

The Usefulness of the Cross*

In commenting on 1 Peter 4:12, 13 and what is said there about Christian suffering, Calvin speaks of the “usefulness of the cross.”¹ This usefulness, as he sees it, has two parts: (1) the refining trial God makes of our faith and (2) our becoming partakers with Christ. In this address I will reflect on what Calvin considers the “far surpassing” utility of the second aspect, what Peter and the rest of the New Testament, especially Paul, call the fellowship or participation of Christians in the sufferings and death of Christ. I propose to do this by exploring our theme (Christian suffering) within the context of the broader, perennially debated issue of biblical eschatology, particularly the eschatology of the New Testament. A subtitle to these remarks, then, could be “Eschatology and Christian Suffering.”

I.

Taking a very large view and surveying biblical studies as a whole over the past century, it is fair to say that few developments, if any, have had such a far-reaching impact as preoccupation with the eschatology of the New Testament writers, a preoccupation which has eventually come to dominate New Testament studies. This development has involved intense debate, but a basic consensus has emerged, and this consensus, it should be recognized, differs in certain important respects from the previously accepted understanding of eschatology (although we note in passing that so far as explicit use of the word “eschatology” is concerned, this conventional understanding is apparently no earlier than the beginning of the nineteenth century).²

* An address given at Westminster Theological Seminary on April 24, 1979 at the inauguration of Dr. Gaffin as Professor of New Testament; printed here with slight modifications and the addition of footnotes.

1. *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St. Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 307.

2. According to the evidence cited by J. Carmignac, “Les Dangers de L’eschatologie,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970–71): 365f.

In bold strokes the difference is this: According to the traditional understanding, eschatology is a topic of dogmatic (systematic) theology, limited to those “last things” associated with and dating from the second coming of Christ, including the intermediate state following death. In the newer consensus, eschatology is expanded to include the state of affairs that has already begun with the work of Christ in what the New Testament calls “the fulness of time(s)” (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:10), “these last days” (Heb. 1:2), “at the end of the ages” (Heb. 9:26). Involved also in this more recent understanding of eschatology are basic and decisive considerations already realized in the present identity and experience of the Christian, and so too in the present life and mission of the church.

The emergence of this consensus has not been without its opponents and detractors. The complaint is heard that “eschatology” has been so overworked that it has become virtually meaningless and useless. Biblical studies, some feel, have been hypnotized by an “eschatological monotone”; everything, it seems, is eschatological, and there is nothing that is not eschatological. One recent writer is even convinced that “eschatology” is a dangerous and malevolent word; its usage, he believes, has developed like a cancer and ought to be excised from the vocabulary of biblical studies and banned without delay.³

But while we agree with another writer⁴ that “eschatology” is indeed a “slippery” word and needs to be used more carefully than is often the case (and that need is in fact a large concern of this address), still it would be monumentally retrogressive were biblical studies to abandon the expanded understanding of eschatology that has materialized in recent decades. At stake are perspectives vital to the biblical message and the full power of the gospel. Those puzzled or irritated by the prominence of “eschatology” in the vocabulary of contemporary biblical studies either have not yet read the New Testament carefully or, for whatever reasons, are not able to perceive what it says.

II.

The biblical warrant for a broadened understanding of eschatology can be briefly indicated along several lines.

1) A global, elemental consideration, that comes from taking in the history of revelation in its organic wholeness, is the essentially unified eschatological hope of the Old Testament, a hope which, to generalize, has a single focus on the arrival of the Day of the Lord, inaugurated by the coming of the

3. Carmignac, *op. cit.*, esp. 383–390.

4. I. H. Marshall, “Slippery Words, I. Eschatology,” *The Expository Times* 89, no. 9 (June 1978): 264–269.

Messiah. From this perspective, the first and second comings, distinguished by us on the basis of the New Testament, are held together as two episodes or parts of *one* (eschatological) coming. The traditional viewpoint, by emphasizing as it does the *distinction* between the first and second comings, giving rise to its systematic conception of eschatology, has lost sight of this unity and the way even in the New Testament, particularly the gospels, these two comings are mixed, so intermingled that the difficulty interpretation sometimes has in distinguishing them is well known.

