

CHRISTLIKE IN CONFLICT: UNDERSTANDING, RESPONDING TO, AND GROWING THROUGH CHURCH STRUGGLE—A PASTOR’S PERSPECTIVE ON CONFLICT IN LIGHT OF 2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-11

by Harry Zekveld

THE APOSTLE PAUL taught that suffering is Christ’s gift to his servants (Phil. 1:29). The Lord gives to each one the gift of suffering in various kinds and degrees. Some experience suffering and conflict in small amounts like a constant, wearying drip, while others experience trouble in cascades like a waterfall. Either way, it pleases Christ to magnify himself and the Gospel through his servants’ suffering, particularly their suffering in the Gospel ministry.

1. Paul’s Suffering for Christ

Scripture makes much of the trials and weakness of the apostle Paul. He was one of the most afflicted of men. He suffered from hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, nakedness, riots, beatings (with rods, three times), floggings (five times the Jews’ forty lashes minus one), stoning, imprisonment, dishonor, bad reports, and shipwrecks. He was continually on the run as a fugitive, hunted like David. He was constantly in danger on land and sea; in danger from robbers, in the city and in the country; in danger from the Jews, from the Gentiles, and from false brothers. The affliction of betrayal by false brothers is perhaps the worst form of affliction a minister of the Gospel can suffer – when people from your own circle rise up against you and disown you. This was our Lord’s deepest grief and trial: denial and betrayal by his closest associates, as David prophesied of the Christ’s painful betrayal from his own experience: “For it is not an enemy who taunts me— then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me— then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God’s house we walked in the throng” (Ps. 55:12-14). The pain of false brethren is especially acute: “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me” (Ps. 41:9).

Besides these afflictions Paul was overwhelmed daily with cares and anxiety for all the churches. “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?” (2 Cor. 11:29). He experienced severe conflict of the heart in his feeling of divine jealousy as he saw God’s people being led astray from their pure and sincere devotion to Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 11:2-4).

Especially agonizing was his constant inner turmoil over the church at Corinth. He had written them a severe letter in which he risked his fellowship with that congregation for the sake of Christ, and was very anxious about how they received it. Listen to his heart on this matter: “For I wrote to you out of much affliction and

anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you” (2 Cor. 2:4). “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open” (2 Cor. 6:11). “I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?” (2 Cor. 12:15).

If all this suffering was not enough, the apostle was given a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass him (2 Cor. 12:7). It appears from the context that this thorn was the work of Satan who sought without ceasing to undermine Paul’s gospel labors by inspiring false teachers to promote errors with increasing boldness as they tormented him with their frivolous charges.

Thus, Paul could say that his life in the ministry was a continual death:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:7-12; cf. 1:8-9).

In the midst of all these trials God not only sustained him, but filled him with such a heroic spirit that he actually rejoiced in being thus afflicted! “I take pleasure,” he wrote, “in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Cor. 12:10). Such a perspective is wholly unnatural to man; only the Spirit of Christ can open our eyes to see and experience this glorious truth in the midst of conflict. Hodge writes:

This state of mind can be experienced only by those who are so filled with the love of Christ that they rejoice in everything whereby his glory is promoted, however painful to themselves. Where this state of mind exists, no afflictions can equal the consolations by which they are attended, and therefore the apostle adds, that he was enabled to comfort those who were in any kind of affliction by the comfort wherewith he was comforted of God.¹

Although to some of us this measure of suffering may seem distant, and perhaps none of us has experienced suffering to this degree, we should remember that the normal pathway of ministry is filled with inward and outward conflict for Christ’s sake. In a recent newsletter, a pastor of a small church plant in the United Reformed Churches in North America wrote:

Like all churches, we have experienced a number of challenges and joys. Challenges and joys are often two sides of the same coin: the people you think are committed for the long-term end up uprooting and leaving after

