

A PAULINE STRATEGY FOR CHALLENGING CULTURAL LITURGIES: MAKING CORINTHIAN DISCIPLES

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Anyone seeking to embody the heart of pastoral ministry will have spent significant energy considering how we might be more effective at shepherding people. The burden of the pastor's heart is to engage in the role of the *undershepherd* in helping to guide the Lord's people into a closer relationship with him (1 Peter 5:2-4). There are few things more thrilling than the joy of watching God transform a life. When stray sheep are called closer to the Chief Shepherd, there is great joy in heaven, and there is a sense of rejoicing in the pastor's heart, too.

The process of helping people live in closer proximity to Jesus is the essence of discipleship. In fact, it is the heart of the final marching orders Jesus left his followers before his ascension. In Matthew's account of the Great Commission, the main imperative is: "make disciples" (Mat 28:19). While making disciples certainly involves evangelism, it is not limited to an evangelistic moment that is completed at a conversion experience. In order to fulfill this commandment of Jesus, we have to be engaged in leading people through a process of growth and maturation. The remaining elements of the Great Commission itself bear that out. Making disciples involves baptism—bringing people to a place of identifying with the work of Jesus on their behalf—and it involves teaching. The teaching Jesus had in mind was not just a transfer of information. It wasn't just about a mental download of doctrine. The commandment involves teaching people "to observe" (Mat 28:20). Being a disciple then isn't just about affirming a set of theological propositions; it is also about action.

One of the Pauline ways of speaking of this is to call people into conformity with the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18). People who have a spiritual encounter with Jesus thereafter spend the remainder of their lives working out the full implications of what that means (Phil 2:12). The process requires continual transformation, and we can see this reality at work in the lives of people within our circles of care. If the spiritual process could be paralleled with the physical life cycle, we might illustrate it with these phases of spiritual life: *unborn*, *children*, and *adult*. In this admittedly simplistic taxonomy, the *unborn* would be those who have not yet come into an appropriate relationship with God. The *children* are those who have become a part of God's people, but remain immature.

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Finally, the *adults* would be those followers of Jesus who attain to varying degrees of maturity in the faith.¹

This is an important illustration because various Christian traditions become fixated with particular phases of the life cycle to the neglect of the others. Highly evangelistic traditions may focus on getting people into the kingdom of God, but languish when it comes to helping people move to maturity. Other traditions may focus on maturity in the faith without appropriate evangelistic fervor. Neither extreme embraces the balance of the Great Commission, nor indeed of the Great Commandment—to love the Lord with the whole heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

Forms of Christian education that end up being little more than information transfer do not help this problem. In James K. A. Smith's volumes on cultural liturgies, he provides compelling arguments for a healthy reconsideration of Christian Education. Smith urges us to consider an alternative anthropology in which love and the imagination are most important in forming our identity and determining how we relate to the world. He then suggests that education from a Christian perspective is about how to facilitate transformation of the human heart in a way that redirects it towards greater ends. In particular, Smith argues, this should happen through Christian worship and liturgical formation. In this way, Smith offers us a reconsideration of how we should engage in the process of discipleship by reconnecting the task of the college with the mission of the church.

Smith's case studies in cultural exegesis demonstrate the way in which human persons are oriented towards particular versions of the good life through "bodily practices, routines, or rituals that grab hold of our hearts through our imagination, which is closely linked to our bodily senses."²

This anthropological adjustment is offered as a correction to the overly "heady" understanding of people as thinking creatures.³ Instead, Smith argues, bodily practices are important because human beings experience and come to *know* the world not first in propositional and conceptual terms, but in terms of an orientation of desire. Smith's anthropological taxonomy seeks to challenge a strictly Cartesian rationalism with Heidegger's more embodied approach to the person. In distinction to an anthropology that reduced the human to thinker or perceiver, Heidegger wanted to show that people approach the world more from the feelings than from the mind. Smith takes Heidegger's approach even farther by pushing him all the way back to Augustine, who argued that the most primordial way humans approach the world is as creatures of love. In this regard, "Our (ultimate) love is constitutive of our identity."⁴

¹ For a fuller articulation of the trajectory of discipleship, see the excellent study designed to help churches measure their effectiveness at building communities of growing believers: Greg L. Hawkins & Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches REVEAL about Spiritual Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

² James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 63.

³ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 41-63.

⁴ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 51.

As humans, our love is directed toward our understanding of the philosophical *summum bonum*, which could be spoken of from a biblical perspective as the Kingdom of God. The real question those who have interest in discipleship should be asking is: What is it that directs the desire of the human heart? What is it that determines the *telos* to which the heart is set? Smith argues that our habits “constitute the fulcrum of our desire: they are the hinge that ‘turns’ our heart, our love, such that it is predisposed to be aimed in certain directions.”⁵ *Habits* are formed from the repetition of bodily practices that function at a precognitive level to inscribe upon the heart knowledge that transcends a merely propositional understanding. Smith calls this knowledge *praktagnosia*, and it is variously illustrated as the kind of knowledge one might have of hometown geography or of the keyboard on a computer.⁶ You may not be able to give street names, but you know how to get to your grandmother’s house. You may not be able to say what letter is to the right of the letter “e,” but you can type without looking. This is because there is an embodiment of knowledge that is greater than what happens merely at the cognitive level—*praktagnosia*. This embodied knowledge is formed from “the complex of inclinations and dispositions that make us lean into the world with a habituated momentum in certain directions,” a reality Smith refers to as *habitus*.⁷

Armed with this anthropology of the human being primarily as a loving rather than thinking creature, Smith builds a case that the world implicitly understands this and engages it effectively in ways that the church frequently misses. If the message of the church is delivered only in cognitive terms, it will never compete with the more visceral appeal of the “gospel” offered by the institutions which embody alternate visions of the “kingdom.” Smith analyzes three cultural institutions (the mall, the stadium, and the university) to demonstrate this point. Each of these institutions achieves its goals of directing human hearts toward its desired ends by engaging people at the level of their heart (*kardia*) rather than strictly at the level of the mind.⁸ If the church hopes for its message to be heard above the clamoring voices of those institutions, the church must learn how to move beyond challenging alternate worldviews and engage in a challenge of the social *imaginaries* that communicate truth

⁵ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 56.

⁶ James K.A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 56-7.

⁷ Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 79.

