak entails entrance into a new, particular kind of weakness, namely the weakness of the crucified Messiah, a weakness that in 2 Cor. 8:9 the Messiah voluntarily or freely determined to enter into on behalf of others” (Heavins 2019, 258).

“*Crucis* in British English is a Latin genitive of noun of the word, *Crux*,” from which four meanings emerge: “a vital or decisive stage, a difficulty or problem, a decisive part, and cross” (Collins English Dictionary 2021). All four of these meanings are to be seen as part of *Theologica Crucis*. The cross of Christ is the vital *crux* to God’s plan and signifies his Lordship over time which “means therefore that in the action of Christ the entire line [eternity] is influenced in a decisive manner, and that in the central event of Christ the Incarnate One, an event that constitutes the mid-point of that line, not only is all that goes before fulfilled but also all the future that is decided” (Cullmann 1962, 72). The pivotal character of the cross of Christ thus transforms suffering from a mere result or affect into a medium in which the will of God is mediated to the world. Furthermore, the cross symbolizes a life and ministry model that demonstrates “participation with the crucified and risen Messiah,” and can reframe the “liability of Paul’s [*and our*] weakness as an asset that authenticates his apostleship [*and our ministry*]” (Heavins 2019, 256). Paul can thus wholeheartedly assert, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I do my share on behalf of His body, which is the church, in filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (Colossians 1:24).

What is this “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions”? Taken in context with verse 25 (“I was made a minister of this *church* according to the commission from God granted to me for your benefit, so that I might fully carry out *the preaching of the word of God*”) and Paul’s emphasis on “the Word of God” being made “fully known” explains the “fills up” in verse 24:

The connection (between 24 and 25) is mission. Paul is saying he’s carrying out his God-given Gentile mission.... the lack is the gap of sufferings between the present reach of the gospel and the suffering necessary to establish a gospel presence among all the Gentiles, paralleling Jesus’s own mission to bring the gospel to the Jewish people. See the same language of ‘minister’ and ‘filling/fulfilling’ in Rom. 15:8, 16, 19 (Thompson 2020).

Furthermore, “The afflictions of Christ represent more than the typical suffering of history. According to Paul they mark the denouement of history. The dying of Jesus is archetypal. Henceforth all righteous suffering will bear a specifically Christological imprint” (Savage 1996, 174).

Theologia Crucis emphasizes weakness and strength based on participation with the crucified and now living Christ (2 Corinthians 13:3-4). Not only is weakness a divinely appointed value in which Paul relished, but Paul also used weakness to subvert his detractors who disdained it. For Paul, “opposition to weakness per se effectively and necessarily is opposition to the Messiah himself. Weakness in itself cannot invalidate a person’s credibility because the Messiah himself entered into the weakest of all possible social, cultural, physical and/or existential conditions: the cross” (Heavins 2019, 257-258; See also Pickett 1997, 192-193).

Theologia Crucis invites us into the arena of ministry weakness, including suffering *with*, not suffering *for*. Suffering *for*, implies a mediatorial or sacrificial role that Christ accomplished once for all. Suffering *with* describes a way in which we relate to God, his people, and the world. Suffering with God’s people produces what Alan Hirsch calls “*communitas*,” a deeper form of community forged in the fires of liminal experiences shared (Hirsch 2007, 162-163). For those of us who are from Western and economically wealthy societies, being vulnerable with the majority world reminds us of who we are and from what we have been rescued (Titus 3:1-5), and such remembrance should help us become more sensitive to those who we minister. On a personal level, unfortunately my years of ministry training in the West coincided with the rise of church growth principles (valuing, size, speed and planning, but not vulnerability), which set me up to fail in valuing, accepting, and truly understanding the difficulties Japanese Christians face in a land where the average church size in the early 1990’s was seven people.

