

Varsy Arsy

Proclaiming The Gospel
in Second Corinthians

by

Phillip A. Ross



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ISBN: 978-0-9820385-4-3
Edition: 1.5.2012

Published by

Pilgrim Platform
149 E. Spring St., Marietta
Ohio, 45750
www.pilgrim-platform.org

Biblical quotations are from the *English Standard Version*, Standard Bible Society, unless otherwise cited.

ESV refers to the English Standard Version, Standard Bible Society, 2008.
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ASV refers to the *American Standard Version*, Thomas Nelson, 1929.

WCF refers to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646.

Strong's refers to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible*, Hendrickson Publishers.

Printed in the United States of America

*For the people who have elected
Barack Obama as the
44th President of the
United States of America
in the hope for
change they can believe in*

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INTRODUCTION

This should be considered to be volume two of *Arsy Varsy—Reclaiming the Gospel in First Corinthians*, Pilgrim Platform, Marietta, Ohio, 2008, in the same way that Second Corinthians needs to be read in the light of First Corinthians. Not that the two cannot stand apart or alone, they can. But in the sense that the second is built upon the foundation of the first, and will be best understood in light of the first.

As *arsy varsy* was an old Puritan phrase meaning *ass-backwards*, *varsy arsy* is the putting backwards the notion of *ass-backwardness*—or putting the matter rightly. Paul argued vociferously against all that arrayed itself against Christ, but he was not merely *against* things. He was preeminently *for* things, *for* Christ and *for* all that Christ stood for. And Christ stands for the things that the world and Satan stand against. There was, is and will always be a fundamental opposition between the forces of good and the forces of evil. It cannot be otherwise.

The dedication of this volume may require some explanation because the theological perspective that inhabits it is not the theological perspective of President Obama, and therefore not of those to whom he appealed.¹ These volumes are directed at the correction of a mindset, a worldview, more than they are directed at any particular person or group. So, it must be understood that the dedication is only what it says. This study of Corinthians is *for* President Obama, but even more so *for* his supporters—for the edification of the American people, for their conversion, for revival, for reformation, for

¹ The President and I share some history in the United Church of Christ. So, I am familiar with the theology that he has been exposed to—Liberation theology and its variants. The United Church of Christ is the most liberal of the denominations that still use the name *Christian* and has led the liberal attack within the Christian camp since its inception in 1957.

growth in grace, for sanctification in the hope of repentance and restitution in Christ's covenant. However, it should not be assumed that these volumes are simply a corrective for liberals and/or Democrats—not at all! The theological perspective and teaching herein is for Twenty-First Century America (and the West generally) regardless of any perceived political rightness or leftness. What is more, these volumes will encourage Christians everywhere to think more deeply about what they believe, and the implications of their beliefs. These books are more about depth, than direction. They are not about right or left, but profundity, sapience and lucidity. They serve as a call into the deep waters of Christianity.

I have attempted in these volumes to provide a faithful gospel perspective, to show that Paul's letters were real—not to divest them of their spirituality, but to demonstrate that Paul's spirituality was earthy and fleshy more than it was of a detached, abstract, ethereal or imaginary quality. Unfortunately, the Christian faith has been blurred and/or diluted by the forces of modernism and Post-modernism in our day, by the lingering forces of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution of the Eighteenth Century, and by the tenacious forces of Gnosticism and Platonism that have claimed common ground with the gospel from the very beginning of Paul's ministry, from the beginning of Christ's ministry, and even from time immemorial, reaching back into the fog of ancient history.

HOPE

The hope for change that was stirred up by Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 was an unspecific hope, a mantra of change that appealed to a deep-seated but unclarified fear. Hope always shines brighter against a backdrop of dread. One of the arts of political success involves the ability to equivocate, to be deliberately ambiguous or opaque in order to appeal to as many diverse people as possible in such a way as to allow them to impose their own meanings and agendas upon one's words. Political success involves appealing to as diverse an audience as possible in order to capture as many votes as possible. Barack Obama appears to be a master of this art.

