

The Gathering: 28 May, 2008

## Introduction-----

I received the following email from a long-time, missionary friend. In the 1990s, he lost his first wife to cancer. Now he (and she) faces the possibility of entering the same deep, dark valley of grief and loss.

May 2008

dear praying friends, we need your help

I just got off the phone with my wife, from the doctor's office where she had gone for her annual mammogram

after reviewing several years of her X-rays, the doctor concluded that there was some "tiny spot" – that she would have biopsied, if it were her

right after finishing her English lesson at the local elementary school, my wife will go to get an appointment for this procedure

needless to say, we need your prayers

my wife was rather tearful, as you might expect – but ask the Lord of the universe to take her and hold her tightly during these next few hours and days

the accuser of the brethren would love to destroy her with worry, distress, and doubt ... so please stand with us and a host of heaven that says, "do not fear"

thank you for your support, and for being part of our team

Ps 16:5-11

*Note the passage with which he closed his email:*

Ps 16:5-11 (NLT)

*5 Lord, you alone are my inheritance, my cup of blessing.*

*You guard all that is mine.*

*6 The land you have given me is a pleasant land.*

*What a wonderful inheritance!*

*7 I will bless the Lord who guides me;  
even at night my heart instructs me.*

*8 I know the Lord is always with me.*

*I will not be shaken, for he is right beside me.*

*9 No wonder my heart is glad, and I rejoice.  
My body rests in safety.*

*10 For you will not leave my soul among the dead  
or allow your holy one to rot in the grave.*

*11 You will show me the way of life,  
granting me the joy of your presence*

*and the pleasures of living with you forever.*

Point of this sermon > We live between the ALREADY and the NOT YET of Christ's kingdom...

*Imagine this diagram:*

Picture two circles overlapping. One circle is the "already" of Christ's first coming, and the second circle is the "not yet" of his second coming. Within the overlap is the cross of Christ, and the age of the Church.

We live in the overlap between "what has begun" and "what is yet to come."

This overlap is the mystery, and the reality, of the ALREADY and the NOT YET.

**Covenant and Corinth** (N. T. Wright)<sup>1</sup> -----

2 Corinthians is the most heart-wrenchingly human letter of Paul that we possess.

- Not only does Paul wear his heart on his sleeve, wounds and all, but he actually says he's doing so (2 Cor 6:11).
- The Corinthian church, or most of them anyway, have rejected him, choosing to go with others whom he darkly terms 'super-apostles' or other less complimentary terms.
- The church has made it clear to Paul that if he wants to come back to Corinth he'll have to prove himself, have to present his credentials, have to obtain 'letters of recommendation'!

The letter highlights a deep personal problem for Paul:

1. the very apostolic authority which enabled Paul to do what he did was being called into question,
2. and he had to find a way of reasserting it,
3. and at a time when for other reasons he had been at the lowest ebb of his life.

Paul suffered in Ephesus something like a nervous breakdown (see 2 Cor 1.8-11), quite probably as part of the strong local opposition to his message.

2 Cor 1:8-11

*8 We think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and overwhelmed beyond our ability to endure, and we thought we would never live through it. 9 In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we stopped relying on ourselves and learned to rely only on God, who raises the dead. 10 And he did rescue us from mortal danger, and he will rescue us again. We have placed our confidence in him, and he will continue to rescue us. 11 And you are helping us by praying for us.*

Notice what Paul is facing:

- in his first letter to the Corinthians, there is "pagan behaviour" to the left,
- and in this letter, a form of "Christian heroism" to the right.

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<sup>1</sup>N. T. Wright, "Conflict and Covenant in the Bible," in *Fulcrum Conference, Islington 2008* (UK: Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre, 2008), [Http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=297](http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=297).

**First,**

Paul argues for the nature of apostolic authority, rooted and grounded in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- The “super-apostles” appear to want Christian leadership to be a matter of heroism, of people who are above suffering, whose testimony to the power of God is clear and bright, unsullied with moments of pain or despair.
- Ancient Roman, pagan culture had a culture of success, an essentially imperial model of human flourishing (Corinth prided itself on being 'more Roman than Rome'), of a way of being Christian which had left the cross behind.
- And Paul will have none of it.
- For him, the cross is not simply the salvific event, a moment in the past which, its work done, can then be put behind the apostle as he goes forward from glory to glory.
- This glory is seen precisely in the suffering, as 2 Cor 4 and 6 make clear:

2 Cor 4:7-13 (NLT)

*7 We now have this light shining in our hearts, but we ourselves are like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. This makes it clear that our great power is from God, not from ourselves. 8 We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. 9 We are hunted down, but never abandoned by God. We get knocked down, but we are not destroyed. 10 Through suffering, our bodies continue to share in the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be seen in our bodies. 11 Yes, we live under constant danger of death because we serve Jesus, so that the life of Jesus will be evident in our dying bodies. 12 So we live in the face of death, but this has resulted in eternal life for you. 13 But we continue to preach...*

- The point is this: apostolic authority is rooted not only in the proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but also in the living out of that death and resurrection
- We are left to infer that this is something that the super-apostles were not doing.
- At the heart of it all, Paul embraced and celebrated the shame of the cross, so offensive to those who wanted their Christian faith to be cut and dried and clean and shiny (and conforming to the culture of imperial success), and yet so essential to genuine apostleship.
- This is the point of Paul's spectacular piece of inverted boasting in 2 Cor 11 and 12, where he boasts of all the wrong things, like someone today producing a curriculum vitae of the jobs they didn't get and the books they didn't write, or perhaps someone writing a family Christmas letter about failed exams, getting sacked from work, and so on, all in the tone of voice of 'what a wonderful year we've had'.

**Second,**

Paul argues for the establishment of the new covenant.

- This is his key category of thought.
- Membership in the covenant involves the remarkable face-to-face recognition, as in 2 Cor 3:7-18, of the glory of Jesus Christ.
- It is in the actual face-to-face meeting of those who recognise Jesus in one another that covenant membership is enacted, is known for what it is.
- This chapter should lie near the heart of all discussion of koinonia, of the nature of Christian fellowship.
- Yet this fellowship is through all of us sharing in the life-through-suffering-and-death of Jesus Christ!

**Third,**

all this has come about because Paul has written a painful letter (2 Cor 2:3).

- Is the 'painful letter' 1 Corinthians itself, or is it one of the somewhat disjointed sections of 2 Corinthians itself, perhaps chapters 10-13?
- Some scholars suggest that it is a letter written between 1 and 2 Cor, and now lost.
- That letter was written with apostolic pain and heart-searching but also with apostolic necessity.

**Fourth,**

we have seen the rise of the super-apostles.

- They wanted everything to be cut and dried.
- These super-apostles were conveying the message to Paul that if he wanted to return to Corinth he'd need letters of recommendation.

## Conclusion

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Apostolic authority, covenant, painful letters, and super-apostles:

- We live within 2 Corinthians,
- we pray it in,
- we struggle with its meaning,
- and in the power of the Holy Spirit, we pray to the Father that the pattern of the crucified and risen Son may be made known in us, and in this church.

This is the ALREADY and the NOT YET of Christ's kingdom!

## Bibliography

Wright, N. T. "Conflict and Covenant in the Bible." In *Fulcrum Conference, Islington 2008*. UK: Fulcrum: Renewing the Evangelical Centre, 2008. [Http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=297](http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=297).