1. Charles Hodge, *1 & 2 Corinthians* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1857, 1859), 382.

spending many seasons attending and growing into the church. The year started out with a family leaving the church, citing a number of doctrines and practices as reasons for leaving (these were stated in an email to the entire congregation; thankfully the congregation wasn't too badly shaken)... In the summer, a young man with whom I had been meeting over many months decided to leave for doctrinal reasons. In the late summer, a regular attendee who had had a long history of substance addiction before he came to us relapsed after many seasons of being clean. For a few tense days, we didn't know where he was, how he was, or whether he was on the verge of suicide. By God's grace, we saw him move away from the edge of destruction and return to the Lord. This past December, a small family left unexpectedly. We deeply felt this departure especially because Emily and I had seen good spiritual growth over their 15 months with us. Nevertheless, that family was struggling with deep moral issues about which Emily and I lovingly confronted one of the parents. At the time of these hard conversations, we were thanked. But soon after our last meeting, the family stopped attending altogether. I share these experiences with you for the sake of honesty and prayer: I don't want you to have a rosecolored picture of our ministry, as if we were bursting at the seams on Sunday morning with hundreds of people waiting to hear the Word. Oh, I wish that was so! Rather, we have found that faithful ministry in our context is slow, arduous, at times simultaneously painful and joyful, and highly relational. We are learning as much as we're teaching. Faithful shepherding can't be outsourced to a website or social media. Persons are not one-dimensional. Saints are sinners redeemed by the Lamb, and they often darken the door of the church with more baggage than found on an airport conveyor belt. It's not an easy work, but it is a good work, because the head of the Church is a good Shepherd. Paul's Corinthians letters have been a great comfort for me (I can only dream of attaining Paul's résumé [see 1 Cor. 4:9-13 and 2 Cor. 11:23-29])! As a New Testament prophet, Paul tirelessly pleads with God's people, in the manner of cross-like suffering, to receive the grace of God through the humble ministry of the Word, and not be taken up with the glamour of super-apostles who peddle the Word in a manner ruinous to the soul.²

This is the experience of all faithful pastors, at various times and in differing measures. Conflict is the daily dynamic of genuine Christian ministry. But how shall we endure such conflict? How shall we endure such conflict with joy? Both seem impossible, and *are* impossible by nature, but by the grace of God ministers of the Gospel can faithfully run the race the Lord has marked out for them.

2. Taken from the 2015 Mission Report of Grace Reformed Church, Jersey City, NJ, to URCNA Classis Eastern United States.

2. Perspectives on Conflict from 2 Corinthians 1:3-11

The same apostle who suffered so much reaches out now to pastor us, on Christ's behalf, with comfort in our ministerial afflictions. The words of comfort which open 2 Corinthians offer profound, personal pastoral wisdom for ministers in the midst of conflict. Remember that these are the words of the Christ who suffered, delivered to us through Paul, his suffering representative and are thus worthy of our double attention. Several features of a Christ-centered perspective on conflict arise in this passage.

2.1. God Intends to Magnify His Mercy in our Conflicts (2 Cor. 1:3)

The embattled apostle begins by blessing God for His mercies and comfort: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3). In spite of all the pain, suffering and conflict Paul is currently experiencing at the time of writing this letter, he is able to begin with praise! Paul is willing to boast of weakness and suffering that *God might get the glory for His mercy*, not so that Paul might be pitied for his unjust pains or honored for his toughness.

Our God is the Father of mercies. This refers to His attribute as a God of pity who feels for his children in their distress. He *is* merciful (Ps. 103:8). He *delights* in mercy (Mic. 7:18). He *abounds* in mercy to all who call on him (Ps. 86:5). This God expresses his merciful *character* in his merciful *work* of comforting the afflicted. Sometimes he comforts us by delivering us from our affliction, or he may send someone to help us carry the load. Paul experienced this in the friendship of Titus. He wrote:

For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more" (2 Cor. 7:5-7).