2) Historically, a broadened understanding of eschatology emerges with the renewed attention, beginning right at the close of the last century, to what, according to the Synoptic gospels, is obviously the central theme of the proclamation of Jesus, namely, *the Kingdom of God*.⁵ In reaction to the idealistic misunderstandings of older liberalism, interpretation of all schools has come to the conclusion, whether or not subsequently dispensing with the exegetical conclusion as a piece of outdated mythology, that Jesus did not preach the actualization of a timeless, always present moral order, but the arrival now, at last, of the final rule of God in creation, present in and through his person and work. Jesus's disciples are blessed to see, and hear now what the many prophets and righteous men of old longed to see and hear but did not (Matt. 13:16, 17). The traditional distinction between the "kingdom of grace" and the "kingdom of glory" is revealing here. It tends to separate what belongs together, and to obscure that for Jesus it is a matter of one (eschatological) kingdom that is both present and future in its coming.

3) Another helpful example is Paul's teaching on the plainly eschatological event of the *resurrection*. The resurrection of Christ is not an isolated event of the past, but, in its full, once-for-all historicity, it is the "firstfruits," the actual beginning of the great resurrection-harvest at the end of history (1 Cor. 15:20). In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul makes this point to assure believers of their future share in this eschatological harvest, in the resurrection of the body at Christ's return (vs. 23). But elsewhere he is no less emphatic that believers are already raised with Christ and have ascended with him (Eph. 2:5f; Col. 2:12f; 3:1); already they are "alive from the dead" (Rom. 6:13).

5. The work usually credited with initiating this epoch-making turn in interpretation is especially that of Johannes Weiss, *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God*, trans. and ed. R. H. Hiers and D. L. Holland (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971; German original, 1892) and also Albert Schweitzer, e.g., *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (London: A. & C. Black, 1910; German original, 1906), chapters 19, 20. An overall eschatological assessment of Jesus's teaching, often overlooked but with better balance and much greater fidelity to the Gospel records, is already present in Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1958; first ed., 1903).

It is within this same eschatological framework that Paul's extensive teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit belongs (and belongs in its *entirety*). Christ exalted is the "life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45); the Spirit is the Spirit of the resurrected Christ (Rom. 8:9–11; 2 Cor. 3:17, 18). The Spirit, with which the church has been baptized and in which all believers share, is the "first-fruits" of what will be received in the resurrection of the body (Rom. 8:23); the Spirit now at work in believers is the actual "downpayment" on the eschatological inheritance to be given in its fulness at Christ's return (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14). The Christian life *is* indeed eschatological life.

But now, just as we are under the impact of those considerations, which have been recalled only in a cursory way, we pose this question: When these considerations are given their due—when they are understood, not, as too often is still the case, as figurative rhetoric or what is true "in principle," whereby the principle is virtually platonic, but as realistic eschatology, as an eschatological realism which is decisive for the present life of the church and the present experience of believers—then, we ask, does this stress on "realized" or "inaugurated" eschatology take adequate account of the concrete and sobering realities of human affairs and every day living? Does not an emphasis on the present eschatological kingship of Christ inevitably tend toward a "theocratic triumphalism" which gravely underestimates the significance of Christ's return and of all that is delayed until then?

These questions (and others like them) ought not to be ignored or suppressed. They point up the necessity, already intimated, for greater definition and precision in our conception of eschatology. The thesis, then, that I propose for your consideration and will try to develop as time permits is that what the New Testament teaches about suffering, especially the relation of the sufferings of Christians to the sufferings and death of Christ, provides indispensable focus and clarification, to the question of biblical eschatology.

III.

Two passages, both in Paul, serve well as a point of departure. A brief examination of each of them in turn will disclose a decisive and controlling perspective, one that is, I am inclined to say, the key to understanding all other statements in the New Testament on Christian suffering.⁶

6. For the discussion in this section and at a number of points throughout the rest of this address, I want to acknowledge the stimulus of the following: E. Lohse, *Märtyrer und Gottesknecht*, 2nd ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 199–203; W. Schrage, "Leid, Kreuz und Eschaton," *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974): 141–175; P. Siber, *Mit Christus Leben. Eine Studie zur paulinischen Auferstehungshoffnung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1971), 99–190;

1) *2 Corinthians 4:7–11*. In the opening verses of 2 Corinthians Paul sounds a note basic to the entire letter. He points out to his readers that they, together with him, share in “the sufferings of Christ” (1:5–7). The sense of this expression in verse 5, particularly the force of the genitive (“of Christ”), is amplified then by what Paul says about his own ministry beginning at 4:7. We have, Paul says, “this treasure” (that is, according to 3:18–4:6, the gospel of the experiential knowledge of the eschatological glory of God in Christ) in “earthen vessels,” “clay pots” (that is, in the fragility of mortality and human weakness). Verses 8 and 9 go on to spell out something of the psycho-physical experiences involved: Paul is afflicted, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. Verses 10 and 11, then, function to provide an overall assessment; they describe the situation, characterized by persecution and suffering, as a whole. It is a matter of “*always* carrying around in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our body,” and again, “*always* being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus may be revealed in our mortal flesh.”

