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The Heart of Paul's Spirituality and the Implications for the Church: Becoming Centered in God through Christ Six Conferences for the New Camaldoli Hermitage [Lecture Notes]

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The Heart of Paul's Spirituality and the Implications for the Church:

Becoming Centered in God through Christ

Six Conferences for the New Camaldoli Hermitage

by

Scott Gambrill Sinclair

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Preface to the Series of Conferences:

The Diversity of Paul's Spiritual Experience and Practice and Its Impact on Church History and the Need to Find Some Unifying Center

- I. Paul's spiritual experience and practice are almost bewilderingly diverse. Here are at least some major poles.
- A. Paul emphasizes charismatic gifts.
 - 1. He writes that he speaks in tongues more even than the enthusiasts at Corinth do (1 Cor. 14:18), and he apparently introduced the practice to the Corinthians.
 - 2. He stresses that tongues are an essential part of a Christian community.
 - a. Even when tongues have produced division in the church and are in danger of alienating non-Christian opinion, he still allows them to be practiced in public worship.
 - b. And he commends their use in private prayer (1 Cor. 14:28).
 - c. And he insists that tongues like all spiritual gifts are indispensable for a healthy Christian "body."
 - 3. Paul also writes that he worked miracles ("signs and wonders," Romans 15:19, 2 Cor. 12:12), and in Acts we have narratives of him doing so (e.g., Acts 14:8-13).
 - B. Paul also had esoteric mystical experiences which he must have regarded as important.
 - 1. He shares with us that once he was taken up into paradise and heard things which cannot be spoken, and Paul cannot even determine whether this experience happened when he was in his body (2 Cor. 12:2-4).
 - 2. Although Paul could not discuss this experience in detail, we should assume that it was important to him.
 - 3. And there are various indications that Paul had other such experiences.
 - a. Paul cites a "word of the Lord," that seems to have come from personal revelation rather than from something Jesus historically said (1 Thes. 4:15). This saying is not otherwise attested and is not the sort of detail about the final judgment that Jesus would have given.
 - b. Through the Spirit Paul knows the joys that await the faithful in the new age (1 Cor. 2:9-10).
 - c. Paul tells us that he attended the Jerusalem Council in response to a "revelation" (Gal. 2:2).
 - d. The Acts of the Apostles tells us of various visions which Paul had (e.g., Acts 16:9), though we cannot be certain whether Acts is historically accurate in descriptions of Paul's inner experience.
 - C. Paul emphasizes that he and other Christians are saved by faith not by works.
 - 1. Paul stresses that salvation is not earned but is a gift. "The wages of sin are death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).
 - 2. We receive this gift by faith, trusting in God's undeserved love and forgiveness.
 - 3. Consequently, we have peace and can serve God in thanksgiving (Rom. 5:1).
 - 4. And Paul himself, while acknowledging his evil past as a persecutor of Christianity, can be joyful.
 - D. Paul stresses that he participates in the sufferings of Jesus and insists that other Christians do likewise.
 - 1. Paul insists that he seeks to be conformed to the crucifixion and death of

Jesus (e.g., Rom. 6:5, Gal. 6:17, Phil. 3:10).

2. In baptism every Christian shares sacramentally in Jesus's death and burial (Rom. 6:3-8).

3. Of course, in practice Christians must sometimes suffer for their faithfulness to Jesus (e.g., 1 Thes. 2:14).

4. Paul suffered horrendously (especially, 2 Cor. 11:23-28), and he had to integrate his sufferings into his spirituality.

E. Paul emphasizes becoming conformed to the glorified Christ.

1. Paul teaches that the risen Christ rules over the universe (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:25).

2. In this present life, Christians are being inwardly conformed to Christ, growing from one glory to the next (2 Cor. 3:18).

3. And in hope Christians look forward to the final resurrection when we will be conformed to the image of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:49) and have spiritual bodies and share in other attributes of divinity (e.g., knowing all things [1 Cor. 13:12]).

F. Paul also stresses the daily struggle to bring oneself into subjection and grow in Christian virtues.

1. Paul stresses that he himself pummels his body (1 Cor. 9:25-27) and that Christians are to exercise self-control in all things.

2. In his letters he never tires of recommending growth in a host of virtues which require disciplined self-sacrifice.

II. This great diversity of spiritual experience and counsel helps attest the greatness of Paul. One is reminded of Blaise Pascal's statement that greatness comes not from going to one extreme but by touching opposite extremes simultaneously (Pensees, VI:353).

III. Christian groups have stressed different dimensions of Paul's diverse experience and practice.

A. Of course, Pentecostals and "Charismatics" have stressed tongues.

B. Various individuals and movements have focused on esoteric spiritual experiences (e.g., appearances of the Virgin Mary).

C. Protestants have stressed justification by faith.

D. Some Roman Catholic mystics and spiritual teachers (e.g., John of the Cross) have insisted that it is essential to share in Christ's suffering, and some traditional Catholic practices, particularly self-flagellation, do this at least symbolically.

E. The Eastern Orthodox have emphasized becoming conformed to the glorified Christ ("divinization").

F. Many Christians, including numerous Roman Catholics, have stressed self-examination, discipline, and the acquisition of virtues by constant struggle.

IV. Divisions within both individual congregations and larger movements have occurred as different people emphasized the centrality of different spiritual paths.

V. Of course, it would be a mistake to assume that a typical Christian individual could combine all of these paths, and Paul himself insists that different Christians have different spiritual gifts, and no individual has them all (1 Cor. 12).

VI. Theoretically a Christian community could combine them all, and Paul stresses that the ideal Christian community would.

VII. However, in practice it is hard for a Christian community to combine all the spiritual gifts while maintaining unity and charity.

VIII. Hence, the question arises as to

A. Whether Paul himself had a core to his own spirituality which managed to hold his wildly diverse spiritual experiences and practices together

B. And whether if we today concentrate on that core we can bring more unity to individual spiritual experience and to a divided Christianity.