Thinking Culturally through the Lens of Cruciformity

In chapters one through four of I Corinthians, Paul zeroes in on two cultural patterns coming from two different cultures: the desire for power from the Jews and the love of wisdom for the Greeks. Both, Paul says, when analyzed by the paradoxical cross, are not strength and wisdom but weakness and foolishness. Do Christians still fall prey to substituting God’s ministry values with culturally favorable ones today? I believe that it does. Notice, for example, the following excerpt (with names and other specifics changed for anonymity) from an email announcing a new staff member for a mission organization:

XYZ Mission organization has been blessed with outstanding leaders to serve in our global family of ministries. Please join me in welcoming John and Jane and their # children. John comes to us from the business world and has a wealth of ministry experience serving in his home church in ABC City. He has worked in senior management at both Well-Known Corporation #1 and Well-Known Corporation #2, spending close to xx years in the PQR industry... (XYZ Mission, 2021).

The emphasized portions above embody what current world cultures value. Leadership over servanthood seems prevalent—even though Paul never referenced himself as a leader but instead confessed that Christ was his head and that he was a bond servant. Having a business background is valued because wealth is valued. Nothing is wrong with earning a comfortable living but, why would a mission organization identify to the wider Christian mission community the company names of a new staff member’s previous employees? If John had previously worked for minimum wage at a fast-food restaurant, would that information have been included in the introduction above?

Paul intentionally avoided carrying out his ministry among the [Corinthians] with an impressive rhetorical display and a powerful personal presence [even while] it was counterintuitive to do so. Had he persuaded them to follow Jesus through such means their faith would have been founded on human wisdom, the logic of the present evil age, and not the power of God (Gombis 2021, 62).

In small but innumerable ways the values of the culture work their way into ministry thinking and methodology, a theme to which Paul returns to time and time again in the Corinthian letters. Thankfully Paul does not just bemoan this anomaly: he also introduces to his readers *cruciformity* as a litmus test for Christ exalting ministry.

Paul writes, “For indeed He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God. For we also are weak in Him, yet we live with Him because of the power of God directed toward you” (2 Corinthians 13:4). Because the living Christ remains the crucified one, cruciformity is Spirit-enabled conformity to the indwelling crucified and resurrected Christ. Like *Theologia Crucis*, cruciformity involves God’s inclusion of suffering and weakness—but cruciformity gives an embodiment to suffering and weakness. Furthermore, at its heart cross-like conformity is about faithfulness and love.

Cruciformity is crucial to our understanding of what God values:

Hence, to those boasting in power and dismissing Paul’s weakness, and to those who have not yet heeded Paul’s exhortations to repent (cf. 12:21), this language creates a necessary obligation for Paul’s listeners to likewise give up their prior valuations of worth or honor or privilege, and to reframe even their own selves in a new symbolic universe: their participation in a crucified Messiah, crucified in weakness (Heavins 2019, 259).

Practically speaking, *Theologia Crucis* and cruciformity teach us that we cannot tap into God’s strength when our hearts and hands are full of human strength and wisdom. “He [Paul] understands the power of God is magnified if servants of Jesus Christ are in social positions of weakness and vulnerability” (Gombis 2021, 68). Moreover, we cannot operate in a stance of “pretend weakness,” what one scholar has termed “power dissolved in weakness” (Heavins 2019, 251): we must conclude that we are anything but strong, able, and independent of God.

To apply conforming to the cross in our modern ministry settings means that we can face the fear of failure by not copying various “successful” looking cultural models for ministry. For example, we can truly embrace “God’s upside-down theology,” namely that already we are all small, weak, and foolish—yet God uses us (Hochhalter 2014, 12). Also, conforming to the cross means we can treat as insignificant what our cultures value in terms of conducting gospel ministry.

Thirty years ago (per my training noted earlier), one would have been considered a fool for attempting what the above paragraph advocates. Even so, McKnight in hindsight concurs:

Homogeneous church principles—where we focus on one type of person in one kind of community—and the church-growth movement are not found in the New Testament and are but another version of Corinthianizing the church. These principles are worldly. Measuring success by numbers—batts or budgets—is also worldly. What mattered to Paul was presenting his churches complete in Christ. Maturity for Paul was Christiformity, so the only metric Paul knew for pastoral ministry was this question: ‘How Christiform is she or he? How Christiform is the church of Ephesus?’ (McKnight 2019, 194).

In the end any ministry model we employ must be cross-shaped. Any value we embrace must be viewed through the lens of the cross.

One further evaluative tool for ministry remains, and that is the lens of Christoformity.

