

FIRST CORINTHIANS

THE NAME OF THE REAL GAME – A LOSER IN THE WIND OF RESURRECTION

SUMMARY

Corinth was a central place for Paul – his headquarters in Greece, where he lived as long as anywhere else, and did more for the people. He wrote many letters to them (gathered in our ‘two’ epistles). It was a tough town, with massive (sexual) immorality, proud of its own adequacy, demanding the right to dominate everyone. The Corinthians laughed at Paul’s presentation of the value of weakness, and political suffering – it was too stupid (moronic) and scandalous! It was in pastoral dialogue with them that Paul really learnt that **weakness was the name of the game, that resurrection-living wasn’t ‘nice’ or ‘successful’, that it was usually just ‘dull’, that in most arguments he started and finished as the ‘born loser’.** In it all he stopped trying to be their patron (giving them spiritual benefits) and started living as one of them, in self-emptiness. He had fights with them about behavior at the Eucharist, fights with them about the morality of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, fights with them about allowing marriages within close bonds of blood relationship, etc. He lost most of them. He had to compromise his own best judgment in most cases (despite his revelations from heaven and his pastoral experience). But through them all, he found out that there was **a different kind of love** than he had ever imagined (agape) and **a different kind of ministry** among them (koinonia). He wrote a hymn to the former in 1 Cor 13 and one to the latter in 2 Cor 5. Life became a process of unfinishable reconciliation between those who could not get it, and Paul, who found out he still had a long way to go to ‘get it’ himself.

‘If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels, but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are, and knowing everything, and I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains, but without LOVE, then I am nothing at all. If I give away all that I possess, piece by piece, and if I even let them take my body to burn it, but am without LOVE, it will do me no good whatever. LOVE is always patient and kind; it is never jealous; LOVE is never boastful or conceited; it is never rude or selfish; it does not take offence, and is not resentful. LOVE takes no pleasure in other people’s sins, but delights in the truth; it is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope, and to endure whatever comes. LOVE does not come to an end.’ 1 Cor 13, 1-8



The west shops of Ancient Corinth

INTRODUCTION

'Not for everyone is the voyage to Corinth' (ancient proverb) (wink, wink) (Horace)

How did the 'resurrection principle' work itself out in Paul's ongoing life? The answer I propose to this question, is 'paradoxically'. Paul did not achieve radical changes in the world. In secular, or imperial terms, he failed. He lived a life of weakness, of sickness, of imperfection, of humiliation, of embarrassment, of suffering, of loss of reputation, of being reduced to loving his fiercest opponents, of being put to death by a mad emperor (Nero) in Rome. This reflection is about the **realism** within which the resurrection principle worked itself out in Paul's life. It is at Corinth that we begin to see this very clearly.

1Cor is about physical bodies, social status, disagreement and disorder in church services, the public face of Christians in a pagan environment. It is an emotion-laden letter. Paul worked out a **new kind of Christian hermeneutic** through his relationship with Corinth...he began to understand resurrection through his own failures! There are New Corinthians today who have not yet heard the message of Paul.

CORINTH: THE PLACE

Corinth was refounded as a Roman colony in 44 bce by Julius Caesar, and was then called Laus Julia Corinthiensis. Augustus set it up as the capital of the senatorial Roman province of Achaia. The emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 ce: Prisca and Aquila then came from Rome to Corinth (where they met Paul), largely due to the growing economy of Corinth. There is a limestone cliff, a sheer wall, 1800 feet high, between the Ionian Sea and the Aegean. It comes down to the Isthmus that joins the Peloponnesus to mainland Greece. This is the Akropolis of Corinth. It was one of the most prosperous Greek cities, with four harbours. It had a large population from nearly everywhere – they came and went with much sea and land traffic. In fact, Corinth controlled most of the shipping from east and west of the Mediterranean. Sailors did not want to sail round the coast, and preferred to go through the Corinthian Isthmus.

CORINTH: THE LOCAL RELIGION

The Romans tried to **domesticate all the local religions** they found, and integrate them in a broad Roman pantheon, and then control them through emperor worship. It is important to avoid anachronisms when we talk about Corinth. [Anachronisms r us.] Corinth is not a 'secular' city in our modern sense. It lives with its household gods, its meat markets, its many temples, its cult of the Emperor. The local religion around Corinth at Paul's time was most interesting. It is basically a religion of **Aphrodite – the goddess of love**. Now that is very polite language for saying the whole city was a large brothel – the most infamous red-light district in all Greece. The very word, *korinthiazein* in Greek, 'to behave like a Corinthian', means to have sex where you shouldn't be having it - especially when the boats came in. The Corinthians were very proud people – very independent people. They were sexual people, only because they were very self-assertive. This possibly goes with the whole situation of economic prosperity.

Some suggest that in Corinth at this time, as in many cities of the Empire, the males outnumbered the females. This would be interesting in relation to marriage controls brought into Roman law by Augustus in 18 bce...

Corinth in these times was the fun city of Greece. Its Isthmian Games were more popular than the Olympic Games.