IX. An outline of the coming series of conferences.

Conference 1: A Hypothesis on the core of Paul's Spirituality

- I. A hypothesis: The core of Paul's spirituality is moving from being individually or collectively self-centered to being centered in God through Christ, and each of the emphases noted above contributes to the move.
- II. Before we can test this hypothesis we must define what it is to be individually or collectively self-centered and what it is to be in God through Christ, and, in a series of conferences on Paul, we must especially ask how Paul might define these terms.
- III. Let us begin with quotes from Paul's writings.
- A. "I do not do the good which I want, but the evil which I do not want, this is what I do. If I do what I do not want, I do not do it but sin which dwells in me" (Rom. 7:19-20).
 - B. "If you call yourself a Jew and feel secure in the [Mosaic] Law and boast in God . . ." (Rom. 2:17).
 - C. "Your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own, for you were bought at a price. Glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19).
 - D. "I toiled, yet not I but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).
 - E. "The love of Christ impels us, since we have come to this judgment that one died for all; therefore, all died, and he died for all that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).
 - F. "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. What I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and handed himself over for me" (Gal. 2:20).
 - G. "I have suffered the loss of all things and consider them excrement that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having my own righteousness . . . (Phil. 3:8-9).
- IV. As these quotes suggest, for Paul the self ("I" "you") is the part of a person or group that can consciously attempt to be in control, and being self-centered is using that control to bring glory to this self.
- A. It is clear from the first quote that Paul realizes that an individual human being consists of various parts or layers which can even be in conflict with each other. The "I" wants to do good, but the rest of the personality does not cooperate.
 - B. Nevertheless, contrary to Buddhist teaching, Paul does believe that there is an individual self, rather than only a chaos without a center.
 - C. The self is the part of us that is conscious, has explicit goals, and makes choices to realize them.
 - D. Being self-centered is the self trying to achieve goals for its own separate aggrandizement. Such separate aggrandizement necessarily undermines community.
 - E. It is clear from the second quote that in groups the self is the dominant idea of what defines the group and determines which members most embody this identity. In Romans 2:17 a generic or collective Jew can boast because
 1. This Jew has enormous confidence in the superiority of the Mosaic Law.
 2. Adherence to the Mosaic Law is what makes someone Jewish.
 - F. Being self-centered as a group is making the preservation of the group's sense of self more important than the group actually serving God and the world.
- V. Paul holds that when the individual or collective self attempts to achieve its own glory, the self fails falling into the control of sin.
- A. For Paul sin is a superhuman power which produces death.
 1. Sin is inspired by Satan and his assistants ("principalities and powers").
 2. It began with Adam, and the effects of Adam's sin continue down through history (Rom. 5:12-21).
 3. Sin always produces some sort of "death," whether spiritual, psychological,

physical, or eternal. "The wages of sin [i.e., the deserved and inevitable result] are death" (Rom. 6:23).

B. The individual or collective self cannot overcome the power of sin on its own.

C. Hence, the attempt to be self-centered (i.e., gain glory through self-effort) ends with becoming sin-centered.

1. Romans 7:19-20 stresses that the "I" does not do the good that it wishes but the evil that it does not.

2. In the verses after Romans 2:17 Paul stresses that the generic or collective Jew who lauds the Mosaic Law does not actually keep it, and this failure brings Judaism into disrepute. "God's name is slandered among the Gentiles because of you" (Rom. 2:24).

D. The attempt to be self-centered is itself a sin and a surrender to other sin.

E. Note that trying to gain control of oneself with the intention of then using that control to serve Christ is still self-centeredness and still liable to fail.

VI. By contrast, as the last five citations above make clear, being centered in God through Christ is choosing to invite Christ to control us and cooperating with his leading.

A. We must freely choose to invite Christ to control us. Even though Christ has purchased us, and we are his slaves, we must still choose to glorify him in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

B. Even when Christ is in control, we still freely and actively cooperate. Even though Paul insists that he has died, he still must live by faith in Christ (2 Cor. 5:14, Gal. 2:20).

C. Since for Paul the Church is the body of Christ,

1. Individuals cooperate with Christ in the context of the Christian community.

2. The Church as a whole must invite Christ to control it and must cooperate.

D. Of course, allowing Christ to control us means growing in love for God and love for all human beings.

1. Paul stresses that the whole law is fulfilled in the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves (Rom. 13:9-10, Gal. 5:14), and Paul stresses that our neighbor even includes those who abuse us (Rom. 12:20-21).

2. Paul assumes that loving neighbor is an expression of love for God who created the neighbor, and when Christians love the neighbor, they make others glorify God. Cf. not keeping the Law makes the Gentiles slander God (Rom. 2:17-24).

3. Being centered in Christ leads to being centered in God, because Christ himself was centered in God (e.g., Phil. 2:6-8).

VII. When we have passed from being self-centered to being centered in God through Christ, Paul says

A. We go through a psychological/spiritual transition which feels like a death and resurrection.

B. We are (increasingly) able to achieve God's goals.

C. We become conformed to the crucified and risen Christ as we share in his earthly suffering and share in his glorious triumph.

1. In this present life we share in the sufferings of Christ.

2. At the same time we share in the new life of the risen Christ.

3. And we look forward in hope to being fully conformed to the glorious risen Christ at our resurrection.

D. We also become conformed to Christ through sharing in the Spirit which was in him.

1. For Paul the Holy Spirit is both

a. The mind of God which allows our minds to think in a more virtuous way (1 Cor. 2:10-16).

- b. A power that even can work miracles (1 Cor. 12:10).
- c. The Spirit which empowered and inspired Jesus.
- d. The risen Christ who is a life-giving Spirit and gives this Spirit to those who believe (1 Cor. 15:45).

2. Without having the Spirit, one cannot be a Christian (Rom. 8:9).

3. The Spirit leads us to serve Christ and become more like him.

E. Finally, we become Christ sacramentally through baptism and the Eucharist.

1. In baptism we die with Christ and rise to new life with him (Rom. 6:3-4).

2. Paul insists that the elements of the Eucharist are the body of Christ (1 Cor. 11:24), and the Church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27).

3. The Church becomes the body of Christ (i.e., the place where Christ lives and acts in this world) through the Eucharist (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

4. Here the body of Christ includes both the individual members of the Church and the Church as a whole.

VIII. It is also important to remember that for Paul the "really real" is the eschatological, and therefore, our real selves whether individually or collectively are not who we presently happen to be but who we are becoming by how we respond to God's call.

A. If we are choosing to allow God to make us a new creation, we are becoming Christ. Note that at the resurrection we will be fully conformed to the glorious risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:48-49).

B. If we reject God's invitation, we are destined for eternal destruction.

C. Hence, Paul can write that as a missionary he is the "fragrance from death to death," i.e., from spiritual death in this life to eternal death in the next" to those who reject his message and the "fragrance from life to life" for those who accept it (2 Cor.2:14-16).

IX. Appendix: Paul and the modern problem of self-acceptance.

A. In the contemporary United States we seem unable to accept ourselves.

1. We are constantly reminding each other of the need to accept ourselves and love ourselves.

2. The constant reminder suggests that we are not succeeding.

B. This need for more self-acceptance reflects the sociological facts that as a whole our society

1. Has lost touch with true community. We are isolated individuals. Note that if we had deep community, we would look to the community for love and acceptance.

2. Has lost touch with God. If we were focused on God, we would depend on him for love and acceptance. We would love ourselves for God's sake (St. Bernard of Clairvaux).