Nonetheless, my contention is that Obama's rhetoric of hope led people to impose their own hopes for change upon his campaign. People know at some deep, unconscious level that something is very wrong, that we have taken a wrong turn somewhere, that

our current lifestyles and the values that support them are fundamentally unsustainable. We are like a herd of cliff-bound lemmings, and the course we are currently on is not likely to turn out well. A course adjustment is needed. People know it, and Obama's rally cry for hope has ignited this concern. It is a good concern, a necessary concern, fraught with danger and opportunity.

My hope is that the desire for change that was given public voice in the midst of the recent election will find its way to the deeper considerations of our sin and the good news of the gospel as Paul proclaimed it at Corinth. Paul's words were for the Corinthians without a doubt, but they are also for us because Paul's words are for the church, for the people of God, whosoever they are, wheresoever they live and whensoever they exist.

People today often think that we live at the very pinnacle of human civilization because we have extended science and technology farther than any other culture in history—and we have! But, while it is true that our science and technology are genuine wonders of the world, at the same time we have gutted the very heart of civilization, the heart of human concern and human culture by converting everything that people do into profit making opportunities. Consequently, we are not at the pinnacle of human civilization at all. We are on the verge of an unprecedented world-wide catastrophe that only a serious, wide-spread cultural change will avert—and only by the grace of God. And God is the real issue. Will we, can we acknowledge God's role in our lives, in our world? We will, of course, one way or another, sooner or later.

CRISIS

At this writing the financial markets of the world are in the midst of unparalleled crisis. Originating on Wall Street in America, toxic credit has poisoned the financial markets of the world. Governments of many countries are following America's lead in "bailing out" various corporations—banks, lenders, governmental hybrids (the twins, Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae), etc.—by "injecting" them with capital to keep them from collapsing. Governments are printing fiat money to prop up institutions that the forces of the market and history have determined to have failed, institutions that would go bust except for the bailouts.

At the time that market forces would collapse various institutions of the world culture in which we live, government forces are

scrambling to prop up the failing institutions in the hope of their continuation and/or in the hope of profiting from their demise. Or perhaps the purpose of the capital injections is not their survival, but something else, something unknown, something unspoken.

It has been in the midst of this crisis that the Presidential campaign of Barack Obama issued promises of hope for change. And it is my contention that the kind of change that the whole world wants and needs at this time in history is substantive change, real change, cultural change, and not the propping up of failed institutions. Indeed, the changes that are coming to the world will sweep many people and institutions from the stage of history through a cascade of events—some intended and some unintended—that are already upon us. Like it or not, understand it or not, Christ actually is our only hope.

The crisis that has swamped the world financial systems is a symptom of a deeper problem. Money is not the problem. It is a symptom. Ground zero of our financial crisis is credit. And what is credit? It is a promise to repay a loan. It is a covenant, a compact, a contract, an agreement. The real source of toxic credit, the acknowledged source of the financial crisis, are the unfaithful promises of borrowers and the immoral practices of lenders. The world is in the grip of a crisis of faithlessness, not just concerning money, but generic and wide spread unfaithfulness. Our promissory notes rest upon a foundation of promissory rot. To fix the crisis, we must first face and fix the covenantal rot with the covenantal God.

Substantive change cannot and should not be engaged in one fell swoop as if someone has *the* answer—I certainly don't, Rather, such changes must be engaged with great care and caution. The social and cultural changes that are needed at this time should get a lot of public discussion and engagement. Now is not the time for political correctness or the denial of Christ's historic impact upon the world. It is toward such a discussion that these volumes are offered in the hope that public discussion will include the voice of Jesus Christ, whose gospel speaks directly to times like these. Rather than rejecting the wisdom of Scripture in the midst of crisis, we need to rediscover the wisdom of Scripture because the Bible has been given to us precisely for times such as these.

Paul and the Corinthians were standing on the verge of historical changes that were similar to the kinds of changes that we ourselves in our time are facing. Thus, Paul's words to the Corinthians have some helpful application for us in that the crisis at Corinth

that Paul faced is not dissimilar from the crisis that we face today. Of course there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the First and the Twenty-First Centuries, but there are important similarities.