The point to ponder here is the obvious pairing of “the dying of Jesus” and “the life of Jesus” as a comprehensive cover of Paul’s existence. Negatively, they are not in view as two separate parts or sectors of his experience, as if “the life of Jesus” and “the dying of Jesus” balance off each other in a plus-minus fashion and added together make up the whole. Rather, the life of Jesus, Paul is saying, is revealed *in* the mortal flesh and *nowhere else*; the (mortal) body is the *locus* of the life of Jesus. Paul’s mortality and weakness, taken over in the service of Christ, constitute the comprehensive medium through which the eschatological life of the glorified Christ comes to expression. “The dying of Jesus” is the existence-form that shapes the manifestation of his life in Paul. In the sense that suffering “the dying of Jesus” manifests the resurrection life

R. Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, ed. E. Dinkler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), 227–232; but especially J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 326–338, and several essays of Ernst Käsemann: “For and Against a Theology of Resurrection,” *Jesus Means Freedom*, trans. F. Clarke (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 59–84; “The Saving Significance of the Death of Jesus in Paul,” 32–59 and “The Cry for Liberty in the Worship of the Church,” 122–127 in *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. M. Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); “Ministry and Community in the New Testament,” *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W. J. Montague (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1964), 84f. That Käsemann, for example, would nonetheless probably find this address as a whole quite alien to the New Testament (particularly Paul) is part of the continuing tragedy of contemporary biblical interpretation, a tragedy which is to be explained, apart from my own exegetical limitations in this instance, by the largely transpersonal, transsubjective perversity of exegesis premised on the assumed rational autonomy of the interpreter (“historical-critical method”), a methodology of which Käsemann is such an effective and, in many respects, exemplary practitioner.

of Jesus, Christian suffering is not merely or only suffering *for* Christ but the “sufferings *of* Christ.” The essentially subjective force of the genitive (or at least a subjective nuance) must be recognized, and may not be toned down or explained away.⁷

2) Philippians 3:10 is another compelling expression of the same thought. Beginning at verse 3 of the chapter, Paul describes his boast in Christ in contrast to his former confidence in himself. He considers everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ, to gaining Christ and being found in him (vv. 7–9). Verse 10, then, tells us that this experiential knowledge of Christ, union with Christ, involves knowing “the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.” This sequence is arresting. It does not read, as we might expect: suffering, death and then, resurrection. Rather, taking in verse 11, Paul knows himself to be enclosed in a circle of resurrection: he is already raised with Christ and experiences resurrection power in order that he might attain to the resurrection of the dead. Verse 10, then, fills out this circle, so to speak. The sequence here is resurrection, then suffering and death. It is crucial to see the force of the conjunction “and” in the expression, “the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings.” It does not mean that “the fellowship of his sufferings” is some other, additional reality in our experience than the “power of his resurrection.” Rather, the “and” *explicates*. It tells us, together with 2 Corinthians 4:10, 11, that the power of Christ’s resurrection is realized just *as* the fellowship of his sufferings and conformity to his death. It tells us of the forming and patterning power of the resurrection; the resurrection is a conforming energy, an energy that produces conformity to Christ’s death. The impact, the impress of the resurrection in Paul’s existence is the cross.

IV.

Misunderstandings can crop up at this point. I want next to take up one of them. In the theological currents that have swept over the world during the past 10–15 years, no issue has been a more intensive concern than that of suffering. Human suffering is a central theme in the theology of revolution and other liberation theologies. Suffering is both the target and means of revolutionary praxis. In particular, in the writing program of Jurgen Moltmann, the sequel to the *Theology of Hope* is *The Crucified God*, in which the principle

7. Cf. M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. J. Smith (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963), 13.

of pain, suffering and abandonment is taken up into the very being (better, becoming) of God himself and structures relationships within the Trinity. Suffering, in Moltmann's view, is first of all, antecedently inner-trinitarian.⁸ If I read correctly, it is increasingly clear that the theology of hope is not so much that. Rather, because, for one thing, it is not directed by a more sure prophetic word, it is a theology, not of genuine hope, but of uncertain expectation, expectations predicated on what man is able to wrest of his future within the givenness of his mortality.