3. Is primarily focused on satisfaction in the present rather than focusing on the long term, especially, life after death. If we were focused on the long term, we would accept ourselves not for who we presently happen to be but for who we are choosing to become.

4. Refuses to face the reality of serious sin. If we acknowledged the reality of sin, we would realize that trying to "accept" ourselves fully as we presently are is hopeless. "You do not suffer from an inferiority complex; you are inferior."

C. Perhaps needless to say, Paul's theology which focuses on God, Christian community, and who we are becoming rather than who we presently are would see self-acceptance as a product of God's love given to us through Christian community and transforming us into the likeness of Christ.

X. An outline of the future conferences

A. We will begin with a session on Paul's own life and spiritual struggle, and the thesis will be that Paul himself moved from self-centeredness to being centered in God

through Christ.

B. Then we will examine each of the dimensions of Paul's diverse spirituality listed in the preface and see how Paul integrated it into becoming centered in God through Christ.

Conference 2: Paul's Own Spiritual Pilgrimage and How It Led to Becoming Centered in God through Christ

"If you want to know how the preacher is sinning, listen to what he's preaching against" –a proverb.

"I am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God, but by the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15:9-10).

- I. Our knowledge of Paul's inner life is limited.
 - A. Our only primary source for Paul's spirituality is his authentic letters (at least, Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon). We cannot know how well informed Luke is when in the Acts of the Apostles he describes Paul's inner experiences or how well letters written in Paul's name by his students reflect Paul's own spirituality. Note: In these conferences I rely on the undisputed letters.
 - B. The goal of Paul's letters is to deal with specific problems in Paul's congregations rather than reveal insights into Paul's own spirituality.
- II. Nevertheless, a characteristic of Paul that seems especially prominent in his psychology and theology is his pride and struggle against it.
 - A. Paul struggled against personal and ethnic pride.
 1. Paul was personally proud.
 - a. In his letters he dwells on his own virtues and achievements (e.g., 1 Thes. 2:1-12). And even if we acknowledge that he was defending himself against critics and using his own life as an illustration of the Christian life, it is hard to deny that Paul comes across as proud. Indeed, at one point Paul even admits in response to his critics that he boasts too much (2 Cor. 10:8).
 - b. Paul was also proud of his ethnic heritage as a Jew.
 - 1). Before his conversion, Paul was a Pharisee, and even as a Christian he boasts that he was an exemplary Pharisee (Gal. 1:14, Phil. 3:6).
 - 2). Although Pharisees could be individually humble, they surely were proud of their Jewish heritage, especially of the Mosaic Law and of their careful elaboration of it. In Romans 2:17-20 Paul has an imaginary Jew boast of his superiority because of the Law.
 - 3). Even in his Christian letters Paul celebrates the glories of the Church's Jewish heritage, including the Jewishness of Jesus (especially, Romans 9:1-5).
 - B. In his theology Paul makes pride the primordial sin and constantly warns against it.
 1. In keeping with the story of the fall in Genesis 1-3 Paul sees the failure to praise and thank God as the sin which led to other sins and corrupted all of subsequent history (Rom. 1:21).
 2. Paul suggests that Jewish pride was the primary reason that most Jews could not yet accept salvation through Jesus. The Jews were trying to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:1-3). One suspects that Paul is here partly drawing on his own experience before becoming a Christian.
 3. Paul insists that the reason why people must be saved by trusting (faith) in God's grace is that otherwise people would boast (Rom. 3:27).
 4. Paul stresses that Jesus humbled himself by becoming incarnate and accepting crucifixion (Phil. 2:6-8, 2 Cor. 9:8-9).

5. And in imitation of Jesus Paul insists that he humbled himself and urges his readers to be humble also (Phil. 3:4-16).

C. Consequently, it seems clear that both before and after his conversion Paul was proud, and, although he continued to be proud throughout his life, he realized as a Christian that his pride was a major problem and he struggled against it and warned others to do the same.

III. As a Christian Paul also reflected deeply and frequently on how he could formerly have persecuted Christianity, and how as a persecutor of the Church he could nevertheless have been saved.

A. He mentions his dark past in several of his letters (1 Cor. 15:9-10, Gal. 1:13-14, Phil. 3:5-6).

B. Presumably, Paul's many critics made an issue of the inconsistency of Paul's life as a Pharisee and his life as a Christian.

C. Consequently, Paul constantly had to reflect on his strange life and defend it.

IV. It was probably Paul's ethnic and personal pride which made him persecute the Church.

A. As a Pharisee Paul's pride had been in the Mosaic Law, both in its greatness and in his own keeping of it.

B. The part of the early church which Paul persecuted did not feel that keeping the Mosaic Law was important. Note that

1. Paul seems not to have persecuted the conservative wing of the early Christian movement which continued to observe the Mosaic Law.

2. Instead, he persecuted the more radical wing which rejected the continuing validity of the Mosaic Law.

a. In the Acts of the Apostles we first meet Paul at the stoning of Stephen, and the charge was that Stephen was speaking against the Mosaic Law (Acts 6:7, 13-14).

b. Acts tells us that Stephen's associates fled from Jerusalem (8:1), and some of them began to make Gentile converts (11:19-21) without asking them to adopt the cultural demands of the Mosaic Law.

c. Paul was converted at Damascus, and apparently he was persecuting this more liberal movement in the Church which disregarded the Mosaic Law and had fled from Israel.

V. Paul believed that, in response to his pride, God out of sheer grace intervened in his life as part of a divine plan to save the entire world through Jesus rather than through the Mosaic Law.

A. The risen Christ appeared to Paul (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:8-10).

B. And Christ gave him the Holy Spirit and a commission to preach a law-free gospel to the Gentiles (Gal. 1:15).

C. Paul realized that he had to give up his attachment to personal and ethnic pride. In the letter to the Philippians Paul says that he now considers his pre-Christian achievements as a Pharisee to be excrement because of the great worth of knowing Christ (Phil. 3:4-8).

D. Through baptism and the Holy Spirit God made Paul part of a new creation in which circumcision (the physical sign of being under the Mosaic Law!) was irrelevant (Gal. 6:14-15) and there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (Gal. 3:28).