There was a large Jewish population in Corinth, many of them refugees from Rome. But the city and its citizens are **not religiously Jewish**: salvation for Jews comes from the intervention of the God of Covenant as climax of the history of God's relations with a people. The Corinthians did not think like that. There was a **pagan cultural environment** in Corinth: salvation came to individuals through intimacy with a deity that seized them, and shared his or her **mythic fate** with them. This explains the **Enthusiasm and the Individualism in Corinth**. The spirit is already saved, but the **body** not going to be saved. They have a practice of instruction into '**cult mysteries**' after initiation. They have political parties, often linked to various interpretations of their cult mysteries.

The overall difficulty with the Corinthians is the mutual relationship between minorities and the mainstream majority. In Corinth, the minorities came from identification with particular teachers/leaders. The minority group then saw itself as the 'initiated few' into the teaching of these educators. This means that they saw the main point of their group as a teaching, an intellectual position. The mainstream majority, on the other hand, were not so constituted by an imagined identification with any teacher – that did not happen! There were consequences for the majority. They lacked a certain 'decisiveness' when it came to particular positions to be taken. They had no formulated positions or principles to help them. So in matters of public mores, legal conflicts, sex in marriage, relations to paganism – such as going to temple rituals or eating meat left over from temple sacrifices – they were not sure what to do. The majority also lacked clear 'order' in its own rituals and practices – they practiced openness to all but did not know if and where to draw a line in relation to some who did not appear 'worthy' of that; they did not know how to bring together subgroups that were richer and poorer; they did not what sort of decorum to demand of those who seemed to exceed normal balance. The majority also lacked any way of handling cases of charismatic or ecstatic behavior.

For all of these reasons, the majority appeared weak, and the minorities strong. Paul tried to speak in favor of the unity of all the groups, but inevitably he sounded as if he came more from the side of the majority, to the displeasure of most or all minority positions.

The lack of success Paul had here is not due so much to his own personal limitations as to the situation the group was in at this stage of its development.

No room in any house in Corinth could hold more than about 40 people. The houses were built in island blocks, turning inward on to an interior courtyard. In any gathering of people, the poor were left in the courtyard! The architecture reflected and created the minority/majority situations just described. Cf. Chrys C. Caragounis, [A House Church in Corinth: an inquiry into the structure of early Corinthian Christianity](#).

One of the vocal minorities that engaged Paul in Corinth, was a group seemingly influenced by Roman Stoic philosophy. They thought that the universe was made of two levels: first of all, earth and its atmosphere here; and then a celestial realm composed of sun, moon, and five planets. They believed that no terrestrial body (in those terms) could ascend to the celestial level. It is obvious that they had no real idea of resurrection of the body, and thought that any reality of 'spirit' must be in us now, here.

PAUL AND CORINTH

Corinth is an extraordinary centre-point in Paul's whole life and apostolate. Paul probably did more for Corinth than anywhere else he ever was. He was there for a fairly long period of time, eighteen months at one time, perhaps. He wrote more letters to Corinth than to any other community. We talk about 1st and 2nd Corinthians, but that's only the way we now package them together. There are at least half a dozen letters to Corinth included there, in different bits and pieces, replying to letters to Paul from Corinth which we don't possess. Corinth was always very much on Paul's mind.

Paul had found lodging and a workplace in Corinth. He formed a group of Christians, probably no more than about 50. The Corinthians are new converts, and still in the long drawn out process of conversion. They are trying to work out how to integrate what they now believe in, in a place and culture like Corinth. So is Paul. He and they are all thinking on their feet. Jews had a longstanding tradition of singing the Lord's song in a foreign land, in exile. But the Corinthians did not think they were in a foreign land or in exile: they thought, rightly enough, that they were a Roman colony, and they wanted to teach everyone (including Paul) how to sing the Roman song. They did not a priori know how to integrate what Paul told them and the culture and way of life around them. The 'church' in Corinth is not an established institution, into which 'secular ideas' penetrate. There is no 'church' before Paul, no canonized 'orthodoxy', and the ideas that penetrated them don't come from 'outside'.

Paul speaks to them in terms of the Gentile background, but tones down the enthusiasms, stresses bonding with the Christ who was crucified really, upholds a higher instruction into the 'cross', and a full salvation of the body in resurrection.

The Christians in Corinth were rather people who gathered (ekklesia) to live and practice this resurrection life in favor of the poor (without an ample teaching about it). They wanted to do something different, without knowing, for example, much about the timing of a second coming of Jesus, or the make-up of bodies in the general resurrection.

PAUL'S STARTING POINT

It has been suggested by Tom Wright, and I think he is correct, that **the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians can be read as an extended commentary on the thought of the 2nd chapter of Philippians. In Philippi, Paul had come to realize the incredible value of his political suffering as better than any intellectual, spiritual, or religious and holy experiences.**

When he came to Corinth, Paul had begun to see the **incredible value of his weakness and foolishness and misunderstoodness.** He began to tell his Corinthian converts that this was much better than any of the sexual practices or self-affirmations of the Corinthians.

