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CHRISTIAN ETHICS EXPRESSED BY “CRUCIFORMITY” AND THE “PARADIGM OF THE CROSS”

(An introduction to material submitted in a course on (Ministerial Ethics))

Of course, all of Jesus’ lessons on the law of love in ethical living are compressed into one great object lesson—Calvary. (*Text* p. 84)¹

In the last few years, a growing number of Christian leaders have begun using the terms “cruciform” and “cruciformity” in respect to our likeness to Jesus. For a much longer time, “cruciform” has been used in many other different contexts for items shaped like a Cross: floor plan of a church, tail of an airplane, position of wings of invertebrates, crystals, gravitational pull of particles, arrangement of leaf blades, chassis of a truck, ligaments in the human body, etc., etc. The following quotes show how foundational and appropriate is this term in giving the “shape” of the ethics of our Christian discipleship.

The cross is the paradigm for a disciple’s life in the world. “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Taking up the cross means intentionally conforming our lives to the pattern of life shown in Jesus’ death on the cross—a pattern that Michael Gorman has labeled “cruciformity.”² It is living by the “law of Christ,” which means having a “ministry shaped by Christ’s paradigmatic status-denying, other-regarding love.”³

¹ T. Burton Perice, *Ministerial Ethics: A Guide for Spirit-Filled Leaders*, (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1996), 84.

² Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul’s Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001)

³ Jeffrey P. Greenman “This essay is a revised version my inaugural address on February 10, 2004 as the R.J. Bernardo Family Chair of Leadership at Tyndale Seminary. It aims to articulate the theological-moral understanding of Christian leadership that guides my work as a scholar and teacher occupying the Chair, and that orients the work of the Tyndale Centre for Leadership Development.” http://www.tyndale.ca/leadership/files/_p.3.

Throughout the New Testament, **leadership is cruciform**—literally, “**cross-shaped**.” As disciples, we follow a leader whose own path of obedience to God led him to the cross, a leader whose identity is revealed unmistakably by his wounds, a leader **whose Gospel is simply “the word of the cross”** (1 Corinthians 1:18).⁴

Being a cruciform church . . . means following the way of self-renouncement . . . It compels us to find a distinct identity in relation to a world that finds the cruciform life unimaginable and even repugnant.⁵

The first quote above states that cruciformity regards the Cross as *paradigmatic*. Another theologian, L. W. Hurtado, explains the use of the term *paradigm* and its importance as follows:

Under this *portmanteau* term [*paradigm*] I gather the several ways that Jesus’ death functions as inspiring and exemplary for Christian behaviour, as descriptive of, and criterion for, Christian existence, indeed as the crucial event by which Christian ethical effort, discipleship, and consequent sufferings are defined and given their significance.⁶

The basic thesis that I shall seek to advance here is that, when considered collectively, the various paradigmatic functions of Jesus’ death are referred to impressively widely in the New Testament. In fact, I contend that the New Testament treatments of Jesus’ death as paradigmatic offer powerful resources for Christian self-understanding and ethical effort. The New Testament references to Jesus’ death as paradigmatic make heavy intellectual

⁴ Ibid., p. 2

⁵ C. Leonard Allen, *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 1990) 149.

⁶ L. W. Hurtado, “Jesus’ Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament”, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 57 (2004), pages 413-433. <http://www.ex.ac.uk/~mahigton/Hurtado.rtf>.

and behavioural demands, but are ignored at great risk to the theological integrity and the efficacy of the endeavour of Christians.⁷

Again, here is a significant quote from an address by a Rev. Huebel:

A paradigm, we are told, is a whole new way of perceiving and evaluating the world or our ministry in the world, not merely another program or strategy. . . . The cross is a paradigm for the way God has always worked and always will work in the world.⁸

A few years ago, when I set out to list all the passages in the New Testament that relate to our becoming like Jesus, I discovered that, of the hundred or so I found, about 80% of them refer to Jesus being an example for us in His sufferings and death. The following table is a listing of verses selected from that 80%. Certainly, it is evident that a major emphasis in the New Testament is the cruciformity of Christian discipleship.

As you read through the following list, you will notice many of the attributes of Jesus expressed in His suffering and death, attributes that will define our ethics as a Christian disciple. Here is a short list of just a few of such aspects of Jesus that we are to adopt as our code of ethics:

- self-denial
- sacrificial love
- willingness to suffer, rejoicing in suffering
- bearing others' burdens
- loving, blessing enemies
- complete surrender to God's will
- humility
- obedience of a slave
- endurance in conquering sin
- no defensiveness, retaliation

⁷ L.W.Hurtado, "Jesus' Death as Paradigmatic in the New Testament".