E. Paul no longer lives, Christ lives in him (Gal. 2:20).

F. Through Paul, Christ accomplishes amazing things, perhaps, especially, his achievements in converting Gentiles. But Paul insists that he himself does not do these things, but "the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

VI. This salvation by grace humbled Paul, but apparently did not diminish Paul's need to boast.

- VII. Consequently, Paul boasts in the Lord, and challenges his readers to do the same.
- A. Even though he acknowledges that it is foolish to boast, he nevertheless does boast in response to the accusations of his critics, but he boasts in what God has done through him.
 - B. Paul acknowledges, even insists, that in and of himself he is nothing (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:11).
 - C. Paul says that whoever would boast must boast in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31).
 - D. Apparently, then even the right kind of boasting (in the Lord! [2 Cor. 10:17]) can move one from self-centeredness to being centered in God through Christ.
- VIII. Hence, Paul sees his own life as moving from self-centeredness to being centered in God through Christ.
- IX. And he tells others that they must become centered in Christ and glorify God (e.g., Rom. 11:36).
- X. Perhaps even more important, Paul insists that cultures must also move from being self-centered to being centered in God through Christ. Indeed, Paul states that God has consigned both the Gentile and the Jewish cultures to sin, in order that they may rely on grace (Rom. 11:32).
- XI. Appendix: I think that at the present time the United States needs to reflect on
- A. The various sins which ethnic (especially, White) pride has led to
 - B. The realization that as a nation we must rely on grace rather than a one-sided view of our past.

Conference 3: Spiritual Gifts and Esoteric Spiritual Experiences as Pathways to Becoming Centered in God through Christ

Preface: In the next conferences we will look at various dimensions of Paul's spirituality, especially dimensions on which subsequent Christian groups have concentrated, and we will see that each of these dimensions can be subsumed under the larger framework of moving from self-centeredness to being centered in God through Christ.

- I. Pentecostals and "Charismatics" have emphasized Paul's charismatic gifts and practices and his commendation of them.
- II. Certainly, charismatic gifts were extremely important to Paul's spirituality, both in his own personal spiritual life and in the spiritual life that he recommended to his churches.
 - A. In 1 Corinthians Paul boasts that he speaks in tongues more than all his readers (14:18).
 - B. Presumably, since tongues were so central to Paul's own practice, he introduced them to the Corinthians.
 - C. Even in 1 Corinthians where Paul tries to limit speaking in tongues, he still stresses the importance of tongues.
 1. In response to abuses (see below), Paul limits public speaking in tongues, but he does not eliminate them from the liturgy (1 Cor. 14:27).
 2. He commends tongues to private prayer (1 Cor. 14:28).
 3. He insists that just as every part of human anatomy is essential to the well being of the whole body, so every spiritual gift is essential to the well being of the whole Church.
 4. Paul even (rhetorically?) writes, "I want you all to speak in tongues" (1 Cor. 14:5).
- III. A major problem with the practice of tongues in Corinth was that the gift was helping make its possessors proud and self-centered.
 - A. The Corinthians seem to have thought that they had obtained total spiritual maturity. In 1 Corinthians 4:8-13 Paul mocks their pretensions and contrasts them with the struggles that the apostles have.
 - B. In their vast spiritual self-confidence the Corinthians believed that they were totally free.
 1. They felt free from any temptation. For example, some Corinthians apparently felt free to engage in the worship of idols, and Paul has to warn them against this (10:14).
 2. They also felt free from following any regulations. One of their mottoes was, "All things are lawful" (6:12, 10:23), a saying that Paul repeatedly quotes and qualifies.
 3. It is tempting to make a comparison between the attitudes of the Corinthians and the attitudes of some sophisticated people in contemporary California!
 - C. Tongues were contributing to this self-confidence and apparently causing division in the church.
 1. Excursus: What "tongues" actually are and when they are a genuine spiritual gift.
 - a. Tongues in linguistic fact are random sounds.
 - b. Everyone begins life speaking in tongues.
 - c. Then children learn that some sounds (i.e., words) have an accepted meaning, whereas others do not.
 - d. Under pressure from adults ("say what you mean"), children stop using random sounds.

- e. Tongues are a "genuine" spiritual gift when they prayerfully express an emotion (e.g., joy) to God. Tongues are especially powerful because
 - 1). They express emotion directly without having to explain the emotions in words.
 - 2). They allow people to be childlike (uninhibited and unself-conscious) in the presence of God.
 - 3). Of course, sharing emotion directly with God and being childlike in God's presence center us in God.

2. The Corinthians who spoke in tongues apparently felt that they were speaking the language of God ("the tongues of angels" [1 Cor. 13:1]).
3. Those who had the gift of tongues apparently also thought that tongues were the primary sign that one had the Holy Spirit. Note Acts 2 where the coming of the Spirit is primarily attested by tongues.
4. Hence, those who had the gift of tongues regarded Christians who did not speak in tongues as inferior. Here we have an illustration of group pride.
5. In his reply Paul stresses that there are many spiritual gifts and they all come from the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4-11).

IV. Paul ranks the gifts on the basis of their contribution to the common good of the Christian community.

- A. The primary purpose of gifts is to promote the common good.
- B. Preaching is a greater gift than uninterpreted tongues (1 Cor. 14:5) because preaching contributes more to the common good.
 1. Only the speaker, not the hearers, benefits from uninterpreted tongues, whereas preaching benefits everyone. Note: Interpreting tongues is identifying the cause of the emotion which the tongues express (Donald Gelpi) and is analogous to interpreting weeping and laughing.
 2. Preaching can favorably impress uninformed visitors, whereas tongues will make them dismiss Christianity as madness (1 Cor. 14:23-25).
- C. Love is the greatest gift since without love, other gifts can harm. Using gifts unlovingly is destructive.
 1. Paul stresses that without love all other gifts are useless (1 Cor. 13:1-3).
 2. Although Paul does not explicitly state this, a clear implication is that without love and concern for the common good, gifts will be used to exalt the person or clique that has them.
 3. The result will be greater self-centeredness and communal division.

V. An exegetical problem in 1 Corinthians 13 is how Paul can claim that faith, hope, and love abide.

- A. Paul stresses that one reason that faith, hope, and love are greater gifts is these endure forever, whereas tongues, prophecy, and knowledge do not.
- B. Yet, it is clear that faith and hope do not last into the consummation, as Paul clearly states elsewhere.
 1. Paul says in this age we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7), but in the coming age we will know (1 Cor. 13:12).
 2. Paul also says that hope for what is seen is not hope (Rom. 8:24). Once all things have reached fulfillment, there will be nothing left to hope for.

VI. The only way that I can make sense of Paul's claim that faith, hope, and love abide, whereas other gifts do not, is that in this present life faith, hope, and love allow us to grasp God more fully, and, therefore, bring us closest to the consummation when we will possess and be possessed by God completely.

- A. Trust (faith) allows us to accept a reality which we do not yet fully understand. Note that the Greek word *pistis* which we translate as "faith" primarily means trust rather

than belief.

B. Hope allows us to look forward to a greater future (including a greater relationship with God) that we cannot yet conceive.