Paul is going to discover this 'weakness' many times again in Corinth, and he begins to realize that it is in that kind of thing, that the resurrection dynamic touches him. That is not an easy idea to market, especially in Corinth. You could hardly tell people that and get much of a response, except by a few 'mad' people, and most would have regarded Paul as being quite out of his mind about all of this, and, in terms of Roman and Greek thinking, it is **foolishness**. The word in Greek is *moria*, which means you have to be a moron to think like that, and they thought Paul was a moron, for accepting that approach to life and trying to communicate it to others. Of course, to

the Jews, it was a **scandal**. It was something that they couldn't get past. So Paul is more and more into suffering, weakness and foolishness - moronic behaviour in their terms, and scandalous behaviour in Jewish terms. More and more he is starting to say to himself and to others: "God, **this is the name of the bloody game**". It is an extraordinary wake-up. You could almost hear him saying: "I thought I understood this resurrection dynamic. The damn thing is not nice at all. And what will Corinth make of it?"

PAUL'S INITIAL CRITIQUE OF CORINTHIAN LIFE

Paul comes along and says to the Corinthians: "Well, I don't like the immorality around here. I also don't like the psychological self-image you people have. You are very proud of yourselves. My position is that we have to become weaker and more foolish, as we get more really in touch with God. That's **what the resurrection dynamic does to you**. And the expression of that dynamic is that we get more and more in touch, **not with our strengths, nor with our desire to dominate others sexually, but with our weakness**. It's **the diametric opposite of the cult of Aphrodite**". That's what he put to the Corinthians, and it was not received well, if you could say so, because they were a very proud and strong-willed crowd.

Paul was always criticizing the patronic system through which Augustus – patron of the whole world - controlled the empire. Paul has his **kenotic system**. He is the emptied out one, for the sake of the whole world. Paul sensed in Corinth that the Corinthian attitude to life was a vital support for the patronal system, and a basic obex to the kenotic system.

PAUL'S ACTION

Everyday he and those who believed in the resurrection gathered in a sardine shop down the street for prayer. Every Sunday they came there for a full morning, for a meal and eucharist. They brought half their week's earnings, and all the food and drink they had at home, and pooled it all. They then took all that down to the neighbourhood and gave it to the needy there. There must not be poor people in a world of resurrection. They believed in life beyond discrimination. They were an **intentionally subversive little group**, intent on changing the accepted patterns of discrimination in their larger world. They integrated into their group the left outs, the left behinds, and the let downs of their world. By doing so they were hope-filled, open-armed, alive-and-well, all of them.

HOW THINGS DEVELOPED

Things developed badly. Paul had troubles **within the Corinthian community itself**, that he had established, within the very group that came to the sardine shop.

This very group, small as it was, say about 50, at most, became internally **extremely conflicted**. They became conflicted about how they gathered for **Eucharist**. The richer ones brought their own meal, and did not share it. The poorer ones went without. Paul objected, and **lost his case**: they were too headstrong for him. They became conflicted about eating meat you could buy at the local butcher, but which had previously come from sacrifices at pagan temples (they called it

idolythata). Paul said it was just meat, so buy and eat it: you didn't approve paganism if you did. Many in his community at Corinth were more fundamentalist than he, and refused to touch it. Paul fell back, and said, well, don't shock your neighbors and your fellow Christians with a more sensitive conscience, by what you do. He **lost his case**. They became conflicted about spiritual gifts (called **charismata**) like speaking in tongues – some were in favor, some against them. Paul said, don't fuss about them, don't regard them highly, love is the main thing, but they wouldn't hear him. He **lost again**. They became conflicted about sexual practices (**porneia**), about the nature of **bodies after the resurrection**, about the legitimacy of looking good and boasting about it. Paul argued all the way, and **lost every round**. You can read the details in 1 Cor. The letter is mostly about these arguments, and Paul's loss of these arguments... He offered resurrection; he got compromise.

Paul was looking more and more like a **weak person, like a fool** who talked big about resurrection and ended up with disappointment. He had hoped and prayed that Israel would see his point, but they didn't. He had hoped and prayed that Corinthians would, and they didn't. The drama wasn't happening. The downside of life was like that, day by day. It took him a long time to learn that the power of resurrection would indeed change the world, but maybe it would not do it through him. All he had was his weakness, his poverty, his powerlessness, and it was through that, that the power of resurrection would do its own work. He called that **kenosis**. The word means, self-emptying. He got it from the Christian 'hymn' given in the letter to the Philippians, chapter 2:

*[Jesus] had every right to be given divine status (like Roman soldiers in triumph after a military campaign), but he did not cling to that, and **emptied himself**, assuming the condition of a slave, and became as human beings (not emperors) are; and he was humbler yet, and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a Roman cross. This is how (rather than why) God gave him the name that is of a different order from all names – and this is how he is Lord (Kyrios)*

He accepted the same kind of kenosis in his own life. Philippians, chapter 3 says so:



Ruins of Corinth's Temple of Octavia

I have come to consider all the advantages I had as disadvantages... For [Christ Jesus my Lord] I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ and be given a place in him. ... All I want to know is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. That is the way I can hope to take my place in the resurrection of the dead.