He may also choose to visit our hearts and minds with inner peace, calming our anxious minds and troubled souls. "God comforts chiefly by his inward influence on the mind itself, assuaging its tumults and filling it with joy and peace in believing."³

God intends to magnify His mercy in our conflicts and calls us to magnify his mercy too. The conflict is much bigger than ourselves. God's purpose in our conflict is not to lead us into self-pity but for God to show pity to us that we might in turn bless him for his pity. Even when our suffering and conflicts are caused at least in part by our own sin, and often sin plays some role in our suffering, we can still look to our God to show mercy and to help us in our time of need. God loves to display himself to us in our hardships so that we may catch a better glimpse of him.

³ Hodge, 381.

2.2. God Qualifies Us to Minister Consolation to Others through our Suffering (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, *who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction*, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4, emphasis added).

Here we find a sequence of five thoughts which form a complete circle, beginning and ending with the God of comfort:

1. the God of all comfort
2. comforts us in all our affliction
3. so we can comfort those in any affliction
4. with the comfort we have received
5. from the God who comforted us

He goes on to say in 2 Corinthians 1:6: “If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer.”

The design of God’s consolation is to qualify Paul for his work as a consoler of the afflicted. He was willing to be afflicted in order to bring consolation to others. “A life of ease is commonly stagnant. It is those who suffer much and who experience much of the comfort of the Holy Spirit who live much. Their life is rich in experience and in resources.”⁴

Ultimately all our afflictions are from the Lord. Job knew that. Paul knew that. They have secondary causes, to be sure, and these secondary causes are real and need to be dealt with. But let us remember that in the end the Lord has sent this affliction to work *on* us that we might be better equipped to work *with* others. He is poor, yet in his poverty he makes many rich (2 Cor. 6:10).

What a comfort to know that in all the hardships we face in ministry, not one iota of it is useless or senseless! Even the most aggravating harassment is designed by God to train and qualify us for further service. See how the apostle stresses this point by means of repetition in 2 Corinthians 12:7: “*So to keep me from becoming conceited* because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, *to keep me from becoming conceited*” (emphasis added). In the same way the God of comfort comforts us to make us comforters that we may all the more honor the God of comfort. Our affliction is for the comfort of our people. “No pastoral suffering is pointless. No pastoral suffering is senseless. No pastoral suffering is meaningless. Every heartache has its divine target in the consolation of the saints....”⁵

⁴ Hodge, 381.

⁵ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2002), 140. For more resources, also see D.A. Carson. *The Cross and the Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993); Sam Storms. “Living with One Foot Raised: Calvin on the Glory of the Final Resurrection and Heaven” in *With Calvin in the Theatre of God: The Glory of Christ and Everyday Life*, eds. John Piper and David Mathis (Wheaton: Crossway), 2010: 111–132;

2.3. We Participate in the Sufferings and Consolation of Christ through Our Afflictions and Conflict (2 Corinthians 1:5)

“For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too” (2 Cor. 1:5).

In verse 5 Paul takes the previous argument a step further to provide deeper insight into the nature of his suffering in the Gospel ministry. When God comforts us in our suffering he does so by virtue of our union with Christ. When we suffer, we suffer *in Christ*. When we are comforted, we are comforted *in Christ*. Thus, through conflict and comfort, we enter into deeper communion with our Lord Jesus Christ. Hodge comments: “The sufferings which Christ suffered, his people are called upon to endure in virtue of their faith-union with Him and in order to be like him.... As union with Christ was the source of the afflictions which Paul endured, so it was the source of the abundant consolation which he enjoyed.”⁶

As we participate in the sufferings of Christ we fill up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the Church (cf. Col. 1:24). Christ's afflictions are not lacking at all in atonement value, but lacking in the amount of tribulation his body must go through in order to be fully conformed to His image and enter His glory. It is *necessary* through many tribulations to enter the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). We are called to be part of the work of completing the church's road through suffering to glory! We should not fear or run away from this calling to suffer as something unexpected and bizarre to be fought at all costs. Peter summons us to rejoice in our sufferings for this very reason: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

This knowledge is crucial for pastors in the midst of conflict for the sake of the Gospel. Our suffering is not our own; it is on Christ's behalf. We are participating in his sufferings. We are representing him. We are ambassadors of Christ not only in the *message* of the cross but also in the *method* of the cross. While the Corinthians had little room for suffering in their theology of Christ's kingdom, Paul accented the role of suffering in the coming of the Kingdom.