C. Love allows us to embrace a reality which surpasses what we can presently know.

VII. For the purpose of these conferences, however, it is most significant that faith, hope, and love are those virtues that most take us away from self-centeredness and bring us to centeredness in God through Christ.

A. Faith, at least, in Paul's usage, is faith in God.

1. Paul would never say, as so many people today do, that we must believe in ourselves.

2. Instead, we must trust God.

3. Indeed, Paul would say that we can only believe in ourselves because God created us, redeemed us, stands by us, is making us a new creation, and ultimately will bring us to eternal glory.

4. Of course, for Paul we know God and come to God through Christ.

B. Similarly, for Paul hope is hope for final salvation when God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

C. Finally, love almost by definition is what takes us out of self-centeredness and centers us in others, including

1. In the Christian community which for Paul is the body of Christ.

2. In Jesus, since he is the illustration of ideal love and self-sacrifice and died for our salvation. Note that Paul's emphasis that loving one's neighbor fulfills the Law (Rom. 13:8-10) probably comes from Jesus (Matt. 22:34-40).

3. In God who is the source and the true center of all things.

VIII. Paul sees all charisms as

A. Gifts from God.

B. Enabled by new creation in the Spirit.

IX. Accordingly, all spiritual gifts properly understood inspire in us gratitude to God.

X. In conclusion we can say that Paul's theology of spiritual gifts only makes sense as a subset of a larger conviction that the Christian life is about moving away from self-centeredness to God-centeredness.

XI. Therefore, a proper understanding of charismatic gifts leads us away from self-centeredness and toward becoming centered in God.

XII. Paul's treatment of his only esoteric spiritual experience that he describes also suggests that the Christian life is about moving from self-centeredness to God centeredness.

A. His only esoteric spiritual experience that Paul describes is being caught up to the third heaven (paradise) where he heard mysteries that cannot be repeated (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

B. He insists that it would be possible to boast about a person who had such a dramatic spiritual experience.

C. It seems clear that Paul is speaking obliquely about himself.

1. In the larger context from 2 Corinthians Paul defends himself against the accusation that he is inferior to some other apostles whom he satirizes as the "super apostles."

2. Therefore, it would weaken his case if he is indeed describing someone else being caught up to the third heaven.

3. And Paul tells us that he is speaking as a fool.

4. And that it is foolish to boast.

5. Consequently, by talking about himself as if he were someone else, Paul can foolishly boast about the sort of esoteric experiences about which his opponents, "the super apostles," probably boasted.

D. However, from the perspective of these conferences, what is most informative is that Paul separates himself (that is, his ego) from the stupendous experience.

1. He does not claim the experience as something he possesses.
2. It is as if it happened to someone else, or, at least, to another aspect of Paul's personality that is not his ego.
3. He does not even know if he was in the body.
4. This tremendous experience did not happen when Paul was being self-centered, and if Paul is faithful to what he experienced, he cannot use it to become self-centered.

E. Would it be going too far to say that for Paul an important test of whether an esoteric spiritual experience actually is from God (as opposed to being from ourselves or some other source, even a demonic one) is whether the experience makes the one who experienced it and those of us who hear about it more centered in God, especially, as revealed in Jesus? Note that much of what masquerades as “mysticism” “begins in mist, centers in I, and ends in schism” (Carl Gregg).

Conference 4: Justification by Faith in Paul's Letters as a Way of Becoming Centered in God through Christ.

- I. Justification by faith is a major theme in several of Paul's undisputed letters, especially, Romans, Galatians, and Philippians.
- II. Protestant theologians beginning with Martin Luther have claimed that justification by faith is central to Paul's life, faith, and thought and is even the core of authentic Christianity.
- III. I am not qualified to review the historical debates concerning justification by faith, including the efforts in recent decades to reconcile Catholic and Protestant perspectives. But I venture two general observations.
 - A. The centuries of debate were aggravated by group self-centeredness on both sides.
 - B. When the ecumenical movement greatly reduced this mutual self-centeredness, representatives of the Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations agreed on a statement concerning justification which resolved the major disagreements.
- IV. I will present one modern, scholarly view of justification by faith in Paul's writings.
- V. As you would guess, I will argue that for Paul justification by faith is primarily a way of moving from self-centeredness to being centered in God through Christ.
- VI. The meaning of "justification by faith."
 - A. Faith
 1. Faith in Paul's writings is first of all a quality that God has. For Paul, as for the entire Bible, God is faithful.
 2. This faithfulness inspires our "faith" in God.
 3. Note: In my view here is the solution to the scholarly debate over whether "the faith of Christ" in Paul's writings is Christ's own faithfulness or our faith in Christ. The phrase evokes both. Because Christ has been faithful, we can have faith in him.
 4. Christian faith is
 - a. A special kind of trust in God. Note that the Greek verb "to have faith" means to trust.
 - b. It includes elements of doctrinal assent, such as God will give to those who love him eternal life. Our trust is based on something!
 - c. Faith necessarily leads to obedience. Those who do not obey God do not trust him!
 5. Note that for Paul faith is a gift from God, but, like other gifts, one that we must accept.
 - a. Faith comes from hearing the Christian message preached (Rom. 10:14-17).
 - b. Plus receiving the Holy Spirit.
 - c. Nevertheless, to benefit from the preaching and to receive the Spirit, we must freely welcome God into our lives and follow his leading.
 - B. Justification
 1. Clearly, justification involves righteousness (justice).
 2. The more difficult issue is whether in Paul's writings it means "account as righteous" or "make righteous."
 - a. On the one hand, Paul clearly states that God out of his own goodness disregards our sins and "justifies" us (e.g., Rom. 4:6).
 - b. On the other hand, linguistically the verb ought to mean "make righteous," and Paul insists that in the end God will judge us on the basis of "works" (e.g., Rom. 2:6).
 3. My own solution (building on the viewpoint of E.P. Sanders) is that justification in Paul is primarily a "transfer term." God disregards our sins by

inviting us into the fellowship of his Son at baptism, and through this fellowship we become righteous.

- a. "Justification" is the beginning of the Christian life (cf. Rom. 5:1ff.).
- b. God invites us to be baptized, enter the Church, and receive the Holy Spirit despite our sins.
- c. As a result, we die to our old selves and gain the power to live righteously.
- d. At the last judgment, all Christians will be saved, but will have to suffer (temporarily) for whatever sins they committed (E.P. Sanders; cf. 1 Cor. 3:13-15). Paul does not give us a clear presentation of what happens to non-Christians but at least leaves open the possibility that they too can be saved (Rom. 2:14-16).