Christoformity

Christoformity is similar to cruciformity but different in a significant way. As Heavins (2019) has expressed, “Any coherent account of Paul’s theology of the cross must account for Paul’s claim in 2 Cor. 13:3-4 that the Messiah is not weak who was crucified in weakness because he lives by the power of God” (Heaving 2019, 256). That is, Christoformity stresses the risen Christ, looking forward with an emphasis on “community reform.” That reform takes place “on the basis of [the community’s] shared participation in the Messiah’s cruciform weakness, and Messiah’s present irreducible life by the power of God” (Heavins 2019, 255).

Today this reform continues in the body of Christ, and like Paul “The pastor is called to nurture a culture of Christoformity” in the sense that “we are formed by his life, by his death, and by his resurrection and ascension” (McKnight 2019, 3). Christoformity means that we who follow him are to conform to Jesus Christ. Jesus himself taught that the disciple should think, do, and be exactly like the master (Matthew 10:24-25; Mark 10:45).

Christoformity is embodied ministry as participation in what God is doing in Christ through the Spirit. “Only Christ is able to make God known to us.... Our response is a willing participation in God’s self-revelation. That is our privilege and our calling as coworkers with Christ in God’s ongoing ministry in the world” (Buxton 2016, 19). Paul expresses ministry as what Christ has accomplished through him and others. “It is not Paul’s ministry or mission so much as it is Christ’s ministry and mission through the Spirit (I Thess. 1:5-6; 2:13; 4:3-9, 19-21).... Thus, Paul is only participating in what God—Father, Son, Spirit—is doing (Gal. 4:19)” (McKnight 2019, 5).

This realization of participation in the mission of God brought about by Christoformity, before any ministry action, helps us avoid focusing on the methodology that too often gets bogged down in pragmatism. Instead, we learn to think, move, and operate in a “narrative way of life” (Rowe 2016, 215), in a “culture” (Willimon 2016, 203), as we enter the flow of what God has been doing previously. Christoformity is this culture or way of life, in which we are to be nurtured and into which we nurture others, especially in the context of ministry and mission.

Learning Christoformity as an Evaluative Tool for Ministry/Mission in Cultures

“God did not create *cultures*... but he has created humans with a fundamental need and capacity to be innovative within a cultural framework” (Nehrbass 2016, loc. 1409). Culture is amoral, but when manipulated by sinful humanity it runs contrary to the will of God, and ministry thought and practice can become tarnished. A clear example is found in 1 Samuel 6, where the Philistines moved the Ark, together with 2 Samuel 6, where Uzzah is struck dead for touching the Ark. The problem was in following the Philistine way rather than the Mosaic way of moving the Ark. For 20 years the Ark had remained in Kiriath-jearim, yet this “new cultural way” of moving the Ark seems to have remained.

Cultural values’ intrusion into ministry thinking and methodology continues today in churches and on mission fields. Yet another example is a recent Tokyo Olympic gospel tract that advertised the testimony of various Christian athletes. While the desire to evangelize certainly is commendable, “such ministry conceptions and their attending postures and strategies” (a methodology of using a very select group of famous people) “for Paul are fraught

with peril” (Gombis, 2021, 68). This peril in Japan is that people aspire not to become the hero (athlete or YouTuber) per se but to get the power, fame, and riches that accompany their success. It seems natural to trumpet our heroes because we all like heroes over losers: “According to the world’s way of accomplishing things, God should choose someone with impressive credentials and lofty social status” (Gombis 2021, 68).

Fortunately, Christoformity as an evaluative paradigm can help ascertain what is driving our ministry/missional thinking and methodology. McKnight rightly suggests that pastors *and all in ministry including missionaries* (italics mine) should work to create a Christoform culture in their ministry spheres (McKnight 2019, 6). What is noticeable for most of Paul’s epistles is the lists of people. For Paul, “Christ in me and in his fellow workers” was his ministry goal, so developing a culture of formation was paramount. To do so, Paul developed a culture of people and measured his apostolic authentication in terms of Corinthians/Gentiles who had responded by faith and served vulnerably in weakness. For us to do likewise involves developing the cultures of listening, presence, and servanthood.

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¹ Psalm 103:14. Unless otherwise noted, English Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible 1995.