⁸ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 24-25. As we shall see, Paul’s anthropology is capable of expressing the diversity of the human being without undermining the unity of the person. For Paul, it is not the mind, but the heart (*kardia*) that is the integrative core of the person. J. K. Chamblin, “Psychology,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993): 765-75, at 769. Paul uses a number of different aspects of the person sometimes interchangeably to express the essence or core of the human being. See Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 528-38. Note the classic treatment in: R. Jewett, *Paul’s Anthropological Terms* (Leiden: Brill, 1971).

through image, story, and mythology.⁹ These secular *imaginaries* produce embodied practices and rituals that eventually aim the human heart away from God.¹⁰

While there are certainly contemporary elements of this problem unique to our time, the issue itself is not without biblical precedent. The Apostle Paul's Corinthian correspondence provides us with a unique window into the social *imaginaries* present in first century culture.¹¹ Perhaps more than in any other New Testament literature, we find in Paul's interaction with the people of Corinth an excellent case study in how the church provides an alternative social *imaginary* that challenges and undermines what is offered by a predominately pagan culture.¹² Corinth was a cosmopolitan city that reflected the values espoused by the Roman Imperial propaganda. Advancing a strategy that would confront and subvert the cultural liturgies of his day would be critical to Paul's missionary endeavor.

Founded by Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., Roman Corinth was populated mainly with freedmen, with veterans, and with artisans and craftsmen from a diverse background. The eclectic denizens of Corinth were assembled mostly from the have-nots of the Roman Empire and given a chance to attain a certain degree of advancement in this city, which took its cues from mother Rome. This meant that the people of Corinth pursued contemporary ideals of *Romanitas* in order to establish their belonging in a world that had previously excluded them.¹³ Heavily influenced by a culture of honor and shame, a person with humble beginnings, if they acquired resources of economic or political capital, could improve their status and in turn their sense of self-worth.¹⁴ Accordingly, commercial and social competition in ancient Corinth reached startling proportions and gave rise to a cutthroat culture in which only the strongest could survive.¹⁵ In Corinthian culture, boasting and self-promotion were necessary means

⁹ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 65.

¹⁰ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 93.

¹¹ Smith discusses a social imaginary from the work of Charles Taylor's *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23-30; see Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 65-71.

¹² David Horrell argues that Paul's Corinthians correspondence is of exception value in that it recalls elements of Paul's earliest instruction to the fledgling Christian community in Corinth (David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], 77).

¹³ Smith argues that Christian worship is political in that it marks us and trains us as citizens of another king and as people who are seeking another kingdom (*Desiring The Kingdom*, 154). This is very resonant with the way that Paul's Gospel invited a subversion of the power structures of Rome; see R. A. Horsley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, Intl., 1997).

¹⁴ Anthony C. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 13.

¹⁵ The struggle for prestige and status in the Corinthian culture lies behind many of the problems Paul faced in his ministry there. The fact that Corinth was the first Greek city to host Roman gladiatorial games confirms the savage spirit of Corinthian competitiveness (Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 11).

of achieving greater honor in society. To be a good citizen was considered the height of virtue, while any other behavior than that which advanced the social construct of the city or Empire was either suspect or blatantly shameful.¹⁶

Despite the difficulties of survival in this context, Corinth was a thriving cosmopolitan and pluralistic city. Due to its strategic location for trade, it quickly became an economic and cultural center well-known for its prosperity. Located just south of the narrow isthmus that connected the two major land masses of Greece, Corinth commanded harbors both in the Aegean Sea to the east as well as in the Ionian Sea to the west. This made Corinth a crossroads for trade in the Roman Empire.¹⁷ True to form with its reputation for being highly competitive, Corinth quickly became a major economic force in the first century both through its engagement in trade as well as through its own manufacturing, which was renowned for its quality and aesthetic value in the period.

In addition to being renowned for its wealth, Corinth was also renowned for its avant-garde living. A number of factors converged to make Corinth a place of extremely diverse morality. The constant traffic from international merchants, the tourism attracted by the nearby cultic site of Delphi, the regular schedule of popular athletic events, and the host of religious pilgrims attracted to the various centers of worship in and around Corinth led to a heterogeneous culture renowned for its sexual promiscuity, its idolatrous rituals, and its ruthless competitiveness.¹⁸

Given the multi-cultural nature of Corinth, it should come as no surprise that the city accommodated a wide variety of idolatrous practices. The most prominent of these would have been the Roman imperial cult, which was situated in a highly provocative and suggestive location among the smorgasbord of religious practices offered.¹⁹ While certainly not every citizen would have participated in this particular cult, those who hoped to advance within the power structures of the day would almost certainly have done. The imperial cult helped to relay the Imperial propaganda and offered opportunity for people desperate to achieve honor and status to demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment to the public ideals.²⁰

The interesting thing for our purposes is how the behavior in a city like Corinth was conditioned by the social practices that made up everyday life in this context. The social, religious, and political institutions were intertwined to embrace the Roman ethos and communicate clear ideas about the world. These institutions were all embodied in *prognostika*

¹⁶ The proliferation of public benefaction in Corinth demonstrates the lengths to which its citizens would go to ensure their social status. For further study, see Bruce Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth: the Influence of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁷ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 9.

¹⁸ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983), 53-56.

¹⁹ Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, 272.

²⁰ See S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

that directed the hearts of the adherents towards the Roman (or at least the Corinthian) vision of the good life.

The early Christian community in Corinth struggled because they were willing to accept certain propositions of the gospel message, but they failed to have that message actually shape their lives in terms of their practices. In essence, “The Corinthians were simply trying to be Christians with a minimal amount of social and theological disturbance.”²¹ Or as Fee elegantly puts it, “Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient. This is what 1 Corinthians attempts to do.”²²

The Corinthians’ dysfunctional view of reality and inadequate experience of the Spirit led to execrable behavior that the Apostle Paul challenged throughout his dealings with them. Whether from an eschatological distortion, or an erroneous view of the material world, or a puffed-up view of knowledge, they managed to justify behavior that Paul found out of sync with the Kingdom of God. So, the apostle Paul sought to deal with this issue in a way that would challenge and subvert the prevailing liturgies within the Corinthian culture.²³ If the Apostle Paul was going to establish a new community of faith in the pagan city of Corinth, he was going to have to engage a strategy that would go beyond an appeal to the person as thinker. While that approach may have gained surer footing in Athens, the philosophical nerve center of Paul’s world, even there it would not have been without difficulty—and it certainly would not be sufficient in the culture of ancient Corinth, a city aflame in pursuit of a decadent version of the good life. How he does that should prove incredibly instructive for us.²⁴

Paul’s Corinthian correspondence is so helpful for us because it is primarily interested not in theoretical knowledge of God, but in the practical application of that profound truth to real world situations.²⁵ In the apostolic attempt to redirect the hearts of the believers in Corinth, we

²¹ Lyle D. Vander Broek quoted in Roy E. Ciampa & Brian S. Rosner. *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 5.

²² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 4.

²³ In this way, Paul’s task in Corinth can be said to be essentially about the formation of desire. Paul is attempting to redirect the love of the Corinthians towards the Kingdom of God and away from the prevailing cultural vision of beauty. Cf. Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 18.

²⁴ Thistleton argues for a particular resonance between first century Roman Corinthian culture and ours. “All this provides an embarrassingly close model of a postmodern context for the gospel in our own times, even given the huge historical differences and distances in so many other respects” (Thistleton, *Corinthians*, 17).

²⁵ In particular, Paul was interested in establishing believing communities through whom the message of the Gospel could be advanced. Note the interesting work of Graham Hill on what it means for the church to be *missional* (Graham Hill, *Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012]).

can see at least three interconnected motifs that guide the process.²⁶ Paul's strategy is based upon an *eschatological shift* that leads to a *transformed epistemology* and produces a *radically subversive ethic*.

AN ESCHATOLOGICAL SHIFT

First, Paul's strategy in ministry to the Corinthians involves an *eschatological shift*.²⁷ It is commonly recognized that Pauline eschatology is heavily influenced by Jewish apocalyptic thought.²⁸ While Jewish apocalyptic influence may be noted in Paul's writings, his thinking also stands in distinction to the apocalyptic mindsets of his time. Both Jewish apocalyptic writings and Paul view history as a division of time into two successive ages. The present age, a world hostile in its manifold rebellion against God, will ultimately be overtaken by the new age of the Spirit when God will overcome all opposition to his rule (cf. *4 Ezra* 4:26; 7:50). The noteworthy difference between Paul and the apocalyptic literature contemporary with him is that this intervention of God is viewed as a future event in the apocalyptic literature, but Paul interpreted the Christ event as the pivotal crux of history which brought the old age to a close and initiated the subsequent and final age of the Spirit, the final Judgment, and the ultimate establishment of God's reign.

Paul modified the Jewish thinking in which he had been steeped. He placed the time of God's most radical invasion of the world in the past in the events of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.²⁹ Paul inverts the future oriented hope of God's actions described in Jewish writings into an eschatological system where the epicenter of God's cosmic earthquake was located in the past; and, at the same time, he maintained an expectation for the consummation of that action in the future.³⁰ There was a form of this eschatological tension in some Jewish writings from our period but

²⁶ This work will focus mostly on 1 Corinthians though these themes are significantly supported throughout the Pauline literature.

²⁷ Much could be said here about the way in which Paul challenged the Roman view of time and space with his eschatological reorientation. For further discussion, see T. R. Jackson, "Roman Imperial Ideology and Paul's Concept of New Creation," in *New Creation in Paul's Letters: A Study of the Historical and Social Setting of a Pauline Concept* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2010): 60-80.

²⁸ The caution of R. Barry Matlock notwithstanding, this remains an important background against which we can understand Paul's own theological innovations (R. Barry Matlock, *Unveiling the Apocalyptic Paul: Paul's Interpreters and the Rhetoric of Criticism* [JSNTSS, 127; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996]).

²⁹ V.P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (The Anchor Bible, 32A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1984), 333-4.

³⁰ Y. Kwon prefers to speak about an organic relationship in eschatological perspectives rather than an eschatological tension. However, a tension does arise when we attempt to explain how Paul can seem to suggest so much has been accomplished for the believer in one instance and in another suggest so much is left to come. The tension is not with God but with how to explain the presence of evil even after the cross. In the end, Kwon's preference for an organic relationship between the present and future may just be a way of sneaking in the old understanding of inaugurated eschatology under cover of different terminology (Y. Kwon, *Eschatology in Galatians* [Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2004]).

the focus lay in the future whereas Paul's writing included two foci: the past as well as the future.³¹

For Paul, the death and resurrection of Jesus marked the end of the old age and the beginning of the new age of the Spirit,³² which he viewed as already begun but not yet brought to complete consummation. The old-age problems that characterize the world still exist while the characteristics of the new age of the Spirit have begun to be present in an overlapping of the ages. This inaugurated but not consummated eschatological matrix is important throughout Paul's letters, and it is powerfully present in Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians. First Corinthians begins with a focus on the cross (1:17; 2:2) and ends with a focus on the resurrection (15:12-28, 42-57), and this places this letter firmly within this important eschatological construct. But, there are also strong pointers throughout the letter that indicate Paul's eschatological matrix is at play in his strategy of discipleship for the Corinthian community.³³

The introductory thanksgiving of the letter is cast in an eschatological framework as Paul attempts to encourage the Corinthian church and affirm their status as an eschatological community.³⁴ He has received word that the competitive spirit of the city has infiltrated the worship community in their pursuit of spiritual giftings. They are comparing themselves with one another in a kind of spiritual one-upmanship that is divisive rather than unifying. So, Paul begins by reminding them that the work of the Spirit is very real among them (1 Cor. 1:7-8) and that the community is an apocalyptic community looking forward to the "day of the Lord Jesus Christ."³⁵

This pervasive eschatological reality underlies Paul's approach to the situation at Corinth. The Apostle deals with the problems he faces in the Corinthian church from this theological matrix in many ways.³⁶ He challenges the worldly wisdom of the Corinthians with the wisdom

³¹ See the excellent work of P. Minear on apocalyptic cosmology. Interestingly, the book of Revelation is the exception which proves the rule. This is the only actual apocalyptic writing which has a similar eschatological tension and this is precisely because it is predicated on the Christ event (P. Minear, "The Cosmology of the Apocalypse," in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Otto A. Piper*, ed. William Klassen and Graydon F. Snyder [London: SCM Press, 1962], 23-37).

³² J. Beker. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 362.

³³ For an interesting application of this important concept, see Keith T. Marriner, *Following the Lamb: The Theme of Discipleship in the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016).

³⁴ P. T. O'Brien has shown how themes addressed in the introductory thanksgivings of Paul's letters frequently serve as a kind of symphonic overture for themes to which he plans to return in the course of his writing (P. T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul* [Leiden: Brill, 1977]).

³⁵ They are an apocalyptic community in the sense that they "eagerly await" the "revealing" (τὴν ἀποκάλυψιν) of Jesus! Cf. Rom. 8:18-25.

³⁶ For further discussion of this eschatological matrix, see G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

revealed from the Spirit (1:6-10).³⁷ He argues that believers should not engage in lawsuits because it compromised their integrity as those who would participate in God's eschatological judgment of the world at the end of time (1 Cor 4:1-5; 6:1-11).