Paul ended up not being the patron of clients in a Corinthian community, or even their broker with a deity. His community there was **not a patronal one, but a kenotic one**. He was the greatest loser among them. And that was how the resurrection dynamic slowly subverted the going way of living in that city.

SOME OF THE AGENDA

The Corinthians had sent Paul a list of questions about their concerns, when he was in Ephesus in the mid-50's. He wrote back after release from prison there (after writing his letter to the Philippians there too). His tone is very different from the tone used to the Philippians: in fact, it is often quite nasty. Let us look a bit more closely at some of these arguments. The Corinthians wondered about **Eucharist, Sex, Idolothya, Charismata, and the nature of body in Resurrection.** We will look at them in turn.

EUCCHARIST IN CORINTH

One of the arguments in the Corinthian community was about **how they would perform the Eucharist.** You'd think they were around today, wouldn't you? They want to do it one way, and Paul wants them to do it another way. And who wins? Well, Paul doesn't win.

For Paul, the Eucharist is the coming together of Corinthian Christians for *the Lord's Supper*. Some powerful patrons among them hosted these gatherings and assemblies. They did them much like a **Greek-Roman patronal banquet**. They had a full meal. But there were two ways of proceeding. One was doing it in your own style, bringing your own food, and eating privately with your own sub-group. The other was doing it in the Lord's supper's true style, sharing everything with everybody. That is what really befitted the new creation. It is easy to guess Paul's feelings here, but *in his new 'weakness' he can't get away with his views.* **He has to compromise.** So he asks the 'haves', if they need to, to eat at home first before they come! And he goes on to suggest that they break the bread early in the meal, and pass the cup around late in it, while they have their food (sub-groups or all-together) in-between these two rituals. Not what Paul really wanted....

SEX AND RELATIONSHIP IN CORINTH

Another argument was about **sex, and the relationship of men and women.** He advocated, in line with the Jewish tradition, and in line with his own vision of inclusive life, the mutuality-in-difference that comes from the union of male and female. But I think he took it further than the usual Jewish theology in this field. He saw the mutuality of marriage as a participation and a **communion of each partner in the 'resurrectional fragility' of the other.** He saw the 'other' not just as 'other' but as 'one' in the one Risen One. It was all very far from the going 'Corinthianizing'! It is a very beautiful insight. Paul couldn't win, in the sense of moving all his converts to this way of living, and even in later Christian interpretations, he has often been misunderstood and misrepresented.

It is somewhat perplexing to realize that this Pauline attitude to the body, to sex, to the flesh, to the opposite sex, did not continue at large in subsequent Christianity. Paul's views could be seen as quite revolutionary in terms of commonly understand Christian principles now. They imply a level of freedom and a level of mutual understanding not usually preached now. Historians are now suggesting that from the second to the fifth centuries, the



Doric columns of Corinth's Temple of Apollo, 550 BCE

Church progressively took over from Roman and pagan culture an attitude to the body, to family, to marriage, to virginity, and to sexual continence, that was rather different in motivation and practice from the Pauline one. Over the centuries, Paul lost again! Perhaps early Christians, unlike Paul and his people, were not free enough in themselves to enjoy life as Paul taught them. Perhaps this is why there was a trend among them towards an asceticism that was more redolent of eastern religions, and that brought with it what eventually became in many Christians a hatred of flesh, an abhorrence of sex, and a repugnance towards the opposite sex. Paul at least did not see the originality of resurrectional thinking as leading in this direction. Moral theologians with a sense of history could well clarify much here. Meantime, those who teach Paul can already show that the core of his insight presented even Corinth with a direction that might well surprise 'good Christians' today.

I think, too, that Paul's insight into the mutual communion in resurrection fragility has been lost, even in the better lines of later Christian theology. It would rather see such a communion in what is positive and beautiful, than in what is fragile because of a resurrectional encounter. Is there too much Narcissism in us to yield to Resurrection?

COMMUNITY IN CORINTH

The **very notion of community** changes here. In general terms, the Roman model was one of *patronal* community (leading to inequality and competition), while Paul's model was one of **kenotic community** (leading to equality and cooperation). More specifically, it is in the dialogue with Corinth that Paul goes even further than he had done in prison at Ephesus, in his own personal thinking, with his understanding of divine action in the world. The Roman thinking focused on human standards, or that which is of advantage to humans, according to the flesh, or fleshly, in this age, that is, on the normalcy of civilization. It prioritized wisdom and the wise, power and the powerful, strength and the strong. *Paul's thinking continued to focus on foolishness and the foolish, weakness and the weak* – and he increasingly included himself here. The first four chapters of First Corinthians are indeed like an extended commentary on the hymn of Philippians 2, 6-11. The *kenotic process of Jesus's God and the general resurrection seems to provoke weakness and use weakness for its purposes*. It is much less dramatic than being crucified – it is just being unable to handle the everyday! And this is the 'process of resurrection'! Paul can even come, in Second Corinthians 11, 23-33, to 'boast' of this weakness in himself....