2.4. Through Conflict God Helps Us to Rid Ourselves of All Self-sufficiency (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so *utterly burdened beyond our strength* that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But *that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead*. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. *On him we have set our hope* that he will deliver us again (2 Cor. 1:8-10, emphasis added).

David Paul Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012).

⁶ Hodge, 382.

Paul and his companions felt the sentence of death. They were utterly burdened beyond their own strength. They were overwhelmed. We should not imagine that Paul was always in charge of his suffering with perfect pain management. He met with times of despair and becoming overwrought, being brought to his knees and crying out to the Lord from a pit of deep darkness.

It may seem to us that ministers of the Gospel should not allow themselves to get into such a place. They should not allow burnout to happen to them. By their faith they should remain in control. But the Lord sometimes brings us to a place where we can't handle things and we fall down. Like Elijah under the broom tree, he brings us to our end so that he may show us our complete insufficiency. Both we and our people need to know that the power of the Gospel and of the Church is not ours. We are not sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us (cf. 2 Cor. 3:5). As Paul says later: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, *to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us*" (2 Cor. 4:7, emphasis added).

"God's first great design in all our trouble is that we might let go of self-confidence. When we do that, there is a temporary sense of falling or failing. But by faith in God's mercy, we land, infinitely more secure, in the arms of our Father, who is utterly in control at the brink of life and death."⁷

How fragile we and our churches really are, so breakable, so ready to fall apart! How surprised we are when our human frailty is exposed, but we should not be surprised. This is a lesson the Lord shows us over and over again because we are so ready to step into self-sufficiency mode.

2.5. God Brings Us to See Christ's Power and Glory through Suffering and Conflict (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

"But *that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead*. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. *On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again*" (2 Cor. 1:8-10, emphasis added).

God purposes to bring us to our extremity so that we may see his glory. Christ magnifies his power through our weakness. In every conflict he is calling us to set our hope on his power, not on our own. But the text is more specific than this. It is not his power *in general* that God wants to magnify in our weakness. He wants to demonstrate the power by which he raised Jesus Christ from the dead. As we come face-to-face with our own weakness and rest in God's power to deliver us, the power of Christ's resurrection is being demonstrated through us. As our suffering advertises Christ's cross, so God's delivering us advertises Christ's resurrection. Paul describes his extreme suffering and God's powerful deliverance as a death-and-resurrection sequence occurring in his life.

Christ directs us to the power of his resurrection so that we might direct others to the power of his resurrection. Then we learn to hope in Christ's life, not our own life. We learn not to put the power center of our ministry in ourselves, something we are inclined to do everyday!

The Lord Jesus revealed this to Paul in answer to his seasons of fervent prayer that God would remove the thorn in his flesh. It pleased the Christ to accent his

⁷ Piper, 166.

power in Paul's ministry by helping him endure the conflict rather than removing the conflict.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

In his book, *Shattered Shepherds: Finding Hope in the Midst of Ministry Disaster*, Steve Swartz challenges ministers of the Gospel not to leave the battlefield in times of heavy conflict. So many pastors give up because they feel they have been treated so unfairly and are unwilling to risk being hurt like this again. He writes:

I know you. You're the man who hears the classic sermon illustration often given jokingly to a chuckling congregation, "The church is made up of sheep and sometimes sheep bite," and when you hear this you think, "Sheep not only bite, they kick, gossip, harm, send vicious letters, call secret meetings I know nothing about, plot evil, treat my family like outcasts, pay less than minimum wage, complain about everything, treat the church like it belongs to them, stand in the way of every good idea and grow in bitterness against their leadership until I get humiliated and devastated in ways no one can really understand." I know you because I've stood in your shoes.⁸

The author himself went through a ministry disaster where he had to leave his congregation a broken man. Filled with despair and self-pity, he determined never to return to the ministry. But the Lord by his grace raised him up again to take up his calling and re-enter the battlefield for the sake of Christ. He counsels despairing ministers to show forth the glory of Christ by looking away from themselves, their wounds, their opponents, their humiliation, and looking to him for new strength, hope, and zeal for the gospel ministry. Though pastors in the pits will need some time to reflect and recharge, they must magnify Christ crucified and risen from the dead by rising again from their despair in the power of Christ and running again to finish the race.