One particularly enlightening excrescence of this reality occurs in 1 Cor 7:29-31 where Paul uses an eschatological argument as ground for urging Corinthian readers/hearers to remain as they are (7:17, 24). The status of circumcision/uncircumcision, slave/free and marriage/singleness are all addressed under the aegis of an eschatological reality. Paul's argument throughout is based on a detachment from the importance of human affairs because the "form of this world is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31). The intention is to demonstrate that the present world is not our ultimate reality. Paul views the time in which the Corinthians were living to be the culminating time of human history (1 Cor 10:11). He reminds them of Israel's history and indicates that their history was intended to instruct not only the ancient Israelites, but also the newly formed people of God that included both Jew and Gentile. For him, the Old Testament narratives were important for their own sake, but they also point forward to God's saving purposes, which have found their fulfillment in Jesus.³⁸

What is particularly important in our context is the way Paul uses the negative example of Israel in such a highly charged eschatological strategy of dealing with the Corinthian practice of eating food sacrificed to idols—whether purchased from the marketplace or attending feasts held in the temples. Paul makes the point in the argument of this section (1 Cor. 8:1-11:1) that food sold in the marketplace may be taken without concern for its provenance, but that believers should be concerned about how their actions affect the faith of others, and they should be concerned about actually being associated with idolatrous practices.

Most likely what was happening in Corinth was the commonplace practice of people holding special dinners in temple precincts.³⁹ Some believers argued on the basis of superior "knowledge" that they were free to do so because the idols were merely false gods (1 Cor 8:4). Paul rejects this position, arguing that believers ought to be responsible for how their actions affect others as well as maintain certain compunctions about direct association with idolatrous practices. He does so by reminding the Corinthians that they are God's eschatological people. He directly confronts the liturgies of the Corinthian social setting, which would have been especially at play in the meals he is warning them about in this context with the sobering reminder of Israel's idolatrous past, and he clearly sets that historical narrative in the larger context of God's eschatological plan. It is no accident then that Paul turns in chapter 11 to a discussion of an alternative meal—one that repudiates the idolatrous temple feasts and

³⁷ This concept is immensely eschatological since the new age envisaged within the Judaism of Paul's day was to be the age of the Spirit.

³⁸ Fee, *Corinthians*, 458-9.

³⁹ Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 191-95.

embodies the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God.⁴⁰ Resituating the Corinthians on God's calendar of the ages is critical to Paul's strategy of redirecting their affections.

TRANSFORMED EPISTEMOLOGY

Secondly, the *eschatological shift* leads to a *transformed epistemology*. This may be observed in the way Paul addresses divisions within the church at Corinth (1 Cor 1:10-4:21). There are at least three major issues Paul addresses in various ways throughout this section in an attempt to move the Corinthians closer to what a truly eschatological community ought to look like.⁴¹ First, the divisions of the church at Corinth have something to do with strife over various leaders. There is no compelling evidence that there was actually division among the leaders themselves.⁴² Nevertheless, the Corinthians seemed to rally around various leaders based on their estimation of the leaders' status in the community.⁴³ Their interest in identifying with the various leaders was likely related to their desire to assert their own honor and status above that of the other believers in the community.

Secondly, the strife is connected with the Corinthians' inadequate understanding of wisdom and knowledge. They have an over-inflated view of their own perception and an exalted view of the efficacy of knowledge. The terms σοφία or σοφός appear in heavy concentration in 1 Corinthians 1-3. The fact that the terms are used derisively by Paul indicates he is challenging what he believes to be faulty perceptions on the part of the Corinthians. Likewise, the term γνῶσις is used more heavily in Paul's letters to the Corinthians than in all of his other letters combined.⁴⁴ The Corinthians pride themselves on their acquisition of rights based on their advanced understanding (1 Cor 8:1-13). But, Paul offers them a totally different way of perception—through love rather than through knowledge (1 Cor 8:2-3).

Thirdly, judging from the defense of his authority as an apostle, there must have existed at Corinth a significant level of distrust with regard to Paul's role in the community. Paul's opponents in Corinth were most likely concerned with the nature of his leadership as his appearance did not match the powerful and authoritative image they felt should be characteristic of an apostle. There were models in Corinth of how a

⁴⁰ Cf. Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (Akron: OSU Publications, 2002).

⁴¹ Fee argues that there are at least four issues going on in Paul's relationship with the Corinthians (*Corinthians*, 48-9).

⁴² In fact, quite the contrary, Paul speaks positively of Apollos for example in 3:5-9 and 16:12. If there were a problem among the leaders, we might have expected Paul to challenge the offending parties, as he did with Peter in Galatians 2:7-8.

⁴³ It is highly likely that this is related to the Corinthian understanding of patronage and power; see John Chow, *Patronage and Power: A Study of Social Networks in Corinth* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ γνῶσις appears 10 times in 1 Corinthians, 6 times in 2 Corinthians, and only 7 times in the remainder of Pauline literature.

community should receive and support visiting teachers.⁴⁵ Public orators were highly sought after in first century Corinth, and there was a robust culture of self-congratulatory boasting among them that served as their marketing strategy for their services. Those willing to pay could assume the orator into his or her patronage and obtain some level of prestige for doing so as well as influence the message of the orator. Paul's approach to ministry renounced the conventions of the day and refused to accept payment from his audience as a way of setting himself apart from the orators (Cf. 1 Cor 9:15-16). By doing so, he may have alienated a group of Corinthians who attempted to place him under their patronage for their own social advantage. Paul's work in the marketplace as a craftsman to support his ministry would have further challenged their sensibilities. They may have had significant difficulty submitting to a person of such menial estate.⁴⁶

The Corinthians had misunderstood Paul (2 Cor 1:14) because they misunderstood the nature of the ministry he had received from Christ—a ministry characterized by weakness and suffering. Paul defends his ministry on the basis that the eschatological inversion inaugurated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus effects an epistemological change (1 Cor 4:3-5, 8, 9-13, 20).

In 2 Cor 5:16, just before employing the eschatologically charged language of “new creation” in 5:17, Paul indicates a change of perspective wrought by the Christ event. Whereas Paul had previously known Christ *κατὰ σάρκα*, he now had a new way of knowing the world and everything in it. He appeals to the Corinthians to embrace this new kind of epistemology in application to his own ministry.

What he is asserting is that there are different systems of measurement. According to the measure of his opponents, his authority does not hold up. But they are evaluating him *κατὰ σάρκα* just as he had once evaluated the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.⁴⁷ However, that cataclysmic event marked the beginning of an entirely new mode of knowledge. The common sense rulings of the old age are foolishness in the new creation.⁴⁸ Paul “coins an epistemological locution—to know by the norm of the

⁴⁵ B. W. Winter, “The Entries and Ethics of Orators and Paul.” *Tyndale Bulletin* 44.1 (1993) 55-74.