The Corinthian church was successful, large and influential. But it didn't realize that its success had been built on a misunderstanding of the gospel that Paul had planted among them. False apostles had been teaching false hopes and false beliefs in the name of Jesus Christ, under the guise of Christianity. Many of the Corinthians didn't realize the problem, though increasingly church members were becoming aware of a problem of some kind. Some of the church members had written Paul for his advice in the matter. Paul, of course, recognized the problem immediately because it was his teaching that had been contravened.

BACKWARDS

Part of the backwardness in Corinth and of our own world today is the fact that Satan and the world have arrayed themselves against the things of the Lord. It is not that God is out of step with the reality that science documents, but that Satan's secularism is out of step with that reality. The Lord is first or primary in order and immanence. The Lord is always *for* life, Satan and the world mitigate against life. Satan and the world stand *against* the preeminence of God and of life. So, it is not that Christianity is always *against* things, but that Satan and the world are always against what God positively stands *for*. So, whether Christianity seems to stand *for* things or *against* things depends upon where the observer is standing. To stand with the Lord is to stand *for* the things of the Lord, and to stand against Him is to stand *against* what He is *for*.

Paul found himself somewhat flabbergasted in Corinth because the church that he had planted there years earlier had veered so far from its inception as to be completely *arsy varsy*—backwards. Again, it wasn't so much that the gospel was in contradiction to the world, as it was that the values and ways of the world were in contradiction to—*against*—the values and ways of the gospel. The gospel did not do the opposing because it was the original impetus of God come to fruition in Christ Jesus. The gospel seed that Paul planted at Corinth was the original. It was the world and the false Corinthian apostles who were against the Lord of the universe. Paul

had set them on the right course at the founding of the church, and the false apostles opposed what Paul had taught.

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians continued the themes of his first letter and introduced others. Written from Macedonia, Paul expressed thankfulness for the repentance and renewed obedience of the Corinthian church. He wrote about completing their collection for the Jerusalem church and defended himself against accusations and slander from the false apostles at Corinth.

Thanks to Stephanie, my wife, and Paul Williams for proofing and feedback.

Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio
April 2009

I. COMFORT

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in all Achaia. Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, He comforting us in all our trouble, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in every trouble, through the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ. And if we are troubled, it is for your consolation and salvation, being worked out in the endurance of the same sufferings which we also suffer; if we are comforted, it is for your consolation and salvation. And our hope of you is certain, knowing that as you are partakers of the sufferings, so also of the consolation.

—2 Corinthians 1:1-7

Scholars conclude that First Corinthians was probably written from Ephesus before Pentecost (late spring) and that Second Corinthians was probably written from Macedonia later that same year before the onset of winter. About six months separate the two letters. It seems that Paul sent several letters to the Corinthians in an effort to help get them back on the gospel track.

The common format for letters of Paul's time was to indicate who the letter was from at the beginning. So, we see Paul identify himself and his position or authority as an apostle, and Timothy, who was with him. Timothy may have served as Paul's scribe or secretary at that time. Note two things about the first verse: that Paul identified himself as an apostle "by the will of God" (v. 1), and that Timothy is not identified as an apostle.

Paul was conscious of his position as a significant Christian leader. He was aware of his responsibility to get the church started correctly, and so he pressed hard to correct the Corinthian church. He also seems to have known that his letters would receive significant attention by other Christians in other churches because he seems to have been aware of various of the apostolic letters being circulated among the churches at the time. He certainly would have been aware of the gospels—at least some of them—and their importance to the churches of the day.

GOD'S WILL

The mention of the “will of God” (v. 1) as the authority of his apostleship was not a statement of self-confirmation, as if people can just claim the will of God as the justification for whatever they want to do in God’s name. Rather, it indicates the nature of a call to Christ, that the call must originate in the will of God and not simply in one’s own heart. A call to Christ takes more than personal desire and the approval of the elders of a church, though both of these things also happen. Paul’s mention of God’s will did not/does not eliminate the necessity of examination and election to church membership and/or church office. It only places the primary locus of such a call in the court of God. The point is that those who are called need to know that they are called by God.

The middle clause of verse 1 provides an interesting statement about the Corinthian church. Paul addressed the church as a whole, a unit, as if it were one, not many. It is important to note that the church in Paul’s day was nothing like the churches we know in our day. Almost everything is different, from our technological lifestyles to the structure or organization of the churches and the way that we do church. It is different because we are different people than the people of the First Century. One of the fundamental differences pertains to the definition and character of the church(es).