*'Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman – I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a day and a night I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked...If I must boast, I will boast of the **things that show my weakness**...'*

2 Cor 11,23-33

He starts off being, and presenting himself as, the great apostle from God, because he knows he is. They don't buy a word of it. He starts off saying: "Look! I've been around the traps. I do this all over the place and you've got to do it my way – the real Christian way." They don't accept a

word of it. He then says: “I’ve written letters to you many times and to other places, and look at my letters and see what I’m telling you.” They still won’t believe a word of it. He ends up in the role of **a persuader** rather than a controller. He could persuade at a certain distance because he writes these letters to Corinth from Ephesus. He’s not even in Corinth, when he is arguing with them. After all his compromises, they don’t really buy it much - and it dawns on him, that, **having to compromise against his better judgment, often and a great deal, and not getting his own way, is an expression of the resurrection dynamic in him.** Now he wouldn’t like it like that, would he? You’d have to say, well I’d like to get rid of this resurrection dynamic, if that’s all it does to me. But that’s what it did to him, and it was certainly not the way the Corinthians liked to behave. They wanted something much more important and grandiose than that. But here is little Paul losing, losing, losing. In fact, resurrection is making Paul **a born loser** – and for him it’s an extraordinary learning.

It’s not just ordinary ageing, maturing, learning. It’s not just ordinary psychological growth, which it is, but I think it is learning something different from what he ever thought he might ever have to learn. It makes him think more and more: “What have I been telling people? And how have I been telling it to them?” And it starts sounding to him more and more like beautiful theory but not the reality. He then turns around and talks more about the reality, and turns to less laying it on to people, and more to telling them how it is for him. And you get a few glimpses of a much more beautiful person out of it as a result. As he said, 1 Cor 9, ‘Necessity is laid on me...’

This whole approach is captured by Rowan Williams, in a talk to the Lambeth Conference, July, 2008. He tries to create unity through the practice of kenosis, or self-emptying for the sake of the other, which leads to the spiritual gift of empathy – identifying with the pain or need that makes the others hold their positions. He tries to take as generous an initiative as possible to break through with them into a previously not envisaged level of communion. He refuses to defuse tension by demonizing or trying to expel the other (or making the other a scapegoat). Cf. Austin Ivereigh, America Magazine, July 29 08).

SEEING A BIGGER PICTURE – LOVE, SPIRIT, COMMUNION IN CORINTH

In the latter part of 1 Corinthians, I’m thinking particularly of **c. 13**, and in **2 Corinthians**, particularly towards the end of it, he starts to try and put this into a slightly adapted framework from the one he’s been using. He says, “General resurrection, Yes. And it’s a prelude to a final transformation of the whole politically violent world. Yes. And eventually that final transformation of the whole world would make everybody in communion together and having a lovely eschatological meal and *convivium* together. Yes. That’s correct. I’ve got most of that from Jewish eschatology and I put the Jesus thing around it and it’s been my whole pitch.” But now he says: “You know, what will happen, whenever that full healing of the universe occurs, what will happen can be said **in one word, and that word is love.**” Only he puts into the word “love”, **nuances and depths** that I don’t think he’d ever seen there before. It’s really love of a very new kind. It’s love that does not contain even the possibility of violence or control. It’s love that is not Corinthian sexual love. Nor is it Artemesian ecstatic spiritual-experience-love. It’s love that he’s come to, slowly but richly, out of those experiences of not being listened to, having to compromise on essentials, looking like a bloody moron, feeling weak and foolish and suffering **kenotically**. In it all he has found love of a kind that he would not have wanted to practise. Is it love of people? Yes. Is it love of God? Yes, I suppose it is, too. But after a while he seems to think God is just about as moronic as he is, and practises the same kind of mad love that he

practises now. But it's definitely a movement in Paul, and all this littleness, if you could use the expression, in him, is like a step towards or a foretaste, if you wish, of the kind of love that will have to be everywhere before the human universe wraps up, and he knows that the show can't wrap up until that sort of love is all around. It's a different plateau, I think, inside himself.

But he realizes then, that the little steps he's going through now, and the dimensions of gentleness that he's touching now, in unexpected places and without inviting them, towards an ultimate love, they are really the effect of a divine movement, and the name he gives to that divine movement is **the Spirit**. So, the spirit is not thought of here as a 3rd person of the Trinity. And it's not a charismatic spirit at all. It's not a Pentecostal spirit, in the Lukan sense of the word. He really links the very word "spirit" with something of this entering into the less and less, and he sees it as the pre-condition of being in touch with the more and more. It's a very beautiful thing. It's a transformation into love, through kenotic nothingness. It is also a transformation of the very concept of love. It's a very 'powerful' thing. Out of nothing, you end up with Omega, and it is Spirit that links one to the other and takes one towards the other.