⁴⁶ “In a city where social climbing was a major preoccupation, Paul's deliberate stepping down in apparent status would have been seen by many as disturbing, disgusting, and even provocative” (Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 21).

⁴⁷ “Flesh” is an important concept in Paul and can be used in a number of different ways. R. Jewett's study of Paul's anthropological terms astutely points out how this term is associated with the old age (cf. Gal 4:21-31). He acknowledges that Paul uses *κατὰ σάρκα* in 2 Cor 5:16 to level the charge that those who are falsely evaluating his ministry are doing so according to the characteristics of the old age in conflict with those of the new age of the new creation (Jewett, *Anthropological Terms*, 453-6).

⁴⁸ Suffering could not be viewed positively in the old world. It is only acceptable because of the promise of resurrection.

flesh—by which he refers to the passé, old-age manner of acquiring knowledge.⁴⁹

The epistemological transformation spoken of by Paul would have been incredibly resonant in the Corinthian community, which was inundated with Roman imperial ideology. As a model Roman colony, Corinth embraced wholesale the new reality offered by the empire.⁵⁰ Paul sought to describe a reinterpretation of reality that stood in stark contrast to the social world created by the power of Rome.⁵¹

While the Pauline juxtaposition of *σάρξ* versus *πνεῦμα* (Rom 1:4; 8:4-5; Gal 4:29) is typically brought into the interpretation of this passage, Martyn proposes that the opposite to knowing *κατὰ σάρκα* is knowing *κατὰ σταυρόν*.⁵² Though the expression *κατὰ σταυρόν* is not actually used by Paul, it seems to encapsulate the meaning of his argument. Earlier, Paul had argued that it was the love of Christ that *controlled or compelled* him (5:14). The love of Christ is to be understood here in the context of the very next verse where the self-sacrificial action of his death and resurrection for the benefit of others is set forth. It was that event which turned the ages, which was presented to Paul by the resurrected Lord Himself on the Damascus road, which, in turn, revolutionized Paul's own understanding of the world and the times in which he lived, and which provided the paradigm for his own apostolic ministry.⁵³ He understood that the message of the cross was "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:23) but, for him, it was nothing less than the event of God's invasion into the world to display the power of his salvation (1 Cor 1:18, 24; cf. Rom 1:16).

Paul redefines wisdom according to the cross. Whereas the Corinthians understood wisdom and knowledge in the context of honor and power, Paul offers an entirely alternate basis for wisdom and knowledge. In 1 Corinthians, Paul uses "wisdom" in a number of ways.⁵⁴ It sometimes refers to the use of human arguments with a view towards persuasion or in the sense of applying worldly rules of measurement in adjudicating

⁴⁹ Martyn 1997:95-7. J. L. Martyn argues that the Corinthians would have had no problems understanding Paul on this matter on the basis of similar ideas found in Philo where the Platonic idea of true knowledge being hindered by the flesh is present (cf. *Agriculture* 97; *Migration* 14; *Unchangeable* 143; *Giants* 53). J. L. Martyn. *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

⁵⁰ For example, Mary E. Walbank. "Evidence for the Imperial Cult in Julio-Claudian Corinth," in *Subject and Ruler: The Cult of the Ruling Power in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Alastair Small (Ann Arbor, MI: Thomson-Shore, 1996), 201-13.

⁵¹ R. A. Horsley, "Paul's Assembly in Corinth: An Alternative Society," in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 53, 371-95; cf. Wayne A. Meeks. *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 164-92; Chow, Patronage, 188-90.

⁵² W. Hulitt Gloer suggests that *κατὰ πνεῦμα* could be connected to *κατὰ σταυρόν* in Paul (*An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Understanding of New Creation and Reconciliation in 2 Cor. 5:14-21* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1996), 108, 398).

⁵³ S. Kim, *The Origin of Paul's Gospel* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1984).

⁵⁴ C. K. Barrett in Ciampa, *Corinthians*, 87.

truth. It is also used in reference to God's plan of redemption involving a crucified Messiah, and as such it entails the substance of salvation itself.

Paul sets at odds the power wielded and pursued by the status brokers of the Corinthian community with the wisdom and power of his Gospel message about the cross (1 Cor 1:17-18, 24-25). The cross upends all of their worldly understandings of wisdom. What the world thinks is wise is actually foolishness to God; it falls under God's eschatological judgment, which has already begun in his powerful invasion of this age in the cross of Christ.⁵⁵ Conversely the wisdom of God is described as foolishness (*μωρία*) to the perishing but the power (*δύναμις*) of God to those being saved (v. 18).

Paul insists that his message is eschatological wisdom that communicates God's truth to the Corinthians (2:6-9). The wisdom he offers is not "the wisdom of this age (1 Cor 2:6)." Instead, it is the wisdom of God previously hidden from human understanding but now made known by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-10). It is the specific role of the Spirit to help believers understand the wisdom of the cross (2:6-16). The eschatological importance of this is reiterated by Paul with the quotation in 1 Cor 2:9. This quotation has been a notoriously difficult crux in the history of interpreting this passage. The main problem is that we cannot identify exactly what Paul is quoting. Paul's use of the phrase "it is written" indicates that Paul believes the following to be scripture. This is a normal construction for Pauline citations of the Old Testament. However, 1 Cor 2:9 in its current form does not appear to represent any single Old Testament text. Origen explained this problem by suggesting that Paul was quoting from an early apocalyptic source called *The Apocalypse of Elijah*, which we know exists but which has been lost to us.⁵⁶ Others have suggested that this may reflect the *Gospel of Thomas 17* where Jesus allegedly says, "I will give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched and what has not entered into the heart of man."⁵⁷

The most satisfying explanation is that this represents an early reflection on several biblical texts, the most significant of which appears in Isaiah 64:4, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him (Isa 64:4 ESV)." This text appears in the context of Isaiah's longing for God's end-time salvation, which culminates in the Isaianic material in new creation language. The salvation plan of God extends to include a new heaven and a new earth in Isa 65:17.⁵⁸ If this is the vein of thought that influenced Paul in this passage, the point is made even stronger that human perception, human understanding is insufficient to comprehend

⁵⁵ Note in this regard the use of Isa 29:14 in 1 Cor 1:19. This may be an Isaianic reminder of the "Wonderful Counselor" (Isa 9:6), the Messianic ruler who would effect God's end-time salvation.