VII. The basis of Christian faith.

- A. God's love for us, especially as shown on the cross. This love guarantees his faithfulness to us (Rom. 5:6-10).
- B. God's promise of final deliverance from suffering and death. This promise is implicit in Jesus's resurrection. If we have shared in Christ's death, we will also share in his resurrection (Rom. 6:5). Note that the final deliverance which Paul awaits includes all of creation (Rom. 8:19-21). Paul believes that God will even redeem the ecology, and I think this vision has ethical implications. If God intends to redeem the natural world, then we as God's followers must treasure it.
- C. The transforming presence of Christ's Spirit in our present lives. This presence persuades us that nothing will be able to separate us from Christ's love as we wait for final redemption (Rom. 8). Note that the life-giving presence of the Spirit is already the "down payment" 2 Cor. 1:22, 5:5) of our coming resurrection.

VIII. How justification by faith overcomes the bondage of law and sin.

- A. Adam's sin led to sin and death for his descendants.
- B. Law made sin more powerful by telling people what they must do and not giving them the power to do it. For more details, see the final conference.
- C. Jesus's righteousness leads to righteousness and life for those who accept him. Through Jesus and the Spirit, righteousness is a power at work in history and delivers us from sin. Note that Jesus left the heavenly realm and entered the realm of history (e.g., Rom. 10:6). Hence, he (and only he) is not conditioned by Adam's sin.
- D. The preaching of Christ's death and resurrection reveals God's unimaginable love and forgiveness for us despite our sinfulness.
- E. When we say "yes" to this love and receive baptism, we become reconciled to God and centered in him, and his Spirit dwells in us. Note that much of this power comes from our being present in a Christian community.
- F. Consequently, our proud self-centeredness, which is the ultimate source and basis of sin, disappears.
- G. The indwelling power of God begins to transform us and make us act righteously.
- H. This new righteousness fulfills what the law demanded, especially as Jesus summarized that law in the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself (Rom. 13:8-10, Gal. 5:13-14).
- I. However, we cannot boast of this righteousness, because it depends on being centered in God and results from first accepting his undeserved goodness towards us when we were sinful. Paul acknowledges that if justification was possible through keeping the law by our own unaided efforts, we could boast (Rom. 4:2).

IX. I believe that Philippians makes an important contribution to the doctrine of justification by faith by especially emphasizing that our primary reward for faithfulness is God himself.

- A. A problem with "salvation by works" is that we earn salvation and therefore

1. We have a claim on God. Paul especially emphasizes the problems here.
 - a. Having a claim that God is morally obligated to fulfill compromises the sovereignty of God. Note that in Romans 9:13-21 Paul emphasizes (overemphasizes?) God's absolute sovereignty.
 - b. Needing to have a claim that God is obligated to fulfill is incompatible with trust in God's grace.
 2. We do not do good deeds from genuinely unselfish motives, but only to get concrete rewards. Note: There is no evidence that anyone in Judaism actually *taught* justification by works, but humans are *tempted* to try to control God by doing good deeds to force God to do what we want.
- B. But, a problem with the traditional Protestant understanding of justification by faith is that there is no punishment for sin committed by believers. If all we have to do to gain salvation is trust in God's grace, it appears that Christians can sin without consequences.
- C. In Philippians 3 Paul stresses that what he most ardently hopes for is to gain Christ. The reward Paul looks forward is union with God through his Son.
- D. But we can only gain Christ by being conformed to him (which at present includes sharing in his sufferings).
- E. Now we can see that there is a punishment for sin (it distances us from union with God in Christ), and yet striving for salvation is not selfish. What we strive for is fellowship with God.
- F. Of course, there will be other rewards, but even these are the fruit of being in perfect relationship with God who is the source of all good things.
- X. And what is especially important for these conferences is that justification by faith, as Paul understood it, is primarily about how God's undeserved goodness and our trust in it moves us from being centered in ourselves to being centered in God through Christ.

Conference 5: Sharing in Christ's Suffering and Divinity

- I. (Review) Paul stresses that he participates in the sufferings of Jesus and that other Christians must do likewise.
- A. Paul insists that he seeks to be conformed to the crucifixion and death of Jesus (e.g., Rom. 6:5, Gal. 6:17, Phil. 3:10).
 - B. In baptism every Christian shares sacramentally in Jesus's death and burial (Rom. 6:3-8).
 - C. Of course, in practice Christians must sometimes suffer for their faithfulness to Jesus (e.g., 1 Thes. 2:14).
 - D. Paul suffered horrendously (especially, 2 Cor. 11:23-28), and he had to integrate his sufferings into his spirituality.
- II. The theology that suffering is the path to salvation has been important in some Catholic mysticism and ascetic practices.
- III. One can embrace suffering both in a self-centered way and in a God-centered way.
- A. One can embrace suffering as a way to insulate oneself from weakness and become more autonomous in the face of life's tribulations. And one can even boast of having achieved such autonomy. In the ancient world this approach to life was "Stoic;" in contemporary American popular culture, it is "macho."
 - 1. Males have inflicted suffering on themselves to demonstrate their individual or collective masculinity ("toughness") and superiority to women.
 - 2. I believe that in practice the "discipline" of self-flagellation in monastic communities often aimed at achieving autonomy. Note: I am not qualified to evaluate the claim that self-flagellation is a substitute for sex.
 - B. One can embrace suffering as a way of becoming more dependent on God for support.
- IV. Paul does the latter; indeed, this is a theme of 2 Corinthians. His critics had denigrated Paul for his weaknesses, and 2 Corinthians is his response. In this letter
- A. Instead of boasting that he has becoming strong though suffering, Paul boasts of his weakness (e.g., 2 Cor. 11:30).
 - B. He stresses that only through God is he able to endure tribulation (2 Cor. 1:8-9).
 - C. Because Paul accepts his weaknesses and his need for God's support, he can accept the weakness of others and invite them to rely on God (2 Cor. 1:3-7).
 - D. Paul recounts a spiritual experience that especially stresses the above (2 Cor. 12:7-10).
 - 1. Paul was battered by a "thorn in the flesh" (whatever that was!).
 - 2. He prayed for relief.
 - 3. Christ replied that God's strength was being perfected through Paul's weakness.
 - 4. Therefore, Paul goes on to say that he will boast of his weaknesses so that Christ's power would rest on him.
 - 5. Of course, by recounting this experience Paul invites his readers to consider applying it to their own spirituality.
- V. Paul stresses that Christians are, or will become, divine by participation.
- A. In our inner lives we are being transformed now "from one degree of glory to the next" through the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18). "If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17).
 - B. Paul also insists that at the resurrection we will be transformed into the image of the risen Christ (1 Cor. 15:49) and participate in the divine knowledge of God himself (1 Cor. 13:12).
- VI. Divinization, the doctrine that Christians will become divine by participation is especially

emphasized by Eastern Christianity, but also theoretically affirmed in the West.