But this is not the hope of the New Testament. Paul does not glorify suffering as an end in itself. Nor does he absolutize suffering and death as essential to man as man (or God as God). For him, life and death are not a binary opposition that constitute the deep structure of human existence, so that to remove death from man would be to deprive him of his humanity. Rather, Paul is certain that at Christ's return we shall all be changed (1 Cor. 15:51), that the mortal must put on immortality (vs. 53), and mortality be swallowed up by life (2 Cor. 5:4). And he has this confidence, we may be sure, not as a lingering remnant of late Jewish apocalyptic not yet purged from his thinking, but as an integral element of his revealed gospel.

But now, with this clear, with this absolutely crucial eschatological reservation made, we must go on to appreciate that as long as believers are in the mortal body, that is, for the period between the resurrection and return of Christ, with Paul it is difficult to overemphasize the intimate correlation of life and death in the experience of the believer, the interpenetration of suffering and glory, weakness and power. For *this* period, for as long as we are in the mortal flesh and the sentence of death is written into our existence, resurrection-eschatology is eschatology of the cross, and the theology of the cross is the key signature of all theology that would be truly "practical" theology. In the life of the church, until Jesus comes, to "remember Jesus Christ raised from the dead. . . according to my gospel" (as Paul enjoins us, 2 Tim. 2:8) is to "know nothing. . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (as was also Paul's determination, 1 Cor. 2:2). The form of Christ's resurrection power in this world is the fellowship of his sufferings as the cross-conformed sufferings of the church (Phil. 3:10). The sign of inaugurated eschatology is the cross. Suffering with Christ is a primary *eschatological* discriminant. And so, in all, the essence of Christian existence, as Paul captures it elsewhere, is: ". . . dying,

8. *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and J. Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974) esp. 200–290; cf. the helpful analysis of R. Bauckham, "Moltmann's Eschatology of the Cross," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 30 (1977): 301–311.

and yet we live; . . . sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (1 Cor. 6:9, 10).

V.

Romans 8:17 says that we are God’s adopted children, “if in fact we suffer with him (Christ) in order that we may also be glorified with him.” This clause, in its context, further clarifies the picture for us at several important and disputed points.

1) Sometimes it is argued that the sufferings mentioned in the passages looked at are the sufferings of Paul the *apostle*, specifically *apostolic* suffering which excludes the rest of the church. But a number of considerations tell against this restriction: In 2 Corinthians, Paul says that the whole congregation shares in his sufferings (1:7). In Philippians, the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and conformity to his death are, along with righteousness by faith, essential aspects of union with Christ (3:9, 10). And here in Romans 8, as we shall presently see more clearly, suffering with Christ plainly includes all believers and is inseparable from their adoption.

To be sure, Paul’s sufferings are those of an apostle; they result from the discharge of his unique apostolic calling to provide a once-for-all foundational witness to Christ. But in the sense that we are to hold fast to this infallible witness and maintain it in the world, and are to build on this foundation alone, the Church, too, is apostolic; we confess that the one, holy, catholic church is also apostolic. And that means further that we must also recognize that, until Jesus comes, the church truly has its unity, holiness and catholicity in the apostolicity of its suffering witness to Christ.⁹

2) Nor should it be thought that the comprehensive suffering of which Paul speaks holds for only a part of the church’s history and is bound to give way to “better days,” when the gospel will have spread and had a greater influence in the world. Rather, the present suffering of the believer continues until his future glorification. The terminus on “the sufferings of the present time” (vs. 18) is “the revelation of the sons of God” (vs. 19), that is, the adoption that takes place (at Christ’s return) in the resurrection of the body (vs. 23). Until Christ returns, then, all Christian existence continues to be suffering with Christ.

3) Christian suffering, the sufferings of Christ, do not have to be sought; they are not, at least in the first place, an imperative to be obeyed. The condi-

9. Cf. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, trans. M. Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1977), 357–361.

tional construction in Romans 8:17 is like that in verse 9: “you are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.” Suffering with Christ, according to verse 17, is not a condition to be fulfilled in order to earn adoption, but a condition or circumstance given with our adoption.