⁵⁶ Fee, *Corinthians*, 109.

⁵⁷ Fee, *Corinthians*, 109.

⁵⁸ I argue that this theme is heavily influential for Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 (T.R. Jackson, *New Creation*).

the purposes of God in the world, but that the end-time work of the Spirit, the ultimate catalyst for and marker of the new creation, provides God's people with an alternate way of knowing that subverts the world's inadequate judgments.

Paul's alternate way of knowing allows him to redefine leadership, an issue at the center of whatever disputes were going on in Corinth, and establish the nature of the church in contradistinction to the typical social groups of the time. In terms of leadership, Paul uses four important terms that reset the inappropriate understanding of the Corinthians. Rather than viewing leaders as superior in privilege and status, Paul refers to leaders as "servants" (διάκονοι) (1 Cor 3:5). He thus undermines the kind of factions oriented around various personas that threatened the unity of the community. He further indicates that the leaders of the church are "fellow workers" (συνεργοί) with God (1 Cor 3:9) and that they serve as the subordinates of Christ (ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ) (1 Cor 4:1). There is no delusion of grandeur entertained about the status of leadership in the Pauline communities. Leaders are stewards (οἰκονόμους) who manage what belongs to God.

All of this calls into question the basis of knowledge employed by the Corinthians. Paul argues that the Kingdom of God is not a matter of human logic, worldly thinking, or rhetorical skill, but a demonstration of the Spirit's power (1 Cor 4:20).⁵⁹ The Spirit's power is demonstrated through the creation and maintenance of the otherwise foolish and weak ministry of Paul and through the transformation of the Corinthians themselves. In order for the Corinthians to fulfill their role as God's eschatological people, they were called upon by Paul to embrace the alternate epistemology inaugurated by the cross of Jesus. Whereas the Corinthians may have tended too heavily towards understanding the end times to be fully present, Paul lived out a cruciform apostleship that challenged their faulty understanding and called them to see that God was facilitating his plan in the world in a totally unexpected and counterintuitive way. Paul expects a change in the behavior of the Corinthians not simply based on reason but based on a whole new reality in which they participate through the work of the Spirit.

A RADICALLY SUBVERSIVE ETHIC

Finally, Paul's *eschatological epistemology* produced a *radically subversive* ethic. This seems to be a key point in Paul's strategy against the cultural liturgies faced by the Corinthian believers. Paul operated within a culture especially adept at aiming the heart's desires towards its own versions of the good life.⁶⁰ For his missionary work in Corinth to be successful,

⁵⁹ Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 377.

⁶⁰ If discipleship must necessarily involve fulfillment of the love commands, this becomes even more poignant. First, our love for one another is testimony that we are followers (John 13:35). Secondly, our obedience to the commandments is the way we are meant to feed and to demonstrate our love for God (2 John 1:6). Cf. 1 Cor 7:19. Note the forthcoming work on the ethical nature of Pauline theology: J. Paul Sampley, *Walking in Love: Moral Progress and Spiritual Growth with the Apostle Paul* (Fortress Press, 2016).

he needed an alternate strategy that fully embodied what the kingdom of God looked like among the Corinthians. It is highly instructive for us that Paul's strategy for the Corinthians was not primarily articulated in terms of a liturgy, but of an ethic—a particular way of living. That is certainly not to say that liturgy was not important for him, but that Paul dealt more thoroughly with the lived experience of the Corinthians. This point is made clear at the very beginning of the letter where Paul refers to the Corinthians as a community “called to be holy” (1:2).⁶¹ It is very clear in this letter that the lifestyles of the Corinthian believers did not necessarily exemplify this calling, but Paul is reminding them of their calling to inspire them to strive towards living out the status granted to them by God.⁶²

In 1 Cor 2:1-5, Paul describes clearly his approach to the ministry he hoped would effectively call the Corinthian people to the hope of his gospel message. He points out how his message stood in stark contrast to the social conventions expected of public orators of his day (2:1).⁶³ Paul determined to focus on the crucified Jesus as the core of his message (2:2). This would have been a strategic mistake if the basis for wisdom and knowledge were to be founded in this world's way of thinking, but the cross was in fact the way that God chose to demonstrate his wisdom to the world.

Paul goes on to argue that his message wasn't characterized by the kind of persuasion they expected from the rhetoricians where the results of the speaking were dependent upon the power of the speaker's delivery.⁶⁴ Quite the contrary, Paul's message (λόγος) was delivered in the form of a proclamation (κήρυγμα) that did not rely on human powers of persuasion, but upon the transforming power of the Spirit of God (2:4-5).⁶⁵ The “demonstration of the Spirit and of power” (ESV 2:4) is not likely a reference to miraculous signs and wonders, as that would assert the kind of power that the Corinthians craved. This would play against the thrust of Paul's argument here. Rather, the effectiveness of the message evidenced in the transformed lives of the Corinthians themselves (2 Cor 3:2-3) is the best testimony to vindicate Paul against any who might undermine or otherwise diminish his work.⁶⁶

The worldly (κατὰ σάρκα) wisdom of the Corinthians led to an improper assessment of Paul's ministry and to divisions within the community. Paul's cruciform ministry was challenging to the Corinthian sensibilities because it did not conform to their image of power and

⁶¹ This is a reality not only in the letters of Paul, but also in the NT as a whole. See David G. Peterson, *Possessed By God: A NT Theology of Sanctification and Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁶² Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 77. See J. Paul Sampley, *Walking Between the Times: Paul's Moral Reasoning* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

⁶³ Fee, *Corinthians*, 90-2.

⁶⁴ B. Winter, *Philo and Paul Among the Sophists: Alexandrian and Corinthian Responses to a Julio-Claudian Movement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁶⁵ Fee, *Corinthians*, 94-5.

⁶⁶ The magnitude of their transformation strengthens the point (1 Cor 1:26)! See: Thiselton, *Corinthians*, 222.

authority. Since Paul did not engage in the common social maneuvering, they read him as being weak and ineffective. But, Paul's decision to know nothing among them but the crucified Jesus (1 Cor 2:2) was not a mere rhetorical convention. It was in essence a way of life that he embraced. It was a form for doing ministry.⁶⁷ It was through his embracing his own weakness that the strength of the Spirit was manifest, as his testimony confirms (1 Cor 2:1-5; 2 Cor 1:9; 4:10; 12:9). This kind of ministry wasn't appealing to those who evaluated through the faulty epistemology of the old age. To them, it was neither powerful nor persuasive. The Corinthians and Paul essentially disagreed over what it meant for them to be a community created and sustained by the Spirit.