It seems to me that that's profoundly his response to the Corinthian people in the Corinthian situation. And I'm sure that's why not too many of them bought it. [We saw that the Lukan Paul tried to 'sell' it to Athens on his way south to Corinth initially, and nobody bought it. That's why he gave up on Athens and went down to Corinth.] And just a few of the rough-hewn characters at Corinth, who had enough experience to know that the self-aggrandizement thing wouldn't work, decided they might buy it. That's how he founded his Corinthian community. There were never more than about 50 people there in his Corinthian community. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor did some work a few years back on it, and tracked out all the names of people mentioned from Corinth in Paul's letters, and their families connected, and he got less than 50. That would be about the size and the style of it. So they could meet in somebody's backyard or in a larger sort of home. They didn't need a special building. It's all that kind of extraordinary littleness that is transforming Paul and them into an extraordinary openness. He calls the openness 'love' and he calls the movement from one to the other 'Spirit'. In fact it sets up a different model of 'community' itself.

Koinonia is the Greek word for *communio* – communion – 'partnership' gets it partly but not wholly. It is a communing-in, and it's a communing-in that total process. It is an entering-into and a feeling that it comes from the inside. They all started to realize that they can do nothing about it, but that it's doing a lot about them. This is a very big development in Paul here. You can easily understand, that if people thought (correctly) that was the whole meaning of Christianity, they'd say "forget it. We've got more interesting things elsewhere." It's true. And Paul would have admitted the truth of it, as he got a bit older. But I think he had touched something that was considerably more real than what he'd been saying to them and to others earlier in his life. There was a fair amount of romanticism and unanchored rhetoric in the earlier presentation. Even in the resurrection language. As he gets older, there's much more realism than romanticism. There's much more earthiness than theory.

That's why I said in an earlier reflection that, in a paradoxical way, Roma is Amor spelt backwards, *Amor* being the Latin word for love. Roman culture has got love wrong. The genius of Paul is that he is really offering that kind of eventual love, not as private piece of spirituality, but as his alternative political and cultural system to the Roman system. He offers it in Corinth, perhaps the least 'ready' city of the Roman Empire. It's really big development, not only in Paul, but in the whole pastoral theology of what 'church' is. We can forget about the relatively minor disagreements in Antioch (with James and Peter). They were really only a training session for this later life that he could not envisage then.

One of the keys into it is Philippians 2, and I read 1 Corinthians 1 – 4 as a commentary on that. I would add to that 1 Corinthians 13, which is the hymn to this new sense of love, to *agape*. If you want to dip into 2 Corinthians 5, it's a marvellous unfolding of the ministry implications of all of that. That is why I wanted to begin with Philippians and then look at Corinthians. You get large things out of that. It's one of the best articulations of the Damascus Road experience.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways [i.e. I stopped kidding myself]. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

[NRSV, 1 Cor 13, 1-13]

It is interesting to hear reflections of some of Jesus' sayings here, and to think about Paul's 'improvement' on them. 'If you have faith like a mustard seed, you'll say to this mountain, 'be moved from here', and it will be moved, and nothing will be impossible for you'. Jesus, Mt 17. 'If I have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.' Paul, 1 Cor 13. Did Paul read about the rich young man, and say 'If I give all my possessions for feeding others, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.' Paul, 1 Cor 13.

AND RESURRECTION IN THIS LIGHT?

In this developed frame of mind, Paul's **view of resurrection** gets much more depth. His Corinthians were philosophically educated Platonists. They could accept the immortality of the spiritual soul, but when Paul talked about resurrection of the body they thought it was stupid. 'Appearances' of a risen Christ would not go over well with them either. Paul nuanced his thought. He began to see the general resurrection process as a prelude to the final transformation of the whole world into its Omega State; then there would be public justice for all, and it would be on earth as it is in heaven. He went on to stress that now, the general resurrection process has already begun and is in full swing: God through the living Jesus in us, and in our weakness, is finally cleaning up the world's mess. Jesus and ourselves (the 'body of Christ') are in this with Spirit-empowered bodies ('spiritual bodies') now. [He means our present real 'weak' bodies, used by the Spirit of transformation...to do real things in the present body-politic.] Especially when we are a true, sharing, Eucharistic communion. He goes further still, and seems to suggest that it is not physical or biological death that will eventually be overcome, but

violence, especially violent death, so that in the end the martyrs are vindicated in God's Justice, and so is our weakness.

SECOND CORINTHIANS

Corinth was never an easy community! The factions and rivalries there stemmed from an overconfidence in the givenness of the Spirit and their claim to transformation already, which their behavior belied. As a result, the correspondence with Paul, of which we have only pieces, was always stormy.

1 Cor did not help! After it, several things happened:

1. Paul made a brief and painful visit to Corinth.
2. A representative of Paul made a visit to Corinth.
3. Paul wrote a 'severe letter' to Corinth (written in 'agony of mind' 2 Cor 2, 3-9).
4. Titus brought news to Paul that the severe letter worked.