The Greek word is *ekklēsia* and literally refers to a calling out, or a calling together—actually both a calling out and a calling together. At the time the Greeks used the word to indicate the governing body of a city (a polis, from which the word political is derived). The *ekklēsia* was a governing body, the gospel of Jesus Christ provided for an alternative governing body—the church. Paul wrote to the Philippians, “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we

await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Christians are citizens of heaven.

Paul was not writing to everyone in Corinth, nor to all of the people who worshiped at the Corinthian church. First of all, he wrote to those who could read. He was not aiming that the lowest classes of society. He was aiming at Christians in any and all classes of society. Those who could read would read his letter(s) to others. Christians are people of the Book, and can, therefore, read. As we know, his arguments are often complex and require diligent study. But Paul was not being an intellectual snob, not showing off his intelligence. Indeed, the simplest Christian could then and can still benefit from his letters. At the same time Paul’s letters continue to provide insights and challenges to the most erudite Christian living in the Twenty-First Century.

And while Paul was not writing to everyone in Corinth, he was writing to every Christian in Achaia. By including all of Achaia, Paul emphasized the unity of the church. Those who were in unity with Christ were in unity with each other and were designated as one church in Achaia.

INDEPENDENCE & COOPERATION

According to Herodotus, the Ionians founded twelve cities along the southern shore of the Corinthian Gulf, many of which retain their original names to this day. These cities formed a confederation of smaller communities, which in the last century of the independent history of Greece attained to great importance and was known as the Achaean League. In Roman times the term Achaia was used to include the whole of Greece, exclusive of Thessaly. In 146 B.C., the league erupted into open revolt against Roman domination, shortly thereafter the Romans under Lucius Mummius defeated the Achaeans, destroyed Corinth, its capital, and dissolved the league.

Why is this important? Because it suggests two things: the people in Achaia had 1) a spirit of independence, and 2) a spirit of cooperation. Paul was writing to the *ekklēsia* in various cities in Achaia as if they comprised a unity, as if they were one. This is important because it suggests that Christian unity can occur across a region in such a way that neither independence nor cooperation are lost.

To this church, these various *ekklēsia* groupings, Paul invoked grace and peace. The order is important, first grace then peace. Paul wished, acknowledged, sent grace to them and then peace from God. He acknowledged that both grace and peace issue from God, and that grace preceded peace. No doubt Paul was aware at this point (after his first letter) that his message to the Corinthians was a message of both unity and division (1 Corinthians 11:19) He was not asking all of the Corinthians to dwell together in peace, but had already suggested that there may need to be a division among them. He will repeat that sentiment in chapter six. And yet his purpose was to establish genuine peace through the restoration of unity by the exclusion of those who were not in Christ, as he communicated in his first letter: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Paul identified himself as being in unity with them by speaking of God as “our Father” (v. 2). And he added that Jesus Christ was in unity and/or harmony with God, as well. His first message was that God is merciful because He provides comfort in the midst of affliction. And secondly, that those who have received God’s comfort in the midst of their own affliction receive it not simply for themselves, but in order that they may pass God’s comfort along to others who are similarly afflicted. The comfort that the saints receive is given to them, not simply for themselves, but as a means of facilitating their service to others. This suggests the importance of the element of service in the Christian faith. Everything that God gives is to be shared, and every opportunity for service is to be engaged.

AFFLICTED & CALLED

The message is not simply that God provides comfort for the afflicted, but that the afflicted are called into service. How did Paul know this? Because he himself had been afflicted because of his faith in Christ. And he had been called into service, not merely as a result of his affliction, but by it and because of it. The purpose of the affliction was not to cause suffering among the saints, but to call and equip them for service. The affliction was the calling, and it was also the equipping. God uses affliction as a means of call and a means of sanctification—spiritual growth.