The Corinthian experience of the Spirit led them to believe that they were protected from the ill effects of participation in actions involving their bodies. They viewed themselves as spiritually superior to others, including Paul himself.⁶⁸ Believing themselves to be living above the mundane limitations of their present world, they alternately over- or under-emphasized the importance of their physical embodiment of the Kingdom of God. For example, some within the community were sexually promiscuous (1 Corinthians 5) while others denied the importance of sex and even marriage itself (1 Corinthians 7). These extreme ethics were the result of their over-estimation of their spiritual experience. They believed the evidence of the Spirit's presence among them was either their asceticism or their libertinism. Furthermore, they manifested miraculous demonstrations of the Spirit, including *glossolalia*. They believed themselves to speak with the very language of heaven and to have fully received the promises of the Spirit, some of which Paul reserved for the future.

The Corinthians' intensely spiritualized view of reality is ultimately attested in their misunderstanding of Paul's teaching concerning the resurrection of the body. Believing themselves to have already obtained the fullness of the Spirit, and viewing reality from the perspective of a type of dualism that devalued the material world, the Corinthians could not envisage the need for a physical resurrection (1 Cor 15:35-58).⁶⁹ Paul, of course, responds by reminding them that the bodily resurrection of Jesus himself was central to the faith (1 Cor 15:1-11), and that the resurrection of Jesus made bodily resurrection for all believers a necessary corollary (1 Cor 15:12-34) in which God demonstrates value for the physical universe.

Yet, the community of Corinthians established by Paul believed they were inoculated against their "fleshly" behavior because they had participated in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This

⁶⁷ Cf. Hafemann, "The Role of Suffering in the Mission of Paul," in *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, ed. Jostein Adna and Hans Kvalbein (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 165-84.

⁶⁸ The repeated use of the term *πνευματικός* in the letter confirms this assessment. Paul's self-defense is articulated in a way that challenges their assumptions about their relationship to him (Cf. 1 Cor. 14:37). See Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 83.

⁶⁹ Smith, *Desiring The Kingdom*, 32.

is the point of Paul's warning about participating in idol feasts in 1 Cor 10:1-5. The power of the analogy lies in the fact that ancient Israel had its own parallels with baptism and the Lord's Supper.⁷⁰ Though they engaged in their own religious practices, God was not pleased "with most of them," and they fell under his judgment (v. 5). Likewise, the Corinthians cannot expect participation in the sacraments to protect them from the spiritual dangers of engaging in idolatrous rituals—rituals that Paul described as being "fellowship (κοινωνός) with demons" (1 Cor 10:20-21).

As Fee concludes,

Thus, all the while they are prating about being *πνευματικοί*, they are also indulging in theological and behavioral fancies that have removed them far from the real life of the Spirit, where one lives out the future in the present even in weakness, not in triumphalist terms, but in terms of the ethical life of those 'who have been sanctified in the name of Christ and by the power of the Spirit' (6:11).⁷¹

Together, the Corinthians form the community where the Spirit of God dwells, and this is why unity is so important in their context (1 Cor 3:16-17). The thought that some among them might create divisions based on human assessments of power compromised the vision of Kingdom Paul wanted to proclaim. Christians who were suing one another challenged the claim that this world's system of values was defunct (1 Cor 6:6). Distorted sexuality, whether in promiscuity or in rejection of appropriate marital relationships, inappropriately separated the spirit from the body and led to significant difficulties among Corinthian believers (1 Cor 5; 7). Participation in idolatrous rituals in the name of superior knowledge threatened the love that was supposed to be central to their eschatological community. Worship that focused on external demonstrations of power played into the hands of the improper evaluations of power and status embraced by the larger society. Devaluing of the physical world led to an erroneous view of spiritual realities and led to false perception of the body. Throughout this letter, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to embrace an ethic that testifies to the eschatological reality of the gospel.

For Paul, the message wasn't a disembodied set of propositions that were declaimed during Christian worship, nor was it simply a way of doing worship that reminded the Corinthians of the reality of the gospel message. It was fully embodied in his own ministry and his way of life. He specifically tells the Corinthians that he is sending Timothy to them to "to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church" (1 Cor 4:17 ESV). It was his way of living and the life to which he called the community that gave the greatest subversive challenge to the prevailing institutions in Roman Corinth that actively sought to direct the hearts of its people.

⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that Israel's experiences were sacramental in exactly the same way as baptism and the Eucharist are considered within the Christian tradition. See: Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 181-3.

⁷¹ Fee, *God's Empowering Presence*, 83.

Paul expected the people of Corinth to embody the same kind of *radically subversive ethic* in their lives. If Ciampa and Rosner are correct, the problems Paul addressed at Corinth are not random issues pieced together in an ad hoc argument. In their view, the letter operates from within a Jewish context influenced by Deuteronomy and Isaiah. It is organized around two primary concerns from the Jewish tradition: sexual immorality and idolatry.⁷² They take 1 Cor 4:18-7:40 to be basically dealing with the problem of sexual immorality. The negative side of this deals with the problems in Corinth itself and the positive side has to do with sexual relationships within marriage. They then argue that 1 Cor 8-14 is essentially addressing the problem of idolatry negatively in its manifestations in the Corinthians' situations and positively in terms of appropriate worship.⁷³

However the argument of the letter might be arranged, Paul's interest in the behavior of the Corinthians is undeniable. The sexually charged atmosphere of Roman Corinth was widely known in the ancient world. Its pluralistic ethos welcomed many gods and goddesses into its affections. Paul's challenge to those competing affections came in the form of urgent admonitions to the Corinthians about appropriate Christian living.

Of course, Christian ethics is an expression of worship, so it will also be helpful to address the question of what the believers in Corinth actually did when they gathered. David Horrell defines Pauline Christianity as "a symbolic order embodied in communities."⁷⁴ So, what form did the embodiment of the symbolic order in worship actually take?⁷⁵ While many practices that existed in the Corinthian church may be considered liturgical, including exercising the gifts of the Spirit, prayer, hymns, confessions, and other aspects of early Christian practice, for the sake of our discussion, we can limit our interaction to baptism and the Lord's Supper as these practices are highly attested in the letters of Paul themselves.

Baptism was the ritual of initiation into the Christian community; it marked the entrance of the person into "the Body" of Christ (1 Cor 12:13).⁷⁶ The believers in Corinth were likely immersed in water, though there is later evidence that there was provision for allowing water to

⁷² Horrell argues that the vices listed in 1 Corinthians fall under three general headings: sexual immorality, greediness, and idolatry (*Social Ethos*, 79).