One reason we have difficulty in seeing this givenness is that our understanding of “the fellowship of his sufferings” is too narrow and restricted. This is just one point that needs more attention than it can be given here. We tend to think only of persecution that follows on explicit witness to Christ, or perhaps also of intense physical suffering or economic hardships that may result from a stand taken for the gospel. Certainly the aspect of persecution should not be depreciated and is central in the New Testament—and we may well ask ourselves why it is so largely absent from the experience of most of us. But the “sufferings of Christ” are much broader. They are the Christian’s involvement in the “sufferings of the present time,” as the time of comprehensive subjection of the entire creation to futility and frustration, to decay and pervasive, enervating weakness. They are the believer’s participation in what was also, according to the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms (LC, A. 48; SC, A. 27) a fundamental dimension of Christ’s humiliation: “Undergoing the miseries of this life,” exposure to “the indignities of the world,” “the infirmities of his flesh,” “the temptations of Satan.” Where existence in creation under the curse on sin and in the mortal body is not simply borne, be it stoically or in whatever other sinfully self-centered, rebellious way, but borne for Christ and lived in his service, there, comprehensively, is “the fellowship of his sufferings.”

The *givenness* of Christian suffering needs to be stressed. This is expressed almost literally in Philippians 1:29: “it has been given to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him but also to suffer for him.” Notice that Paul does not say faith is common to all Christians, while suffering is the lot of only some. He expresses instead a correlativity of faith and suffering, the intimate bond between them. The Christian life is a not only . . . but also proposition: not only believing, but also suffering.

This givenness or the *indicative* of Christian suffering can be grasped from what Paul teaches about adoption and sanctification. In Romans 8 particularly, suffering with Christ is nothing less than the present mode or condition of our adoption. Remove that suffering, Paul is saying, and you take away our very identity as God’s adopted children, our being heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ.

Also the renewing work of God in the believer in its entirety, our sanctification, is at stake here. Verse 29 tells us the target of God’s electing purpose in sanctification is “conformity to the image of his Son.” The specific pattern of transformation is *conformation*, conformity to Christ, not as an abstraction

or general embodiment of virtues and holy living, but in the historical pattern of his incarnate existence: suffering first and then glory. For the sons' conformity to the Son means suffering now, for "the present time," and the glory to be revealed at his return.

So, when, for example, in 2 Corinthians 3:18 Paul asserts that, as believers beheld the glory of the exalted Lord-Christ, they are even now being "transformed into the same image from glory to glory," the further explanation of this transformation "from glory to glory," its concretizing, is given in the next section and what is said there, as we have seen, about the treasure in earthen vessels and the life of Jesus manifested in the mortal body. Or, in the light of Philippians 3:10, present transformation from glory to glory is realized in "being conformed to His death." Peter confirms this when he tells us that it is just as we share the sufferings of Christ that the Holy Spirit, in his identity as the Spirit of *glory*, rests on us (1 Pet. 4:13f.).

With Calvin, we must recognize that as Christ's whole life was nothing but a sort of perpetual cross, so the Christian life in its entirety, not just certain parts, is to be a continual cross (*Institutes*, 3:8:1, 2). Where the church is not being conformed to Christ in suffering, it is simply not true to itself as the church; it is without glory, nor will it inherit glory. Just as the Spirit of glory came upon Jesus at his Jordan-baptism opening up before him the way of suffering obedience that led to the cross, so the same Holy Spirit, with which the church was baptized at Pentecost, points it to the path of suffering. The Pentecostal Spirit is as well the Spirit of suffering, although this tends to be "the spiritual gift no one is talking about."¹⁰ It was, in fact, not only to James and John but, through them, to the whole church that Jesus said, "You will drink of the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with" (Mark 10:39). Until he comes again, the concrete form of the Christian's fellowship with Christ is the cross. It is not only to some but all his disciples that Jesus says: "a servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20), and again: "if *anyone* would come after me, he must. . .take up his cross *daily* and follow me" (Luke 9:23). And we might add this in passing to get at our concern from another angle: we should not think that for Jesus's disciples taking up their cross is a burden somehow in addition to keeping his commandments, or one other commandment among the rest. Rather, cross-bearing is the comprehensive configuration of obedience to Christ.¹¹

10. Adapting the title of an article on suffering by L. Samuel, "The Spiritual Gift No One Is Talking About," *Christianity Today* 21 (Jan. 21, 1977): 10–12.