⁸ Glenn E. Huebel, "A Forgotten Paradigm: The Theology of the Cross," <http://user.txcyber.com/~wd5iqr/tcl/cross.htm>.

TABLE — ETHICS OF NEW TESTAMENT DISCIPLESHIP = CRUCIFORMITY

Mat. 16:24, 25: ²⁴Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. (See also Mark 8:35, 10:21; Luke 9:23, 24, 14:27)

Mark 10:39: ³⁹ . . . Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, (See also Mat. 20:23)

John 12:23-25: ²³Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

John 15:12: ¹²My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

Acts 5:41: ⁴¹The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

Acts 21:13: ¹³Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.”

Rom. 8:29, 36: ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers . . . ³⁶As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

Rom. 12:1: ¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of

worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind

Rom. 15:1-3: ¹We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. ²Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. ³For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”

1 Cor. 4:12-16: ¹². . . . When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world. . . . ¹⁶Therefore I urge you to imitate me.

2 Cor. 2:15, 16: ¹⁵For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life.

2 Cor. 4:10-12: ¹⁰We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. ¹¹For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. ¹²So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

Gal. 6:17: ¹⁷Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

Eph. 5:2: ²and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Eph. 5:25: ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Phil. 1:29: ²⁹For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him,

Phil. 2:5-8: ⁵Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: ⁶Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Phil. 3:10: ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

Col. 1:24: ²⁴Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

2 Tim. 1:8: ⁸So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God,

Heb. 12:1-4: ¹. . . let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ²Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Heb. 13:12, 13: ¹²And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. ¹³Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.

1 Pet. 2:20-23: ²⁰. . . But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²²“He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” ²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

1 Pet. 3:17, 18: ¹⁷It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. ¹⁸For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,

1 Pet. 4:1 ¹Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin.

1 Pet. 4:12, 13: ¹²Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 John 3:16: ¹⁶This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

1 John 4:10: ¹⁰This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:11: ¹¹Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

Rev. 12:11: ¹¹They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.

I believe that most Christians would agree that ideally the very essence of ethics for a Christian is to think and act like Jesus. To be changed into the nature of Christ is the ultimate purpose of God for our lives and thus the basis of discipleship and the ethics of a Christian disciple. To have our attitudes and actions transformed into a likeness to those of Jesus, it is obvious that a focus on Jesus' nature is essential, especially on those aspects of His nature that are stressed in the New Testament as being a paradigm for our spiritual formation.

As shown in the previous table, the main focus on Jesus as an Example in the New Testament is on His attitudes and actions during His suffering and death. Consequently, it is scripturally imperative that we learn to increase our focus worshipfully on these same attitudes and actions, and in doing so, continually commit ourselves to the Cross as a paradigm to fulfill our call to discipleship to become like Him, including in all the ethics that affect every aspect of our lives.

Such a focus in itself will help significantly in a change into the likeness of Christ:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (II Cor. 3:18)

Of course, this transformation is not just a passive process, we must pursue a total commitment to the process of change to cruciformity, as Paul expresses in this passage:

. . . I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, . . . ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹² . . . I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took

hold of me. ¹³ . . . one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, (Phil. 3:8-13)

A revelation that has contributed in my change to cruciformity is that God has planned that all things that happen to us are part of our training. Romans 8:28 states that “all things work together for good” and the next verse explains that the “good” that He has purposed to accomplish by all things is for us to be conformed to the likeness of His Son:⁹

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. (Rom. 8:29)

This verse also makes clear that it was the Father’s ultimate intention that we be conformed to the likeness of Jesus (cruciformity)¹⁰; thus, it is only reasonable that cruciformity becomes our goal, also. I am challenged to continue to look for and meditate on qualities in Jesus that He desires to develop more in me — specifically, qualities that will affect how I will become more cruciform in my motives, my attitudes, and my actions related to every aspect of all my relationships.

This “Introduction” should help you understand the terms “cruciformity” and “paradigm” as I use them in my responses throughout this course. For further reading on this theme, please contact me for a copy of *Conformed to His Death=LIFE! The Cross as a Paradigm for Every Aspect of Christian Experience*.¹¹

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⁹ This theme and circumstances that were used in its revelation are found in Chapter 5 of *Conformed to His Death = LIFE! The Cross as the Ultimate Paradigm for Every Aspect of Christian Experience*, an unpublished book by the author printed in 2006.

¹⁰ For an extensive treatment of this theme see the book by Devern F. Fromke: *The Ultimate Intention* (Indianapolis, IN: Sure Foundation Publishers, 1990).

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