Then we have 2 Cor, but it is an amalgam of at least two letters. The two principal letters are:

Letter A, celebrating the reconciliation of Paul with Corinth, cps 1-9

Letter B, chapter 10-13

Within Letter A, there are two passages that don't fit, and could be extracts from other letters written to other places than Corinth:

6,14 – 7.1 on xenophobia

9,1-15 to the churches of Galatia, about the collection.

Others think there are (parts of) five distinct letters to Corinth, gathered in our 2 Cor. Two are about the collection, two are in defence of his own ministry, and one is the letter of reconciliation. It is clear that the Corinthian correspondence is a stitched up piece of material, from many disparate pieces, and we don't always know which piece is earlier, and which piece fits with which other piece.

As we have it, 2 Cor is a difficult text, but it is a very moving one...

Adversaries from outside the community have disturbed the community. They have come with a [model of the theios aner \(divine man\)](#), in terms of which they see Jesus, themselves, and converts. This leads to conflict with Paul's position, and a need of reconciliation. *Paul insists on the 'crucified Christ' model (and reconciliation only in terms of it.)*

The Corinthians have vacillated between excessive self-indulgence and misplaced asceticism. Paul is exasperated, and he tries to sort out the true way for them to live.

In 2 Cor we have possibly the most personal letter of Paul. We also have him using the skills of rhetoric, including diatribe. He fires a barrage of questions at this 'opposition', he challenges them in serious and ironic ways, he flings out paradox after paradox, he even hurls insults at them. The crucial issue seems to be Paul's authenticity as an apostle: what was Jesus like and what was he sent to do, what is Paul really like and what is he really sent to do.

In 2 Cor 11, 21-33, Paul lists his sufferings. He mentions weakness, sickness, and sufferings - the very things the Greek world rejected in favour of the perfect human body. Paul accepted imperfection and humiliation. This embarrassed the Corinthian church! He mentions the most humiliating events of his life. He lists the public corrections he has received. He has received the 39 lashes, been beaten with rods, and stoned, he has been degraded by all conceivable authorities, Jewish and Roman. Paul is 'boasting' of his ultimate self-defeat. He has no credentials. This is his identification with the crucifiedness of Christ, and the reason that the power of the Risen One can work through him.

He has come to regard as loss and rubbish everything that a good Jew would prize. He is in the lowest position, and empties himself. See Sigurd Grindheim, The Crux of Election, 2003

Paul now lives out of a sense that emptied-out love is a new and alternative politics, in the face of the dominative politics of the Empire. He counter-points one with the other.

"From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view (or, in the way we used to look at them). If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation (and is creative in a new way) : the old has passed away, and the new has come." (2 Cor 5, 16.)

The 'old' : it is a world of division and separation. It is a world of racial discrimination, a world of separation and violence, a world of competition, a world of abuse of the other, a world that eliminates those it does not want. It is a world that does not know how to in-gather. It is a world that lives with the anxiety that its God is divided from it, distant, offended, negative to it. Its guilt makes it afraid that it can never make up to God for what it has done, and that it deserves to be annihilated, since it has no value, in itself, or for its God.

This 'old' view of things has passed away, been harried away, and a 'new' one has come.

The 'new' : a world to which God says, 'I am with you. I raise you from the dead. I claim you, I own you, I care for you, I love you, I protect you, I include you in my life, I live your life with you, I enjoy you. I in-gather you into Me.' It is a world of respect, and wonder, a world of communion and relationship. A world where divisions, between human beings and God, and among human persons themselves, have no place at all.

"All this is from God, who through Christ has 'in-gathered' us to himself and given to us the ministry of 'in-gathering'. That is, God was in Christ, 'in-gathering the universe to himself, not counting trespasses against anyone, and entrusting to us the message of 'in-gathering'. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you, on behalf of Christ, be 'in-gathered' with God." (2 Cor, 5, 17-21)

PAULINE HERMENEUTICS

In and through his experiences and exchanges with Corinth, Paul came to see 'everything' in the light, not just of the Damascus Road experience, but rather of the actual experience he had grown into at Corinth.