11. Cf. A. de Quervain, *Die Heiligung*, 2nd ed. (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), 161.

But now in all this it is absolutely essential, really *everything* depends on recognizing that the reality of Christian suffering is (and I know no better word) *eschatological*. It is so “natural” for us to associate suffering only with eschatological delay and to view it only in the light of what we do not yet have in Christ. But when this happens we have lost sight of the critical factor, that in the New Testament Christian suffering is always seen within the context of the coming of the kingdom of God in power and as a manifestation of the resurrection-life of Jesus. Only with this proviso, this *eschatological* proviso, is Christian suffering the fellowship of Christ’s suffering.

Right at this point, then, we can appreciate just one of the decisive differences between the historical sufferings of Jesus and Christian suffering. For Christ, there was no fellowship in suffering, only the blind insensitivity of the disciples all the way and that awful climax of isolation and being forsaken by God and abandoned to his wrath on the cross (Matt. 27:46). For believers, in suffering there is participation in the life and power of their Savior, a participation which is seriously misunderstood as long as it is merely seen as compensating and offsetting particular times of hardship and suffering. There is a fellowship in which his power is made perfect, not alongside of or beyond, but in their weakness (2 Cor. 12:9, 10). His limitless power is manifested through the medium of their pervasive and extreme weakness. This is why two things often associated with Christian suffering in the New Testament are comfort and joy (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:3–7; 7:4; Phil. 2:17, 18; Col. 1:24; 1 Thess. 1:6; Jam. 1:2; 2 Pet. 4:13).

VI.

We may now look briefly at Colossians 1:24, where Paul says: “I rejoice in my sufferings for you and in my flesh I fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, that is, the church.” Certainly the vital, spiritual union between the glorified Christ and believers is an explanatory presupposition of this striking and much debated statement.¹² However, “the afflictions of Christ” are not what (the exalted) Christ, as a “corporate person,” presently suffers through the church.¹³ Nor are they the sufferings

12. Particularly useful for its careful survey of the history of interpretation is J. Kremer, *Was an den Leiden Christi noch mangelt* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1956).

13. E.g., R. Yates, “A Note on Colossians 1:24,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 42 (1970): 91ff.; F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 215f.; A. Oepke, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:1098.

of the church viewed as Christ's because of the union between them,¹⁴ or because Paul here adapts the Jewish notion of the end-time messianic woes, which the people of God endure for the Messiah's sake and to usher in his coming.¹⁵ Rather, we agree with those exegetes who hold that the afflictions in view are the past, historical sufferings of Christ himself (in his humiliation).¹⁶ But how in this sense is there something lacking in the afflictions of Christ? Hardly that Christ's atoning sacrifice was deficient and needs to be supplemented or that the reconciliation is incomplete. Apart from other considerations, the whole point of Colossians especially is the uniqueness and all-sufficiency of Christ and his work, and in verses 20–22 Paul has just said that Christ has made peace by the blood of his cross and that by his death he has now reconciled the church.

It is one thing, particularly, in the context of Reformation polemics, to say what Paul does not mean. But that still leaves the question, what *does* Paul mean? How when he has just said that all the fulness dwells in Christ (vs. 19), can he go on to speak of “filling up” what is lacking in his afflictions? The answer would appear to lie in what Paul says elsewhere about our sharing in Christ's sufferings and the fellowship of his sufferings. The critical factor here is the special, unique and ultimately unfathomable solidarity between Christ and the church. This union is such that not only can the sufferings of believers be viewed as Christ's and as being conformed to his death, but also the personal, past-historical sufferings of Christ and the present afflictions of the church are seen together as constituting one whole. Again, certainly not in the sense that the sufferings of the church have some additive atoning, reconciling value. But there are aspects other than soteriological from which the church's sufferings can be bracketed with the suffering of Christ himself. These aspects we may designate apostolic or missiological, having to do with the gospel-mission in the world of the church together with its Head.

14. The view of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and many older commentators (cf. Kramer, op. cit., 177–183); more recently, e.g., H. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 51.

15. E.g., E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 70; R. P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1974), 70; R. J. Bauckham, “Colossians 1:24 Again,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 47 (1975): 169f. That the conception of the messianic woes provides a more general background to the eschatological suffering in view in verse 24 may very well be the case.