VII. A potential theological problem for Paul was that the idea of a human being becoming divine conflicted with some of his fundamental religious convictions.

A. In Paganism a human being could become divine, but Paul rejected Paganism.

1. In Pagan mythology selected humans (e.g., Ganymede) could become divine, and in Roman politics it was usual to declare that when good emperors died they became gods.

2. But Paul, consistent with his Jewish heritage, rejected Paganism in the strongest terms (e.g., Rom. 1:18-32).

B. The central affirmation of Judaism was monotheism, and Paul emphatically affirms monotheism (e.g., Rom 3:30), and the doctrine that a human being could become divine seemed to conflict with that.

VIII. Today we can note that the theological problems which Paul faced continue to exist.

The doctrine that human beings are not divine but can become so conflicts with both branches of axial religion and makes Christianity, beginning with Paul, unique.

A. In one branch of high religion, including mainstream Judaism, Islam, and

Confucianism there is a chasm between the Divine and humans that cannot be bridged.

1. The Divine (God in Islam and Judaism; Heaven in the thought of Confucius) is eternal, all powerful, morally perfect.

2. Human beings are the opposite: transitory, weak, sinful.

3. Salvation consists in receiving through obedience to the Divine all of the blessings which are possible for a creature that by its very nature cannot become divine.

a. For example, in most biblical Judaism (and much modern) salvation is the good things in this life. There is no life after death.

b. In the Qur'an, paradise is pictured as a place of bodily pleasure.

c. In the teaching of Confucius the ultimate goal is good government and a well ordered set of social relations. There is no emphasis on somehow becoming more than human.

B. In the other branch of high religion which would include Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and some mystical schools (e.g., Sufism) human nature is inherently divine.

1. In Hinduism, our deepest self (atman) is God (Brahman).

2. In Buddhism there is no separate self, and all of reality when properly understood is perfect. What appears to be chaos (samsara) to the unenlightened is in reality fully just and contains no essential problem. Samsara is Nirvana.

3. In Daoism, all things inevitably follow the Dao ultimately, and what appears to be evil in the short run is part of a beautiful pattern in the long run.

4. Sufism and other pantheistic religious schools assert that there is nothing but God, which certainly must include us.

5. In these religious streams the solution to self-centeredness is enlightenment, that is realizing that one's essential self is the same with the (perhaps impersonal) divine in everyone else (Hinduism) or that there is no essential self (Buddhism) or that everything ultimately follows the Dao.

C. A problem with the first school of religion is that salvation seems limited, and the human ability to imagine a salvation beyond the limits is not satisfied.

D. A problem with the second school is that evil cannot be taken seriously, since every human being at the deepest level is divine or the seeming chaos of existence is not to be taken seriously by those who have attained enlightenment. To the enlightened "samsara" (the chaos of existence) is Nirvana.

IX. Paul's doctrine that humans are not inherently divine but can become so raises the issue of how Paul can be a monotheist.

A. Many, especially, older scholars, doubted that Paul believed that Jesus was divine, since such a belief would conflict with monotheism.

B. Today there seems to be an emerging consensus among scholars that regardless of how one salvages monotheism in Paul's thought, he clearly believed in the divinity of Christ. We can see this in Paul's modification of the *Shema*.

1. In the classical monotheistic confession of Judaism (still said each Sabbath in the synagogues) we have, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

2. But in 1 Corinthians (the epistle of Paul which most emphasizes Jesus's subordination to the Father) Paul modifies the Shema to include Christ in the divine realm. "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6).

X. Paul maintains monotheism while still believing that Christ is divine by stressing that Christ was centered in God. For example,

A. In the famous Christ Hymn in Philippians 2:6-11 Paul stresses that Christ before his human birth had equality the God (i.e., with the Father).

B. However, Christ emptied himself, becoming human and being obedient to the Father, even to accepting crucifixion.

C. God then exalted Jesus giving him rule over all things.

D. However, this exaltation did not diminish the Father, but glorified him, since it was the Father who exalted Jesus.

XI. We may note in passing that in John's Gospel we have the same solution to combining monotheism with the divinity of Christ. Because Jesus obeys the Father perfectly, Jesus can contain the Father fully. See, for example, John 5:18-19.

XII. We may also note in passing that the same approach can work in the imminent Trinity. Donald Gelpi (my favorite theologian!) holds that the eternal Son is obediential efficacy, that the eternal Son is the one through whom the Father acts.

XIII. Of course, in early Christianity including the Letters of Paul, we cannot expect the doctrine of the Trinity or even the divinity of Christ to be spelled out with the sophistication of later theology which was the product of centuries of discussion and development.

XIV. Paul holds that humans become divine by following Jesus's example of obediently giving up everything for God.

A. Paul stresses that he has willingly suffered the loss of everything and seeks to be "conformed" to Christ's death in order to share in Christ's suffering.

B. Through that sharing Paul hopes to share in Christ's resurrection (Phil. 3:7-11).

C. In the resurrection Paul will be conformed to Christ's glorious body (1 Cor. 15:49) and know all things (1 Cor. 13:12).

D. And in the resurrection God will be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28), i.e., all things will be divine by being fully centered in God.

E. Of course, Paul is holding up his own life and hope as a model for his Christian readers.

1. Adam tried to become God by disobeying God, and as a result sin and death came to all people (for more details, see the next conference).

2. Paul stresses that, as his own life illustrates, Christ summons us all to obey God and at our resurrection share in divinity by participation.

XV. As we await our resurrection, Christians can be inwardly transformed from "from one degree of glory to the next" (2 Cor. 3:18) through participation in Christ's Spirit if we allow the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus.

XVI. Therefore, I think that it is clear that divinization in Paul's spirituality is one dimension of being centered in God through Christ.

