

## **New Creation Ministry: Eschatological Implications for Ministry in 2 Corinthians 5:11-21**

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It is said that in 2 Corinthians we get a unique glimpse into Paul's heart. He makes himself more personally accessible to his readers in this letter than in any other. He "wears his heart on his sleeve and speaks without constraint, hiding neither his affection, nor his anger, nor his agony."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, "it would be equally true to say that he never wrote a more theological letter."<sup>2</sup> However, when one considers the theology of Romans, the affection in Philippians, and the forceful rebuke found in Galatians, these claims might seem overstated. While Paul's recounting of his hardships as he boasts in his weaknesses in 2 Corinthians 11 certainly conveys gripping vulnerability, is it accurate to describe this as his most theological letter?

Central to the argument in Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians, nevertheless, is a deeply theological claim. Paul grounds his heartfelt defense and affectionate appeal to this congregation in an eschatological understanding of redemptive history. In responding to the charges of his opponents, Paul distinguishes his methods and aims in ministry from the so-called "super apostles" (11:5; 12:11). He renounces their "disgraceful, underhanded ways" and refuses to "practice cunning" (4:2). Why? Because the coming of Jesus has brought a new state of affairs into the world that transforms how we should view and relate to one another. This eschatological perspective surfaces throughout the letter but finds clear expression in his classic New Creation text in 5:17.

Paul's already/not-yet framework of redemptive history influences his method and goals for Christian ministry, as well as his standards for evaluating success or failure in ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC, vol. 8 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1973), 32. Cited by Robert J. Cara in the class notes.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Specifically, Paul’s understanding that the New Creation has begun in the resurrection of Christ shapes how he approaches calling people to conversion and caring for believers as participants in the New Creation. As a result, he targets the transformation of the heart rather than the conformity of outward behavioral appearances.

### **Paul’s Eschatological Defense of His Ministry in 2 Corinthians 1-5**

2 Corinthians 5 contributes to the section of Paul’s letter dedicated to defending his New Covenant ministry (2:14-7:4).<sup>3</sup> The Corinthian congregation has become restricted in their affections toward Paul and his companions (6:12), apparently because false teachers have deceived them (11:4-6).<sup>4</sup> They have come to conclude that Paul is personally ineffective as a minister (10:1) and unspiritual in his approach and decisions (10:2). It seems that Paul’s opponents held to a triumphalistic perspective that viewed model leaders as impressive individuals (10:10) who took decisive actions (1:17) with obviously successful results (4:2-3).

Paul works to undermine this kind of thinking early in the letter. He informs them about his affliction in Asia, when he was burdened beyond his natural strength and despaired of life itself (1:8), in order that he might hope in God *who raises the dead* (1:9). These descriptions of suffering, inability, and despair would have been an embarrassment to Paul’s opponents—and it is in such embarrassing circumstances that Paul boasts in chapter 11. The resurrection of Christ has transformed how Paul evaluates hardship and seeming defeat.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D.A. Carson & Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 418.

<sup>4</sup> Although incidental to the main argument, this essay assumes the literary integrity of 2 Corinthians. Even if chapters 10-13 represent new information that has come to Paul about the situation in Corinth (e.g., Carson & Moo, 430-436), Paul’s perspective on his ministry and his theological defense of it are consistent throughout the letter as it has come to us.

<sup>5</sup> Paul will later highlight similar experiences of suffering and lack in order to commend his ministry (“that no fault may be found with our ministry,” 6:3; “we commend ourselves in every way,” 6:4). They are “as dying, and behold, we live...as having nothing, yet possessing everything” (6:10). While a natural-minded “super apostle” might consider Paul’s resume of beatings, hardships, and imprisonments and conclude that evidently God has not blessed his ministry, Paul recognizes unseen, eschatological realities that are at work.

Paul then transitions to address what the Corinthians have perceived as inadequacies in his ministry among them. He begins by communicating his sincerity and genuine care for them: “For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity (εἰλικρινεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ), not by earthly wisdom (σοφία σαρκικῆ) but by the grace of God, and supremely toward you” (1:12).<sup>6</sup> This sets up his explanation for his delay in coming to Corinth, since the church has evidently interpreted this as either indecisive or inconsiderate. “Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make plans according to the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα)?” (1:17).<sup>7</sup> The reason Paul is not disingenuous toward them, treating his “yes” as a “no” in his interaction with them, is rooted (γὰρ) in the fact that “all the promises of God find their Yes in [Christ]” (1:20). That is, the eschatological fulfillment of God’s promises in Christ influences Paul’s posture toward the Corinthians; how could he treat his word to them lightly when God demonstrated his faithfulness in accomplishing every promise in the death and resurrection of Jesus? Furthermore, his ministry is the “Amen” to God’s “Yes” (1:20), since God has established, anointed, and sealed believers with the Spirit as a guarantee (ἄρραβῶνα) of the yet to be realized future blessings (1:21-22). The opening paragraph of Paul’s response to their concerns, then, places his ministry among the Corinthians in the context of the already/not-yet fulfillment of redemptive history.

After addressing further considerations that determined his travelling schedule in relation to Corinth (2:1-11), Paul then moves into a full explanation and defense of his ministry.

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<sup>6</sup> Paul’s contrast between the sincerity from God (εἰλικρινεῖα τοῦ θεοῦ) and the wisdom from the flesh (σοφία σαρκικῆ) distinguishes two manners of acting in this world which ultimately reference the old and new eschatological orders.

<sup>7</sup> Barnett notes that κατὰ σάρκα “implies behavior independent of the Spirit of God, that is, by purely human standards” (Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 102n19). As is noted below, this references the realm of the fallen creation without the resurrection of Jesus and the presence of the eschatological Spirit. “To generalize, σάρξ describes the self-maintaining impetus of the present evil age, better, it focuses the inertia and weakness of the old aeon in antithesis to the Spirit as the power of the age-to-come (cf. Heb. 6:5).” (Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul’s Soteriology* [Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987], 108-109). Paul will accuse the false apostles of boasting κατὰ σάρκα (11:18).

He begins with thanking to God, “who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession” (2:14)—but this is not the triumphalism of the false apostles.<sup>8</sup> The triumph of Christ passed through death to resurrection, and therefore his servants are sometimes confronted with what appears to be failure. Nevertheless, through them “spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2:14), even if it a fragrance of death to the spiritually dead and life to those raised to spiritual life (2:15-16).<sup>9</sup> To recognize these theological realities at work is the opposite of being a peddler of God’s Word (2:17), one who is concerned only with outward, visible effectiveness.

Paul’s key evidence of this fragrance at work through his preaching is the Corinthians themselves. While some are impressed with things the world values and accepts like letters of recommendation (3:1), the Corinthian congregation is Paul’s letter of recommendation written on his heart (3:2). In fact, the Spirit of God has written the principles of Christ onto their hearts (3:3; cf. Jer. 31:33; Ez. 36:26-27), a work that is superior in glory to the Mosaic administration and its tablets of stone. This is the ministry of the “New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit” (3:6).<sup>10</sup> It is likely that Paul contrasts the Old and New Covenants in this section because his opponents, arriving in Corinth with their letters of commendation, were a form of Judaizers.<sup>11</sup> They evidently emphasized conformity to the law of Moses; however, “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (3:6). Paul’s teaching elsewhere clarifies that this is not due to an inherent

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<sup>8</sup> “This metaphor, with its paradoxical power-in-weakness elements, may have been chosen to answer to those who suggest that such sufferings somehow disqualify or invalidate his ministry” (Barnett, 138).

<sup>9</sup> The spiritually dead (belonging to the old, fallen order) smell the death of Christ and encounter only the stench of death. But those who participate in Christ’s resurrection experience the aroma of eschatological life. This new evaluation of Christ will resurface in our primary text (2 Cor. 5:16).

<sup>10</sup> The activity of the Spirit evidences the arrival of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, with all of its eschatological implications. (Gordon Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994], 296-320). For Paul, the New Covenant and the New Creation are co-extensive.

<sup>11</sup> Barnett, 161.

problem with the law but with a person's inability to fulfill the law in the power of σάρξ (Rom. 7:7-9; 8:3-4, 7).<sup>12</sup> When tablets of stone meet a heart of stone, only death can result (3:7), regardless of what outward conformity might appear.<sup>13</sup> To be a member of the New Covenant means to have a new heart (that is, to be a new creation), so that the veil is removed that shrouds the glory of the Lord (3:16). Genuine transformation occurs, then, not by attempting to obey external regulations (following the law in the realm of the flesh) but by beholding the glory of the Lord ("who is the Spirit")<sup>14</sup> and "being transformed into that same image from one degree of glory to another" (3:18).

Given these New Covenant eschatological realities, the fact that the gospel is "veiled to those who perishing" (4:3) does not imply ineffectiveness or hopelessness. The New Covenant minister has no place for "underhanded ways" or "cunning" (4:2)—manipulative attempts to convince and change people. While the "god of this world" (ὁ θεὸς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου)—that is, of "this age" as opposed to "the age to come"—prevents unbelievers from seeing the glory of Christ (4:4), the God of the original, unfallen creation who spoke light into darkness (4:6) joins the proclamation of Christ (4:5) and shines light into the human heart to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (4:6). Paul applies creation language to the experience of conversion; in other words, the God of creation produces the New Creation (a new heart) within believers so that they are able to recognize the glory of Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> "The consequences of this monstrous alliance of sin and the law is that all kinds of qualifications that describe the corruption and curse of sin now also apply to the law. As sin means death for man, so also the law (2 Cor. 3:6)" (Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, Trans. John Richard de Witt [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 147). For Paul's understanding of the law, including its continuing application for the believer under the "third use" of the law, see Ridderbos, 278-88.

<sup>13</sup> Ridderbos comments that "so far as the doctrine of sin is concerned, the real antithesis between Paul and the Judaism he controverts does not lie in the evaluation of these differences, but in the diametrically opposed judgment as to the strength and function of the law in this universal sin situation" (132). Likewise, it seems that Paul's "Judaizer" opponents were overconfident in the ability of the law to effect change given the fallenness of man.

<sup>14</sup> The resurrected Lord Jesus exercises his transforming power through the eschatological Spirit.

This influence of the age to come spilling over into the present age is like a “treasure in jars of clay” (4:7)—eternal realities at work in the midst of apparent unimpressiveness and defeat (4:8-10). This demonstrates that the surpassing power belongs to God and not intrinsically to the human minister (4:7). While Paul and his companions are always being given over to death, the resurrected life of Jesus is at work in the Corinthian church (4:11-12). They do not look to the things that are seen (of this old world) but the things that are unseen (of the new, eternal world) (4:17-18)—and so walk by faith in the future realm and not by sight (5:7). Even if the earthly dwelling (body) is destroyed, God has prepared for them an eschatological home (5:1-4) and has given the Spirit as a present guarantee of these promises (5:5). Awaiting this day, genuine believers make it their aim to please Christ since they will all face the eschatological judgment (v. 9-10).

“Therefore,” Paul says, “we persuade others” (5:11). In 5:11-21, Paul describes what that persuasion means for him as a minister of the New Covenant. He contends that his efforts among the Corinthians have not been motivated by self-interest (v. 12) but by the love of Christ (v. 14), demonstrated in the death of Christ (v. 14-15). In fact, Christ’s death and resurrection are not merely external motivators; to be in Christ means to have died with Christ (v. 14) and, having been raised with him, to live for him (v. 15). Living for the interests of Jesus and for his people is the opposite of self-serving boasting (v. 12). This transformation of the individual believer (and, by implication, the individual minister) is rooted in a larger—in fact, cosmic—transformation that has begun in Christ’s resurrection. If someone is in Christ, he participates in the New Creation (v. 17). Understanding Paul’s theology of New Creation is essential to grasping what he wants the Corinthians to recognize about his gospel ministry.

### **Paul’s Theology of New Creation**

The English Standard Version (following the Revised Standard Version) renders 2 Corinthians 5:17 as “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” However, this supplies a particular interpretation of Paul’s ellipsis, since the Greek text simply states, “If

someone is in Christ—new creation” (εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις). Paul’s language of “new creation” (καινὴ κτίσις) and the “old things” (τὰ ἀρχαῖα) passing away so that “behold, the new things” (ἰδοὺ...καινά) have come has linguistic ties to Isaiah’s prophecies of the coming New Creation, specifically Is. 43:18-19; 65:17 (LXX).<sup>15</sup> The language of promise-and-fulfillment bookends Paul’s discussion in chapters 2-7 (1:20; 7:1)—including the fulfillment of the prophecies of the rebuilding of the temple and the promise of the New Covenant.<sup>16</sup> However, Isaiah envisioned a restoration of the physical order that extends even to peace in the animal kingdom (Is. 65:25). Nevertheless, even in Isaiah’s context there seems to be a multi-tiered anticipation for these prophecies, since the immediate reference point is Israel’s return from exile and reestablishment as a nation (Is. 43:3-7).<sup>17</sup> This restoration from exile is seen as an eschatological New Creation, and Paul applies these promises to the reconciliation available in Christ.<sup>18</sup> For Paul, the New Creation has been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus; he reasons from (ὥστε) Christ’s resurrection (v. 15) to the presence of the New Creation (v. 17).

The cosmic scope of the renovation promised in Isaiah clarifies that Paul is not simply speaking of the change that the individual believer experiences—far less that conversion means one is “like a new creature.” He has in mind a recreated world that has begun in Christ

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<sup>15</sup> G.K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 299-300. Gignilliat sees the emphasis of Paul and his fellow-workers being *servants* in the ministry (5:5; 6:4) as an allusion to the Servant of Isaiah 40-66. Specific to verse 17, “the new thing of God’s activity within the movement of Isaiah centers on the Servant’s paradoxical activity in Isaiah 53 and a similar move is made with Paul’s conjoining of the new creation with Christ’s death” (Mark Gignilliat, “A Servant Follower of the Servant: Paul’s Eschatological Reading of Isaiah 40-66 in 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:10,” *Horizons In Biblical Theology* 26, no. 1 [June 2004], 117). Paul will also apply Is. 49:8 eschatologically in 6:2. Cf. Lee, Mason. “Now is the Acceptable Time; Now is the Day of Salvation’: Reading 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:2 in Light of its Narrative Substructure.” *Restoration Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (2014 2014): 1-13.

<sup>16</sup> Beale, 300.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Balla, “2 Corinthians,” *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, eds. D.A. Carson & G.K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 766.

<sup>18</sup> G.K. Beale, “The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 4:14-7:1,” *New Testament Studies* 35, no. 4 (October 1989), 555.

and includes everyone who belongs to Christ, since they are identified with his resurrection.<sup>19</sup>

“There has been created a totally new environment, or, more accurately speaking, a totally new world, in which the person spoken of [the person ἐν Χριστῷ] is an inhabitant and participator.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course the existential component is not thereby excluded.<sup>21</sup> Paul has already described the internal transformation that believers experience that enables them to come to Christ (3:3, 16; 4:4-6). In fact, in the already/not-yet time frame for fulfillment, the believer first experiences internal resurrection (in theological terms, *regeneration* and then *sanctification*) in this life before experiencing bodily resurrection in the future (4:14, 16). Nevertheless, this existential aspect is not merely an individual experience for the believer but is connected to the eschatological renovation of the cosmos that has principally begun in Christ. This is what Paul intends when he says the “old” or the “former things” have passed away while the “new things” have come. “It is a matter of two worlds, not only in a spiritual, but in a redemptive-historical, eschatological sense.”<sup>22</sup> The broader context of God reconciling the world to himself (v. 19) and reckoning the believer’s sin to Christ and his righteousness to them (v. 21) highlights the objective features of the “new” that has come. “The whole argument of the passage revolves around the substitution of one objective status and environment for another.”<sup>23</sup>

Among the “new things” that have arrived in Christ’s resurrection is a new standard of evaluation. “From now on”—that is, since the arrival of the New Creation—“we regard no one according to the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα)” (v. 16). To assess people according to the values of

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<sup>19</sup> Ridderbos, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1994), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Beale comments that “the two categories of ‘soterio-anthropological’ and ‘soterio-cosmological’ are not mutually exclusive and easily overlap” (*A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 303n3).

<sup>22</sup> Ridderbos, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Vos, 47.

σάρξ fails to recognize the eschatological time frame in which Christian ministry operates.<sup>24</sup> This is primarily because we are no longer to consider the Christ (Messiah) according to the flesh (v. 16)—the resurrection has transformed how we should view Jesus’ humiliating death. If one were to look at the crucified Jesus using the triumphalistic expectations of the “super apostles,” it would seem that his work was a failure, even less that he is a glorious Messiah (cf. 1 Cor. 1:22-24). The death of Jesus, however, is not the final word, and it is inappropriate to analyze his work outside of the realm of the resurrection. “Those who estimate Christ according to the flesh are submerged in the old era, despite the inception of the new one.”<sup>25</sup>

This understanding of the text accords with Paul’s use of *καινή κτίσις* in Galatians 6:15: “For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but new creation.” For Paul, the New Creation has caused a “dramatic and thoroughgoing shift in his value system” so that not only circumcision but also uncircumcision is inconsequential in the age to come.<sup>26</sup> It is those who want to “make a good showing ἐν σαρκί” who promote circumcision (v. 12), falsely assuming that σάρξ can be a means of perfection (Gal. 3:3). They are stuck in the old order, and so they boast ἐν...σαρκὶ (6:13). To be a Christian, however, is to recognize the epochal significance of the death and resurrection of Jesus—and, paradoxically, to boast in the cross, by which the world and its merely human values have been crucified in the believer’s estimation (v. 14).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> “‘Flesh’ and ‘Spirit’ represent two modes of existence, on the one hand that of the old aeon which is characterized and determined by the flesh, on the other that of the new creation which is of the Spirit of God” (Ridderbos, 66).

<sup>25</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 144.

<sup>26</sup> Douglas J. Moo, “Creation and New Creation,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20, no. 1 (2010), 48. “The new creation brings a new canon, a new standard of judgment, along with it. This is above all redemptive-historical in nature” (Ridderbos, 286).

<sup>27</sup> “Here it is made clear that the crucifixion of the world is an event that marks the total devaluation of both circumcision and uncircumcision. Kosmos is a realm where people set a high value on those distinctions. It is with the destruction of those distinctions that the new creation emerges” (Paul Minear, “The Crucified World: The Enigma of Galatians 6:14,” *Theologica Crucis—Signum Crucis* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1979], 397).

In both 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15, then, the priorities and values of the new age have set the standards and tenor for Paul's ministry.

### **Paul's New Creation Ministry**

What is the nature of a ministry that finds its reference point in the new age? In Galatians 5:6, Paul makes a parallel statement that “in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, *but only faith working through love.*” It is faith working through love that provides both the means and the goal for Paul's gospel ministry, and this comes through in 2 Corinthians 5 and its surrounding context.

Paul writes that in light of the eschatological judgment (5:10), he seeks to persuade others (v. 11). But the motives and methods for his persuasion are markedly different from those who “boast about outward appearance<sup>28</sup> and not about what is in the heart” (v. 12). Super apostles and Judaizers are concerned about outward conformity to standards in the ability of the flesh (and therefore they make use of fleshly means); New Covenant ministers target a heart that has been gathered from the eschaton and planted into the believer as a member of the new age (Ezek. 36:26). Since gospel ministers have experienced this regeneration themselves, the “love of Christ” is what controls their efforts (v. 14).

It is uncertain whether ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ Χριστοῦ should be rendered as an objective genitive (“love for Christ”) or subjective genitive (“Christ's love for us”), and perhaps Paul is intentionally ambiguous, but the causal participle that follows (κρίναντας, “because we have concluded this”) draws attention to the death and resurrection of Jesus (v. 14-15).<sup>29</sup> The love of Christ, principally expressed in his atoning and restorative work, provides the motivation for Paul and his companions as they serve the Corinthians. Furthermore, manipulative measures are

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<sup>28</sup> His language of boasting in “outward appearance” (ἐν προσώπῳ) calls to mind the cognate description in Galatians 6:12 of those who want “to make a good showing” (εὐπροσωπῆσαι) in the flesh.

<sup>29</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville, Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 278.

both out of place and unnecessary, since in the death of Jesus “all have died” to the old order and in his resurrection they have been brought to eschatological life, no longer to live for themselves but to live for the crucified and risen Jesus (v. 14-15). A New Covenant minister knows that believers *want* to please Christ (v. 9) since they have undergone death and resurrection and have been transferred to the age to come. All appeals to the flesh, then, are inappropriate and pointless; there is no need for “lording over” when “we work with you for your joy” (1:24).

However, since Paul recognizes that God has entrusted him with the message of reconciliation (v. 19), he appeals and implores (v. 20) for people to be reconciled to God. This is strong and urgent language, but it is no less loving and sincere. Rather, it is based in objective and eschatological realities: God has reconciled the κόσμος to himself (v. 19);<sup>30</sup> *God* is making his appeal through the ambassadors of the risen Christ (v. 20); God has condemned sin by reckoning it to Christ (v. 21; “God condemned sin ἐν τῇ σαρκί,” Rom. 8:3); *now* is the day of salvation (6:2)—the “favorable time” prophesied in Isaiah 49:8. These are the redemptive-historical facts that supply the reason for Christian ministry; this is the great eschatological “now” that provides the context for all of Paul’s gospel efforts. It is the same eschatological window of time in which today’s gospel ministers sow and harvest.

### **Conclusion**

How should a pastor today evaluate fruitfulness in ministry? That is a persistent challenge, and it affects pastoral endurance. What supplies the standards for considering success or failure? What should a pastor celebrate, and what should he see as something to avoid? How should he seek to influence people, and what supplies the data for whether or not that influence is effective?

These kinds of questions take up much space in the literature of the church world. Few books and articles, however, present any connection between these concerns and the reality

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<sup>30</sup> “Cosmos is the world turned away from God, rebellious and hostile toward him” (Ridderbos, 92).

of the New Creation. For the Apostle Paul, they are inseparable. The survey above demonstrates how often he relates one to the other. Paul saw all of life and ministry in light of the risen Jesus. In 2 Corinthians, it is clear that he also saw all of ministry in light of the eschatological realities that were brought about in Jesus' resurrection.

Pastors today would do well to study this theology and its implications. Although we walk in the flesh, we do not wage war according to the flesh (10:3). Too often church ministry literature is concerned about getting the flesh to cooperate by implementing the best techniques from the world. Obviously, effectiveness and strategy is important, and there is no reason to ignore the common grace insights that can be gained from the corporate setting. But beneath everything must be the realization that there is a clash of two eschatological orders. This is sobering, but it is also encouraging. The God who is working a renovation of the entire cosmos has the power to change people!

This should affect how we seek to influence people—whether our ministry is driven by force of personality or by the proclamation of the gospel. It should also affect our standards for evaluation. Paul was ready to celebrate when his preaching was the fragrance from life to life, but he did not become anxious when it was also the fragrance from death to death (2:16). What can appear to be defeat in the world's eyes may be the very success that God has designed. Pastors, take heart.

This is true in the realm of weakness and suffering as well, and pastors must be prepared for this and help their congregation to anticipate this. There is no place for triumphalism, either in the vision for the Christian life we present or in our expectations for ministry. Resurrection power is perfected in ministerial weakness (12:9). In all these things, Christ always leads us in triumphal procession (2:14).

The New Creation has dawned. The love of Christ compels us to implore the world, "Be reconciled to God."

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