16. E.g., J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1879), 165f.; E. Lohmeyer, *Die Briefe an die Philipper, and die Kolosser und an Philemon* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1953), 78; E. Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946), 130f.; H. Ridderbos, *Aan de Kolosenzen* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1960), 156–159; W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1964), 86f.

The Usefulness of the Cross

With Professor Murray, we must say, in reference to this verse, that, together with the sufferings of Christ, in their suffering believers “are regarded as filling up the total quota of sufferings requisite to the consummation of redemption and the glorification of the whole body of Christ.”¹⁷ Without construing this “total quota” into the doubtful view that the suffering of each Christian hastens the Parousia by mechanically reducing a fixed quantity of sufferings still outstanding, still this verse points us to consider that an important aspect of the rationale for delay between the resurrection and return of Christ is the necessary role of suffering for the gospel and its advance appointed to the church. Also, I would suggest in passing and as a matter for further discussion, that what Paul says here has a definite bearing on the much-debated issue of the nature of the covenant and the role of Christ as covenant mediator and the last Adam. The suggestion, at least, is that the Spirit-worked suffering obedience of the church, which is the fruit of self-abandoning faith that rests in and lives out of its covenant head, is, together with his own obedience, as Murray puts it, integral and necessary to attaining the full possession of the eschatological inheritance.

VII.

In bringing these remarks to a close, I want to broaden them in two directions:

1) In making the emphasis I have so far, it is of course essential to maintain balance within a larger context. Some may be uneasy that I have spoken in the way I have, with Calvin, of the “usefulness of the cross” and that so much has been said about the cross but so little about the Atonement. I want to remove any uncertainty there may be in this respect. In the tradition of historic Christian theology, especially since Anselm, the cross and the Atonement have been virtually synonymous. Again and again, in every generation (and ours is no exception), it has been truly crucial to stress the exclusive significance of the cross of Christ, that his sufferings and death have an atoning, reconciling efficacy that is true of none other. I would not want anything I have said this morning to leave the impression that I do not share this concern fully.

But my particular concern today is to remind that it is after all a matter of *balance*. Too much of church history, in considering the significance of the cross, has gotten trapped in a false dilemma, the dilemma between Atonement (Christ as Mediator) and conformity (Christ as example).¹⁸ The

17. J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:299.

18. Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Sanctification*, trans. J. Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952), 135ff., esp. 158–160.

requisite balance is nowhere more decisively and effectively struck than in 1 Peter 2:21–25. Christ suffered, Peter says, “for you,” and in back of that “for you” lies all the atoning uniqueness and exclusive justifying efficacy of that suffering. Again, Peter tells us, “Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross” and “by his wounds you have been healed,” and at that, not as if he were one sheep among the rest, but as he was and is the Shepherd and Overseer of the sheep who were going astray. At the same time, however, Peter is intent on showing that a purpose, a particular utility of Christ’s sufferings and death is that “we might die to sin and live for righteousness” and to “leave you an example for you to follow in his footsteps.” And those footsteps lead, as Paul tells us, into “the fellowship of his sufferings” and “being conformed to his death” (Phil. 3:10).

Galatians 6:14, if I read it correctly, is instructive at this point. There Paul declares: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” While the Atonement is certainly in Paul’s mind here (vv. 12, 13), that is not prominent in the verses that follow. Rather, what explicates this boast in the cross is the fact, as he continues in verse 14, that through the cross the world has been crucified to Paul and Paul to the world, the fact further, according to verse 15, that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, human status or performance of any kind, mean anything, but that what counts is a new creation, a new creation, verse 16 goes on to tell us, that is realized in and among those who walk according to its rule. This new creation-rule, in turn, means finally, verse 17—and this is the final note of the epistle before the closing benediction—that Paul bears in his body the brand-marks, the stigmata of Jesus. Paul’s “boast” in the cross of Jesus is the gracious patterning of his life and ministry by that cross.

Risking a generalization that has all manner of significant exceptions, it does seem fair to say that the churches of the Reformation have shown a much better grasp of the “for us” of Christ’s cross and the gospel than they have of the “with him” of that gospel, particularly *suffering* with him. The question we must continue to put to ourselves is this—and certainly we will hardly be so blind as to suppose that for the church in today’s world this is anything less than a most searching and urgent question: do we really understand the exclusive efficacy of Christ’s death, if we do not also grasp its inclusive aspect? For the New Testament the efficacy of the Atonement has not been applied where it does not issue in “the fellowship of his sufferings” and “conformity to his death.” Really, we should say that the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings is an inseparable benefit of the Atonement. Putting our question another way, when with the Westminster Shorter Catechism (A. 34), we teach that “adoption is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the

number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God,” will our catechising, including that of our lives, make clear, as Paul does, not only in Romans 8:17 but by the entire course of his ministry, that until Christ returns, the comprehensive mode of our enjoying all these privileges of adopted sons is suffering with him? There are few truths which the church down through its history has been more inclined to evade; there are few truths which the church can less afford to evade.

2) I want also to address for a moment the traditional evangelical debates on eschatology and the question of the millennium. I do so with a continuing sense of the complexity of the issues, recognizing the plausible appeal to Scripture that each position can make and the need for all sides to do greater justice to the whole of Scripture. My plea here is simply this: for a greater recognition of what we have tried to show to be the defining, delineating role of Christian suffering in biblical eschatology, and that this perspective be given its due in our discussions.

Looking in one direction, we must agree that New Testament eschatology is most assuredly an eschatology of victory, and of victory presently being realized. But, any outlook that fails to see that for the church, between the resurrection and return of Christ and *until* that return, the eschatology of victory is an eschatology of suffering, any outlook that otherwise tends to remove the dimension of suffering from the present *triumph* of the church, distorts the gospel and confuses the (apostolic) mission of the church in the world. The church does indeed carry the eschatological victory of Jesus into the world, but only as it takes up the cross after him. Its glory, always veiled, is revealed in its suffering with him. Until Jesus comes, his resurrection glory in the church is a matter of strength made perfect in suffering. The “golden age” is the age of power perfected in weakness.

But now, doesn't this outlook betray a pessimism that virtually turns away from creation and our calling in it? Doesn't it surrender or at least undermine the ideal, so precious to the Reformed faith, of the whole of life to God's glory and of a gospel that addresses the whole man? To this we reply with Abraham Kuyper that we will not yield one square inch of the crown rights of our King Jesus over the whole creation,¹⁹ and we will insist that the gospel offers the present reality of eschatological life in Christ, present renewal and transformation of the believer in his entirety, according to the inner man, with the redirection and reintegration of human life in all its aspects. And we will have much more to say as to the cosmic scope of redemption and the awesome

19. I am not able to document this statement, which I have repeatedly seen (or heard) attributed to Kuyper. Presumably it is somewhere in his *Encyclopedia of Sacred Theology*.

breadth of the gospel of the kingdom. But, at the same time we must also insist with Paul in Romans 8 (vv. 18ff.) on *this* cosmic truth: that the whole creation *groans*, that there is not one square inch of creation which is not now groaning in anxious longing for the revelation of the sons of God. And in the meantime, until that revelation at Jesus' coming, these adopted sons, under the power of the Spirit (vs. 23), also groan, not in isolation from creation or by withdrawing from everyday life and responsibilities, but they groan *with* creation; they groan out of their deep, concreated solidarity with the rest of creation. They groan by entering fully and with hope for the entire creation (vv. 20, 24f.) into the realities of daily living and cultural involvement, knowing all along that for the present time these are all subject to futility and decay, knowing full well too, even though it so often proves elusive and difficult to maintain, the *balance* to which they are called, that peculiarly balanced lifestyle demanded of them because as Paul puts it elsewhere, paraphrasing him slightly: "the time has been shortened, so that from now on those who do in fact have wives should be as if they had none; those who do mourn, as if they did not mourn; those who do rejoice, as if they did not rejoice; those who do buy, as if they did not possess; and those who are in fact to use the things of the world, as if they did not make full use of them. For this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor. 7:29–31). And Paul has no more ultimate word on this situation than to say: "the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory to be revealed to us" (vs. 18).

Only in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings will the church avoid the extremes of a quasi-theocratic utopianism, on the one hand, and a millennial escapism and narrowing of the gospel, on the other. For this reason, too, that we stay free of these extremes with their inevitable tendency to various forms of ideological and even practical bondage, it has been given to us, "not only to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for him" (Phil. 1:29).

All told, we may sum up in paraphrase of the eschatological vision captured in Psalm 84 (vv. 5–7):²⁰

Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are thy ways;
 Who going through the vale of misery use it for a well, and the pools
 are filled with water;
 They will go from strength to strength.

This, too, is the usefulness of the cross.

20. Paraphrase by Martin Shaw, *Sing We Merrily Unto God Our Strength* (London: Novello & Co., 1932).