Swartz warns ministers (and ministers' wives) against false ministry expectations. We tend to believe that if we really work hard and invest ourselves, God should give us the return of a joyful, fairly comfortable, flourishing ministry. We conclude that we don't deserve to be hurt and we shouldn't have to put up with a lot of conflict. Our perspective on and goals for ministry become self-centered dreams of entitlement. But the Word of God admonishes us to rid ourselves of all such dreams. Though the Lord may give us times of peace and flourishing in the church, it pleases him often to glorify himself by leading us into conflict that we

⁸ Steve Swartz, *Shattered Shepherds: Finding Hope in the Midst of Ministry Disaster* (Kress Christian Publications, 2015), 9.

might show forth the power of his death and resurrection. He wants us more and more to die to ourselves and live to him.

2.6. God Shows Us Our Need for His Community through Conflict and Suffering (2 Corinthians 1:8-11)

For *we do not want you to be unaware*, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. *You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many* (2 Cor. 1:8-11, emphasis added).

The apostle Paul did not suffer alone, in silence. He valued the fellowship of the covenant community in his struggles. He wanted them to be aware of his affliction (v. 8). He sought their prayers for God's help; more than that, he demanded it: "You also must help us by prayer!" He shared his burdens with the people of God so that they might carry them before the Lord in community. He also assured the Corinthians that God would help him and his co-workers through the prayers of God's people. In short: *Paul suffered conflict in community*.

Ministers often do not follow this way of handling conflict. We suffer silently. We suffer all alone. Perhaps we do not want to appear weak. Maybe we believe that our ministry struggles are just between ourselves and the Lord. Perhaps we do not want others to know that not everything in our church is going well. We imagine that if we keep the problem private it will not grow.

The apostle Paul models for us a better way. How often the apostle sought the prayers of God's people! He asked for prayers that he might be given words for ministry, boldness and clarity for ministry, and an open door for ministry (cf. Eph. 6:19, Col. 4:3). He asked the Church at Rome *to strive together with him in their prayers for him*: "I appeal to you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, *to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf*, that I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea" (Rom. 15:30-31, emphasis added). We need our congregations to strive together with us by their prayers in order that through them God will help us carry our load of afflictions and endure the conflicts.

There is urgent need for more community in ministry. Paul Tripp highlights this in his book *Dangerous Calling* when he writes about *the missing community* in the pastor's life (Tripp: 83-96). We read Ephesians 4:1-16 as if we're not part of the body; we just equip the body. We read 1 Corinthians 12 as if we're not part of the body. We hide from people in order to protect ourselves. We don't share our worries and struggles. In so doing we set ourselves up for conflict.

It is God's will that we allow all His people as prophets, priests and kings to minister His comfort and encouragement to us, especially in our times of trouble. Ministers are to live and work as those embedded in the communion of the saints, not only to minister and to pray in Christ's name, but also to be ministered to and to

be prayed for in Christ's name. In this way Christ again brings glory to His own name as the sheep serve the shepherds in the name of the Chief Shepherd who has given them gifts through the ministry of the shepherds.

Conclusion

Paul wrote: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (Phil. 1:29). Suffering belongs to a minister's calling, not for suffering's sake, but for Christ's sake. Conflict is a central part of our suffering for his name and gospel. May the Lord give us eyes to see conflict in the ministry not as an irritation to be avoided or an aggravation to be protested, but as a participation in his suffering and in his consolation for the advance of his kingdom.