Of course, this is not the only use of affliction. God also uses it for discipline and chastisement. And for those who reject Jesus Christ, affliction provides a real-time prelude to the vicissitudes of hell as an end-of-the-line or last opportunity to turn from sin and embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Every occurrence of the word *tribulation* in the KJV is a translation of *thlipsis*, which is here translated as *affliction*. Tribulation is one of God's tools. The purpose of tribulation for the faithful in Jesus Christ is the calling to and equipping for ministry, which means that Christians are definitely not spared tribulation, but may even be more susceptible to tribulation experiences than those who are not Christian. This insight has application to the Dispensational doctrine of the rapture. God's intention is not to save Christians from pain and difficulty, but to save them for ministry in the midst of it.

Christians are to experience God's comfort in the midst of personal affliction and tribulation, and then to comfort others in the same way that God has comforted us. We are to learn how God's comfort works in the midst of our own pain. And we must note that God's comfort is not usually the elimination of the pain of affliction, but the proper understanding of it. Knowing that the purpose of my affliction is to help me provide comfort for others does not eliminate or lessen the pain. Rather, it tends to increase my tolerance for pain, knowing that it has a purpose that serves the glory of Jesus Christ, a greater purpose, even an eternal purpose that promotes the cause of Christ.

To actually be useful to Jesus Christ in the accomplishment of God's purposes is a great comfort to the saints. Others may belittle such service, lamenting that it falls to them, but not those who are faithful. The faithful treasure whatever service they can provide for the cause of Christ. Large or small, great or insignificant, it doesn't matter because it pleases the Lord. This is the comfort about which Paul speaks, and can be seen again in verse 5: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too." There is a correspondence between sharing Christ's sufferings, suffering with or because of Christ, and sharing in the comfort provided by Christ through faith.

We see it again in verse 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." Here Paul is showing us how it works. His

suffering was for the Corinthians (and others), as was his comfort. It was not for him, but for them. It flowed through him. His affliction called him into service to Christ in order to learn how Christ comforts His people in the midst of affliction, and in order that he may then extend that comfort to the afflicted Corinthians. And in the same way, by imitation, the afflicted Corinthians were called into service to Christ by their affliction. And they were similarly trained by Christ Himself, who comforted them, in order that they may serve other saints who are or would be afflicted for the cause of Christ.

The same thought is extended in verse 7: “Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort.” The faithful saints at Corinth experienced affliction and distress, which was no doubt exacerbated by their adherence to the gospel as Paul had expounded it to them. And the common concern in the face of difficulty and affliction is to wonder why God would do such a thing, why God would allow his faithful people to experience the pain and difficulties of tribulation. Our natural minds lead us to think that God should reward faithfulness with ease and pleasure. But Paul, conveying the supernatural mind of Christ, does not suggest that.

STRENGTHENED

Rather, Paul finds that his hope is all the more strengthened by the fact of their suffering because he knows that in Christ their suffering will result in the comfort that only Christ provides, and will call them into service as it has called him. He knows that the comfort is not a function of the suffering, but of faithfulness—that faithfulness to Jesus Christ and the comfort of Christ are the same thing. No degree of suffering can dislodge the comfort of Christ. Jesus proved that on the cross. Paul knows that no human experience, no matter how painful or traumatic, can undo God’s covenant with Jesus Christ or derail the salvation that Christ has secured for His people. So, Paul’s hope for the afflicted Corinthians was unshaken. Suffering for the sake of Christ cannot undo the comfort provided by Christ. Rather, it increases it.

This is a great hope, greater than anything that we in our natural minds could ever conceive of, greater than any sin, surely greater than our personal discomforts in the midst of the difficulties of this world. Christian comfort is not a respite from struggles and diffi-

culties, nor from pain and hardship. Rather, Christian comfort is faithfulness in the midst of struggle and difficulty, faithfulness in the face of pain and hardship. I'm not saying that pain and struggle are necessary. God is not a masochist. I'm only saying that they are ordinary experiences in this fallen world, and that God uses them for His purposes.

Things will be different in heaven. There "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4). That will be then. Here and now we live between the already and the not yet. Here sin is real, and it generates pain and difficulty. So God uses it for His purposes and our benefit in Christ. And we will do well not to disparage God's ways, not to ignore God's tools, nor to lament our difficulties. Rather, Christians are called to embrace God's way, to use and to be used by God's tools, and to see our difficulties as opportunities for ministry.

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