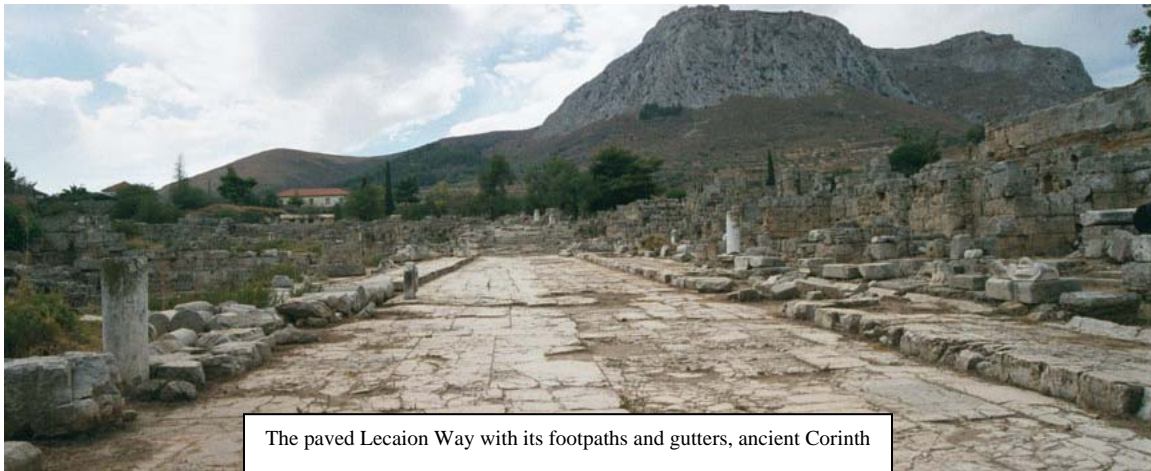
You might say that in and through Corinth Paul discovered a different 'hermeneutic' in which to understand the Christian mystery, and the resurrection itself. It was a hermeneusis of God's Gift

through human weakness... It was a realization that the experience of the latter was provoked by the former, and that it actually led to the former....

Is it only when you drop out of the argument between different positions on a binary plane, that you drop into a wholly different world?

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Paul's experience of this 'love' stemming from resurrection and finding expressing in 'kindness' of a loser to those more gifted than he, is a personal, almost unique one. It would be interesting to contrast it with meanings given to kindness and love in later history. Cicero thought it was a virtue, so did the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius. Early Protestantism declared humans to be fundamentally sinful, and so unable to do a good action without dependence on the grace of God – as a result the possibility of natural kindness disappeared. Hobbes in the 17th century saw human life as a perpetual struggle for power and a war of all against all – humanity could be civilized only the absolute political rule of a sovereign. Hume in the 18th century introduced sympathy as the necessary foundation of morality, and insisted that sympathy was experienced by everyone, and was part of human nature. Rousseau influenced Romanticism in Europe and made it emphasize the natural goodness of humans. Psychoanalysis had a look at kindness, and said that enduring, reciprocal love or tolerance between parents and children cannot arise until both parties know the worst of each other and learn to accept each other as they are.



The paved Lecaion Way with its footpaths and gutters, ancient Corinth

Through all this background, and much more, kindness is not an attribute much favored today. It is often thought to be against equality and the recognition of rights. In the 19th century, great charitable philanthropists, the industrial giants of their day, founders of schools, hospitals and universities, were eventually denigrated, and charity became suspect, a thinly disguised form of imperialism, asserting its power or assuaging its guilt. Nowadays 'caring' (with 'care packages') is no substitute for real kindness.

Human beings are ambivalent creatures. Kindness comes naturally to us. But so does cruelty and aggression. Nowadays some think that animals besides humans can enter into the sufferings and fears of others of their kind. But it is humans alone who can enter into the feelings of people far removed from them, and share their plight as fellow-humans. The extent to which this happens depends on their imaginative powers.

We might well see the difference between Paul's vision of this kind love and what history has done with the idea later. We might also wonder if Paul's 'imaginative powers' were greater than those of later humans. We might well do so, if we included in 'imaginative powers' his sense of the power of Jesus's resurrection let loose in his increasing lowliness. But we ought to hesitate: his sense of 'resurrection working through his weakness' was not imagination...

Cf Margaret M. Mitchell (University of Chicago Divinity School), [The Corinthian correspondence and the birth of Christian hermeneutics](#), Speaker's lectures, Oxford, 2008. To be published.

Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor, *On Kindness*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2008, reviewed in *The Guardian* by Mary Warnock.

Michael Gorman ([Reading Paul](#), Eugene, Cascade Books, 2008, p.8) tries to put 'Paul in a (VERY LONG) Sentence':

"Paul preached, and then explained in various pastoral, community-forming letters, a narrative, apocalyptic, theopolitical gospel 1) in continuity with the story of Israel and 2) in distinction to the imperial gospel of Rome (and analogous powers) that was centered on God's crucified and exalted Messiah Jesus, whose incarnation, life, and death by crucifixion were validated and vindicated by God in his resurrection and exaltation as Lord, which inaugurated the new age or new creation in which all members of this diverse but consistently covenant-ally dysfunctional human race who respond in self-abandoning and self-committing faith thereby participate in Christ's death and resurrection and are (1) justified, or restored to right covenant relations with God and with others; (2) incorporated into a particular manifestation of Christ the Lord's body on earth, the church, which is an alternative community to the status-quo human communities committed to and governed by Caesar (and analogous rulers) and by values contrary to the gospel; (3) infused both individually and corporately by the spirit of God's Son so that they may lead 'bifocal' lives, focused both back on Christ's first coming and ahead to his second, consisting of Christlike, cruciform (cross-shaped)1) faith and 2) hope towards God and 3) love toward both neighbors and enemies (a love marked by peaceableness and inclusion), in joyful anticipation of 1) the return of Christ, 2) the resurrection of the dead to eternal life, and 3) the renewal of the entire creation."