⁷³ Ciampa, *Corinthians*, 23; see also B. S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

⁷⁴ Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 80.

⁷⁵ For in-depth analysis of early Christian liturgical practices, see Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*. But, Dunn cautions against interpreting Paul on the basis of liturgies we assume existed in his communities: Jams Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1990).

⁷⁶ Note the important work of James Dunn who argues that Spirit-Baptism is Paul's way of denoting the gift of the Spirit that accompanies the initiatory rite of conversion—water baptism. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament on the Gift of the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1979). For further study on the liturgical importance of baptism, see Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and the Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism*, (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

be poured over the head when there was insufficient access to enough water for full immersion.⁷⁷ Early believers were usually baptized naked, which contributes to the proliferation of “putting on” and “putting off” or clothing language so common in Paul, and frequently used in baptismal contexts.⁷⁸ The Baptism itself as the initiation rite symbolized and embodied separation from the world, transition into a new social group, and reaggregation into a new reality. The ritual actually enacted concepts central to Paul’s message. Horrell observes that Baptism “dramatized the believers’ transition from the old life to the new, their escape from the wrath to come and their entry into the community of those who are ‘one in Christ.’”⁷⁹ Baptism was not repeated for the individual, but believers would have witnessed the baptisms of other initiates. This ritual would certainly reinforce the nature of the church as an alternate society that embodied an altogether different approach to reality than that espoused by the typical Corinthian.⁸⁰

The Lord’s Supper was about *κοινωνία* within the body, an enactment of membership and participation in the community.⁸¹ Without 1 Corinthians, we would know very little about how the earliest Christian communities actually celebrated the Eucharist (1 Cor 10:16-17; 11:17-34).⁸² This practice in Corinth involved more than just the communion wafer or the bread and wine common in contemporary celebrations. There was a full meal involved according to Paul’s account in 1 Cor 11:17-34. But, it was more than just a meal. The bread and wine represented both a memorial of the death of Jesus, as well as a participatory sharing in the effects of his sacrificial death. Celebratory meals were typical components of other Greco-Roman associations that met frequently in Corinth. For the church to have its own rite of fellowship would have been perfectly in line with that customary practice.⁸³ However, the community of which this meal was a part would have stood in stark contrast to the various assemblies of Corinth. It would look and act much different from the typical social gathering in Corinth.

⁷⁷ The Didache instructs that believers should be baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Cold water was preferred as was “living water” as from a stream or river. Fasting was required of both the baptizer and the baptized, and the community was instructed to join in the fast as well (Didache 7:1-4). The Didache represents teaching much later than Paul’s writings, but these rituals may represent traditions that go back much farther than their own composition.

⁷⁸ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 151. Cf. Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14; 2 Cor 5:3. For further study, see Jung Hoon Kim, *The Significance of Clothing Imagery in the Pauline Corpus* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).

⁷⁹ Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 86.

⁸⁰ R. A. Horsley. “Paul’s Assembly in Corinth: An Alternative Society,” in *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth*, ed. Daniel N. Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005): 371-95.

⁸¹ For further study on the liturgical importance of the Lord’s Supper, see: Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997).

⁸² Horrell, *Social Ethos*, 86.

⁸³ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 157-62.

First, the meal itself was a time when the community of believers could care for the less fortunate. In Corinth, those believers with higher social status would consume the food, leaving those of low estate hungry and deprived—a practice that Paul repudiates in 1 Cor 11:21. Secondly, the ceremonial portion of the meal commemorated the story of the sacrificial death of Jesus and its effectiveness for those who participate with him by faith. The meal demonstrated that participation in the powerfully embodied images of eating and drinking. Thirdly, the meal itself was an intensely eschatological meal. Believers were told to perpetuate the practice “until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26). This was a regular reminder of the eschatological transformation so important to Paul’s work. Finally, the meal itself was a time for unity and fellowship. The community’s fellowship was arranged not according to the hierarchical and competitive structure of Corinthian society, but conditioned by love and marked by unity. It transcended social norms of race, gender, religion, and class in order to dramatically express the truth of Paul’s Gospel that God’s new humanity was a reality in the lives of the participants (Gal 3:26-28; 5:6; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:19).⁸⁴

The liturgies offered by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthian community are incredibly important for helping to aim the heart of Corinthian believers towards the Kingdom of God. James K.A. Smith’s work is an excellent reassessment of anthropology and brilliant cultural analysis. His explanation of how cultural liturgies serve to form a kind of person is very helpful as well as his strongly ecclesial theology of how the worship of the church ought to subvert what is on offer from the world. The important question in light of the Apostle Paul’s strategy in the city of Corinth has to do with how the particular ritual forces of cultural formation become *thick* practices.⁸⁵ Smith argues that there are *thin* habits like brushing teeth or exercising daily that may not touch our identity and that there are also *thick* habits that play an important part in shaping us. The difference of course between these two can be difficult to determine. What makes a practice *thick*?

For a practice to be deeply meaningful to us usually requires that there has already been some kind of inner transformation of the heart. So, taking public transportation can be *thick* with meaning if it confirms a strong conviction that doing so helps to preserve the environment. However, it is less evident that taking public transportation will actually aim the heart towards environmentalism. This is certainly not to devalue the importance of liturgy in Christian worship. Christian liturgy embodies and enacts the message itself in a way that other *thick* practices do not. However, it is instructive to note that Paul, who was keenly interested in the liturgy of the church, did not seem to rely on a reformation of Corinthian liturgy. His liturgical communities could certainly be discussed as the location of the Spirit’s work, but his focus was not directed to the liturgy itself as the means of obtaining the transformation of the Spirit.

⁸⁴ Meeks, *Urban Christians*, 157-62.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 80-85.

What I am suggesting is that the best challenge to the enticing liturgies of the world must necessarily involve Christian liturgies that value deeply the ethical lives of believers. When Paul confronts the Corinthian situation, which parallels ours in many important ways, his primary strategy began with an important *eschatological shift*. This was no theoretical/propositional concept to be affirmed. It was absolutely foundational for the Christian community. It unmasked the worldly powers and pulled back the curtain on God's ultimate reality. This *eschatological inversion* supported a *transformed epistemology* that offered believers a new way of assessing the world and the challenges they faced in it. The cross itself became a new measure of reality. All of this led to a *radically subversive ethic* that embodied the good life of the Kingdom of God first in the life of the apostle Paul himself and then in the lives of the Christ followers of Corinth. This strategic pattern should become an essential part of whatever pedagogical practices we engage to retrain our hearts toward the holy. Christlike living teaches us the chief *praktognosia* and *habitus* of the Kingdom of God.