Conference 6: Mastering Oneself by Becoming Centered in God/Christ

- I. Paul loves to give lists of vices to avoid and virtues to cultivate (e.g., Gal. 5:19-23), and he exhorts his readers to take heed.
- II. Paul believes that as part of God's creation everyone has some freedom, and all human beings can sometimes choose to do right or wrong.
 - A. Not only is this belief common sense and perhaps obvious by observation.
 - B. In Romans Paul insists that even people who are not acquainted with the biblical tradition have by nature some knowledge of God and some knowledge of right and wrong and can actually make good choices and perhaps even be found worthy at the last judgment (Rom. 2:14-16, 26-29).
- III. Nevertheless, Paul emphasizes the limited power of human beings on their own to do what is right. Note the insistence that all have sinned (Rom. 3:9).
- IV. The reason that we are so ethically limited on our own is because we are in Adam.
 - A. Paul emphasizes that all human beings are in Adam (Rom. 5:12-14, 1 Cor. 15:22).
 - B. The story of Adam in Genesis 2-3 is simultaneously about the past and the present.
 1. We may note in passing that to some extent all stories are about both the past and present.
 - a. As soon as a story exists, it is about the past, because it must reflect an earlier period in which it was composed.
 - b. All stories are also about the present, because the action of the story occurs as we read in the present or even as we remember the story in the present.
 2. Nevertheless, the story of Adam is supremely about both the past and the present.
 - a. It is about the past because Genesis portrays Adam as the first human being whose sin brought death on all subsequent humans as well as himself.
 - b. But the story is also supremely about the present, because
 - 1). The word "Adam" means human in Hebrew
 - 2). The sin of Adam, disobeying God's commandment in order to become like God, is the basic sin in the Old Testament. The Old Testament primarily condemns two related transgressions:
 - a). Worshiping other gods.
 - b). Disobeying God's commandments.
 - C. In Paul's thought human beings are in Adam because
 1. We are molded by the sins of others, beginning with Adam's which made all of his descendants subject to death.
 2. We are naturally inclined to disobey God in an attempt to become god ourselves.
 - V. Another reason that humans often cannot do what is right without God's help is the negative effects of ethical exhortation or, to use Paul's vocabulary, the weakness of the Law. In Romans 7 Paul stresses that human beings can choose to do what is right but cannot actually do it. The evil we do not choose is what we end up doing.
 - VI. Paul gives a complex analysis of why we cannot follow the law on our own power.
 - A. Before we have definite moral rules (law in Paul's terminology), we can easily deceive ourselves and sin without being fully aware.
 - B. Such sin is universal.
 1. Partly because of the universal tendency toward self-centeredness.
 2. Partly because we inherit the sinfulness of others.
 - C. Such sin still is destructive (by definition) but does not lead to self-alienation. Note

that these dynamics can exist both on the level of the sinful individual or the sinful group. We do not know that we are being destructive.

D. The coming of law (for Paul, especially, God giving the Mosaic Law) makes individuals and groups consciously aware of their sin and the need to get beyond it.

E. Hence, we individually and collectively rejoice in moral standards, because we recognize that they are just and necessary.

F. But the law which tells us what we must do does not give us the power to do it.

G. Consequently, we try to meet the demands of the law by our own effort.

1. To the extent that we succeed, we become more self-centered whether as individuals or a group.

2. To the extent that we fail (and everyone to some extent fails) we become alienated from ourselves.

a. In individuals the self (ego) orders the rest of our personality to do what is right, and the remainder of our personality rebels.

Psychologically, this alienation produces individual guilt and shame. We feel bad about ourselves and cannot face condemnation from others.

b. In groups the leadership directs the group to do what is right, but members of the group do not comply, and the unity of the group is compromised and the stature of the group declines.

H. This alienation weakens us morally, and we sin more. To use Paul's own image, the law makes sin abound (Rom. 5:20). Note how astonishing this idea is coming from someone who earlier in his life was a Pharisee.

VII. Therefore, to overcome sin we need to become a new creation by grace.

A. There must be a fundamental change of our basic nature.

B. We cannot make this change by our own power.

VIII. This fundamental change can occur because of

A. God's love for sinners as revealed by Jesus's death on the cross.

B. The presence of the Holy Spirit. Note that for Paul the Holy Spirit is both

1. The mind of Christ/God which helps us think the way that God does (1 Cor. 2:11-16).

2. An actual power. Note that the word for Spirit in biblical languages means wind, i.e., an invisible force.

3. The Spirit at work in the community of the Church, since the Spirit is what all Christians have in common and allows us to be unified despite our diversity.

IX. Paul likens this fundamental change in our basic nature to a death and resurrection in Christ. Note, for example, that

A. In baptism, which is required for all Christians, we share in Christ's death and burial and rise with him to newness of life (Rom. 6:3-4).

B. Paul presents his own life as death and resurrection in Christ (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:9, Phil. 3:10-11).

X. In this new life, we do engage in self-discipline, but we do so in the power of the Spirit. Christian virtues are primarily the "*fruit*" of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

A. Paul stresses that he disciplines himself and urges the Corinthians to do likewise (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:24-27).

B. But we must do so in surrender to the Spirit which dwells in us.

XI. We are now centered in Christ, and Paul can write, "I no longer live; Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

XII. Of course, transformation is a continuing process. Hence, Paul stresses that he is still growing and urges us to continue to grow (Phil. 3:12-16).

XIII. The solution to sin is not trying harder on our own, but being more attentive to God's power and call and cooperating with them, and God's call is to be centered in Christ.

A Brief Summary and Reflection

- I. We began these conferences by noting the tremendous diversity of Paul's spiritual practices and recommendations.
- II. We also noted that subsequently different Christian groups have emphasized different ones, and the result has been division.
- III. In these conferences, I have argued that all of Paul diverse spirituality is focused on moving from being self-centered, whether individually or as a group, to being centered in God through Christ.
- IV. An interesting question is whether when Paul says things like, "I no longer live; Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20), he is talking about a personal "mystical" experience or only a theological principle and an ethical goal. I suspect that
 - A. Paul is talking about an advanced mystical experience, partly because later Christian mystics (e.g., Teresa of Avila) have had similar experiences and recognized them in Paul's writings.
 - B. However, Paul is not primarily telling us about himself, but instead giving exhortation to the reader. Therefore, it is also reasonable to take Paul's statements that he has died and Christ lives in him as theological and exhortative. We are to
 1. See ourselves as having in principle died already in baptism
 2. And in cooperation with the Spirit working to become Christ-like through being Christ-centered.
- V. Perhaps then we can conclude by saying
 - A. The test of any spiritual practice in Christianity at is whether it leads us to become more like Christ, including
 1. Being more loving to others
 2. Being more focused on Jesus, especially, on his death and resurrection.
 - B. The Church can tolerate, even celebrate, a vast variety of spiritual practices provided that we see
 1. All of them as somehow leading to the one goal, being centered in God through Christ.
 2. And we see being centered in God as itself salvation.
 - C. Perhaps all these points have a special relevance to the contemplative life.
 1. In the active life an important goal is relieving the sufferings of others through concrete deeds (e.g., providing food for the hungry).
 2. Because of this goal it is easy to neglect a focus on union with God, since obviously, relieving suffering is itself desirable, admirable, and Christian even if it is not leading to being more centered in God.
 3. By contrast, the contemplative life focuses on inner growth through union with God.
 - a. The contemplative strives to grow inwardly.
 - b. And through advice and prayer help others to grow inwardly.
 - c. And as we have seen through these conferences, inner growth, whether individual or communal is a pilgrimage from being self-centered toward being centered in God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit.