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Proclaiming the Word of the Triune God

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¹ Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ² But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:1–6, ESV)

What does our world need? The Christian will likely and hopefully respond with the gospel. Indeed, the gospel is the cold cup of water that the world requires. Yet, what more could be said by way of clarification? We might explain what we mean by the gospel itself. In other words, are we speaking of the *historia salutis* or the *ordo salutis*? Or does the question have to do with communication? These and other questions are legitimate and should be discussed. However, I want us to think about the *means* that God uses to reach a world in need. What are those means? How might a confessional church address that question?

The Westminster standards are certainly an aid to the church. Think of question 155 of the Larger Catechism. It asks, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?" The answer speaks to our question when it addresses the means used by God to make the Word effectual unto salvation:

The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the hearing of the Word, an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners: of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ; of conforming them to his image, and subduing them to his will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.¹

Think about that answer. The reading of the Word, *but especially the hearing of the preached Word*, is made by the Spirit of God an effectual means of drawing men to salvation in the triune God. That's what our world needs. It needs to hear the preaching of the gospel. Yet, Paul wrote to Timothy and said that our world does not want to hear preaching (c.f. 2 Tim. 4:3). So, what is the remedy for a world that does not want to hear the preaching it so desperately needs? Paul's answer

¹ Westminster Assembly, Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), Q. 155.

was simple: preaching (c.f. 2 Tim. 4:2). Preaching is the remedy even when the world does not want what it needs. Unfortunately, the church does not always believe that.

Several years ago I was chatting with two ministers from different denominations. We were all attending a function together when a third minister approached us and said to one of the ministers with us, “Brother, my council just voted to cancel the Sunday evening service.” The other minister looked at him and said, “Oh, that’s wonderful news, now you can do something useful with the time!” Sadly, that is not an isolated incident. Talk to preachers and they will tell you, not so directly, that preaching is no longer effective in our changing, visually oriented, technological world. But Paul would stop them at that point and say, “You may say that your preaching does not work in this changing world, but God has not changed his mind about the efficacy of preaching of the word.” God continues to use his word, especially the preaching of the word, to humble sinners and subdue their will to his glory. And that being the case, the question which needs to be asked is what does such a ministry look like? What sort of ministry does God honor and so use to humble sinners and subdue their wills unto him and his word?

That question leads us to our text because in that text we find that sort of ministry. I will develop four points in this paper. First, I will explain what ministry Paul obtained. Second, we will consider how that ministry was shared with those who received it. Third, I will examine the nature of the new covenant’s unveiled nature. Finally, I will advance some considerations regarding a commendable ministry.

A Ministry Obtained

2 Corinthians 4 is not a remote and isolated text. The preacher could preach it or teach it as such, and we will examine a comparatively small pericope. Yet, the text is part of a larger whole; it is a portion of a much broader argument. For instance, chapter three is necessary in order to understand chapter four. What is more, the new covenant of chapter four sets itself over and against the old covenant of chapter three. Thus, when Paul says in the beginning of our text, “Having this ministry,” he is referring to the ministry of the new covenant over and against that of the old (2 Cor. 4:1).

Now, the question is forced upon us, what does that mean? What does a ministry of the new covenant look like? What does it look like over and against the ministry of the old covenant? Paul would be the first to say that the ministry of the new covenant is one that is open, one without a veil, but a ministry of the old covenant is one that is not open. It is veiled. Think about Moses. When Moses went to Mount Sinai and into the presence of God his face would be uncovered and he would receive from the Lord. He would descend the mountain aglow. And then he would speak to God’s people and cover his face. Now why would he cover his face? Verse thirteen of chapter three tells us why: “so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end” (2 Cor. 3:13).

Not surprisingly, commentaries have a variety of views on what this means. Several simply enumerate the various positions. So, what does it mean? At the very least, it means that Moses covered his face so as to hide a passing glory from the people of God and so direct them to a glory that was permanent and impassible. In other words, Moses knew and understood that he was a minister of a covenant that was passing away, that would give way to the fullness that would come in Jesus Christ. And so he hid the glory of the old covenant for the good of the people of God that they might look forward. But this is not true of the new covenant ministry. The new covenant ministry is an open ministry. It is a ministry that proclaims abroad, it is a ministry that shows forth the glory of God and does not hide it because it is not a diminishing glory.

Then in verse five, the truth of that glorious open ministry is explained further. Paul contends that the open proclamation of the truth characterizes this new covenant ministry and in verse five he unpacks that truth. He says, “[what] we proclaim is not ourselves.” Stop there a minute. Because it’s so important in today’s culture, it’s always been important. We do not proclaim ourselves. In our world there are so many who would build their own kingdoms. There are so many who would take the gospel, and treat it as if it were a license to establish their name, their reputation, and their ministry. But according to Paul, we proclaim not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Now, this raises an obvious question. Who is this Jesus? He is the image of God, and the glory of God is found in the face of Jesus Christ. Let this sink in, because as soon as you read that, if you’re familiar with the New Testament, you start to think intertextually. For instance, in Hebrews the student finds something similar. In Hebrews 1:3 the author of the Hebrews says that, “he [Jesus] is the radiance of the glory of God, and the exact imprint of his nature.”

Geerhardus Vos says that this expression that Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God tells us that Jesus did not possess a derived glory, but rather that God’s glory was his glory. Vos explains this verse as teaching that Jesus was *homoousias* with the Father. That is, Jesus was of the same substance, the same essence with the Father.

What about that phrase “the exact imprint of his nature?” Vos argues that this statement teaches us that Jesus is *monogenes*. He is the only begotten Son of the Father. In other words, the Scriptures are Trinitarian. God the Father and God the Son share the same essence and yet are two different persons. That’s what we find here in this text. We find that Jesus Christ is the image of God, the exact imprint of God’s nature. He is different from God as to his person, and yet the glory of God shines in the face of Jesus Christ. And the glory of Christ is not a derived or borrowed glory because he is *homoousias* with the Father.

But what of the Spirit? Go back to chapter three. At the end of that chapter Paul speaks of the Spirit and how it was necessary for the Spirit to remove the spiritual veil so that the Old Testament person could see. Then Paul says this peculiar thing. He says “For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Is Paul a Modalist? In other words, is he saying that Jesus is the same *person* as the Spirit? By no means! What then is he saying? He is teaching what would later come to be described by the Latin phrase, *opera ad extra Trinitatis indivisa sunt*. That is to say, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are so closely aligned with one another in their economic administration of redemption, that we can say, and Paul does under the inspiration of the Spirit, that the Lord is the Spirit, because the Spirit carries out the purposes and the glory of the Son. This ministry is the ministry of the triune God. This word of truth that is proclaimed openly is indeed the word of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In our day, people want to know what they can do. They see difficulty all around them and they are distressed. They see in today’s events the loss of their freedoms and the infringement of their rights. And these same people seek from the church the answer to the question, “What can I do? What can we do?” I think in some ways what they are asking is, “What should you be doing, pastor, that you’re not doing already? Because my rights are deteriorating, and all I see you doing is preaching a gospel that has no connection to my losses.” I want to give you Paul’s answer to that question. The minister should be proclaiming the Word of the triune God in season and out of season. The minister who has this ministry should be occupied with this Word from this triune God. The gospel of the triune God boldly and faithfully preached is the need of the hour.

Perhaps you remember when Paul went to Thessalonica in Acts 17. Paul had already “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6) and now they became distressed in that town too as Paul came and proclaimed another king, Jesus. But what did Paul do in response? He continued to preach

the gospel. I need to be direct with you. To want more than the faithful and bold preaching of the Word is to doubt the Spirit's effectual use of preaching to bring dead men to life and so subdue their wills. Do you doubt? If so, I would encourage you to get on your knees and say, "Lord increase my faith in your means of grace."

A Ministry Shared

The second thing that I want you to notice is that this is a shared ministry. Notice that the new covenant minister has this ministry. But I also want you to notice that Paul says "this ministry" (2 Cor. 4:1), and then he says, "our gospel" (2 Cor. 4:3). This is our gospel. It is the gospel that the minister openly shares. It is the gospel that you openly hear. It is the gospel that all believers embrace.

Moreover, Paul says we are "your servants for Jesus' sake." When I was very young I worked at a grocery store. Upon getting the job, the owner of the business sat me down in his office—he was also the manager—and he informed me of the rules. They were very simple: You may not talk to fellow employees while you are at work and you may not be their friends outside of work. You serve me, and as you serve me, you serve them, but you are not their friend. And by the way you are not my friend either.

You see, that's not the servitude that Paul is expressing here. The servitude that Paul has in mind is an invitation from the triune God to believe his gospel, and to embrace it as our own, and when we hear it together to delight in it together, and then serve one another that we might bring God glory and honor through that service. And it is as a servant that Paul commends himself and ministers like him to everyone who has a conscience in the sight of God.

And yet, the key to this is not everyone who has a conscience, but it is everyone who has a conscience in the sight of God. In other words, it is not like working for the man I worked for at this grocery store doing everything I was told knowing that he was the all seeing-eye. That is not what is in mind. Paul is saying that the triune God who gave to us this ministry loves us and invites us to embrace this gospel such that it is our gospel. And if we're being anything but faithful, the greater judge who is the scrutinizer of the souls and consciences of men will know it. But rather than having a fear of punishment we shall be crestfallen because we have disappointed Him who is our all. That is what it means to share this ministry.

An Ministry Unveiled

Thirdly, this is an unveiled ministry. We began with the new covenant ministry in contrast to the old covenant ministry. In the old covenant the gospel was veiled to the Jews. Now, this veil could be understood in numerous ways, several of which are described in 2 Corinthians 4:2-3. Think of Paul's situation. He has been pursued by his enemies. They hate him. They are the Judaizers and they have not dealt faithfully regarding his ministry. Therefore, the gospel could be veiled by underhanded dealings, and by cunning. That word "cunning" is an interesting word. It means willing to do anything, and the idea is anything evil. It can be veiled by cunning. It can also be veiled by tampering with the word of God, adulterating the word of God. In the Greek, the word "tamper" has at its root a word for fish bait.² You can bait people in. You can bait and then switch. You can tamper with the word of God, and peddle it as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 2:17. Paul says

² Behind the verb δολόω stands the noun δόλος. According to Liddell and Scott, δόλος means "bait for fish, ... hence, any cunning contrivance for deceiving or catching, as the net in which Hephaestus catches Ares." Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, and Roderick McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 443.

that we renounce all those things. We refuse to practice them. I want you to understand something. Any minister of the gospel must renounce these things. He ought to refuse them because he is preaching the Word of the triune God, the truth of God, truth revealed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is the very image of God, the radiance of his glory.

However, even if someone preaches the word of God faithfully, I want you to understand something. Paul says it very clearly. Men still may not see. Why is that? The answer is because the eyes of men are blinded. They are blind because the god of this age has blinded their eyes. You know that's an interesting expression and we don't really have time to explore it right now, but when you think about the two ages in the scriptures you think about looking at this age and the age to come. The god of this age has blinded the minds of men, and how has he done that? Well he's done that through his ministers. Not only does Satan masquerade as an angel of light, but if that is true of him then it is certainly true of his minions. Paul says as much in 11:14-15.

Well then, the question becomes, how is that veil removed? It is removed in the same old way. It is removed in the same old way that it was in the old covenant. Go back and look with me at chapter three. This is the chapter on the ministry of the old covenant; look at verse fourteen, "But their minds were hardened, for to this day when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted because only through Christ is it taken away." It's only taken away through Christ and his Spirit who lifts the veil that people might effectually hear the word. And this leads me to my final point.

A Ministry Commended

Now, this task of preaching can be wearisome for the minister. It really can be. Think about it. We invite a young man with a sense of call to seminary and we tell you how insufficient you are for these things, because that's what Paul says: "Who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Cor. 2:17). And we also tell you that you're ancillary to the whole process. God can find someone else and raise him up to replace you. We tell you in many and various ways it is not about you. And now you're really encouraged, aren't you. But not only that, we find that the task itself is wearisome. Why? Because you can preach, and preach, and preach until you're blue in the face and there's nothing that you can do to lift that veil. That veil has to be lifted by the Spirit of God.

So I want to talk to you about a ministry commended. Paul says at the very beginning that he has this ministry "by the mercy of God" (2 Cor. 4:1). This ministry is a mercy of God—not a punishment. Therefore, Paul says, "we do not lose heart." Let's pause here because this is an interesting word. It's translated in the New Testament in some places, "we don't lose heart" and in other places, "we don't grow weary." It's ἐγκακοῦμεν. It's used in 2 Clement 2:2 to describe a woman who is fearful to bear a child. It has the idea of fear.

Paul understands the burden of ministry, and therefore he goes on to say, "we do not grow weary." There is no need to grow weary. Why? Because this is a ministry of mercy that God has given you. Yes, you say, but we carry around, as Paul will say "the death of Christ in us that others may live," and that is burdensome! But we must remember what John says. John says that the death of Christ is the glory of Christ. This is a glorious ministry that the new covenant minister engages in so openly, and so we do not lose heart. But I'll tell you what else we do. We pray. And that is what I want to encourage you to do. I want to encourage you to pray for the ministry of the gospel. Because the preaching of the gospel is what this world needs and what the church needs. The church needs a ministry of open proclamation of the truth of Jesus Christ—heralding it, and not stumbling in it. The church needs to pray for that sort of ministry day by day by day. So, pray for it!