

POWER AND WEAKNESS

Dialectic of Healing within the Healing Community

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NO SINGLE letter within the extant correspondence of St Paul – with the possible exception of Philemon – reveals so graphically as does 2 Corinthians how completely human and vulnerable its author knows himself to be. In this document Paul artlessly exposes in a fascinating manner a very loving, indeed a passionate heart. He moreover betrays himself astonishingly as a person of deep sensibility, and at times almost of over-sensitivity to the reactions of others. He lets himself be seen as a man of such an affectionate, impulsive make-up that its very weaknesses demonstrate its power and magnanimity. So unexpected and inexplicable are in fact the abrupt changes of mood Paul here evinces, that most critics consider the letter to be a jumble of several briefer notes, maladroitley pieced together by a scrupulous, if uncomprehending editor. We shall return to this judgment further on.

The healing community in Paul

The conception of the Church as the healing community is a comparatively modern one; thus it is not surprising that the phrase is absent from Paul's letters. Indeed, the vocabulary associated in the gospels with healing¹ is almost totally lacking in Paul. Amongst the charismatic graces he does list 'gifts of healing', which he distinguishes from 'acts of power' (miracles) in 1 Cor 12, 9b.28.29. Yet where Acts will enumerate various kinds of healing as Paul's most characteristic miracles (Acts 14, 8–10; 16, 16–18; 19, 12; 20, 9–12; 28, 8–9), he himself is content to refer in generic terms to these 'signs of the apostles' (2 Cor 12, 12; Rom 15, 19). He will pray that 'the God of peace' may keep the Thessalonians 'sound in spirit, soul, and body' (1 Thes 5, 23); and he suggests to the corinthian community that failure to 'discern the body' of the risen Christ in

¹ Such terms as *iasis*, *iasthai*, *therapeuein*, denoting healing; *nosos*, *malakia*, *astheneia*, *arrōstos*, connected with illness, and *hygiēs*, *hygiainein*, with health.

the Eucharist explains why 'many of you are ailing and sick, while a number have died' (1 Cor 11, 30).

However, if Paul nowhere denominates the Church as 'the healing community', his letters yield abundant testimony that the reality and the various activities which the expression connotes for us today were constant and primary concerns for him. Each letter from Paul's pen, of those that have come down to us, gives high priority to an exhortation or admonition orientated towards what he frequently calls the 'building up' of the community (1 Thes 5, 11; 1 Cor 14, 12; 2 Cor 12, 19; Rom 14, 19; Eph 4, 12.16), an enterprise in which 'love for our brotherhood' (1 Thes 4, 9) holds the primacy (1 Cor 8, 1). It is instructive to realize moreover that there is no pauline letter that is not directed to the entire community *as a fellowship of believers*. Even the brief note we call 'to Philemon' begins and ends as a communication to the local church, tiny though it be. Indeed, Paul's appeal to this small circle of christians is addressed to it specifically as a healing community which Paul ardently desires to see increased by his return of Onesimos, 'both as a man and as a christian' (v 10). For Paul clearly indicates that this growth is not to be construed in merely numerical terms. If this colossian house-church is to receive the runaway as a beloved brother in Christ, it must grow in love as well as in faith, by stifling the resentment it undoubtedly shared with Philemon over the injuries inflicted on him by the truancy of his slave. Only thus could this augment of one be reckoned as genuine growth 'in Christ' for the whole community.

The 'healing' character of Paul's exercise of his apostolic authority in correcting abuses in Thessalonica is evident. The 'idler' is to be ostracized 'until he is ashamed of himself' (2 Thes 3, 14), yet 'not treated as an enemy', but admonished 'as a brother' (v 15). The philippian community is urged by the 'heart-warming' reality of 'our common life in Christ' to 'fill up my cup of joy by adopting the same attitudes, maintaining the same love, as though you had but one soul, one mind' (Phil 2, 1-2). That zealous pair of women, Evodia and Syntyche, competent, hardworking, but possibly also domineering, are to be helped to 'settle their differences' (Phil 4, 2-3).

It is however through his epistolary exchanges with the corinthian community, despite the fact that two of Paul's letters to this church are probably lost (1 Cor 5, 9; 2 Cor 2, 4), that we are given the deepest insight into Paul's tireless efforts to bring that church to an awareness of its role as a healing community. In 2 Corinthians

particularly we are provided with an estimate by Paul of his own talents and limitations as 'healer' of the breach between himself and this group of christians, and also of the divisions within the Church itself.

Already in his first surviving letter to Corinth, Paul had reminded that community that it possessed within itself the means of healing the breach which a strongly partisan spirit, born of misplaced, exaggerated personal loyalties, was causing. The fraternity to which they had been called by God was nothing less than 'the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1, 9). And he, the unique and universal redeemer of mankind, must remain one and indivisible. In truth it was 'into his name' (his person, and *not* Paul's) that each of them had been baptized (1, 13). The divisions among their membership were the unhappy result of a failure to see that the gospel was not a matter of 'communications' or 'human philosophy', that their faith was built solely 'upon God's power' (2, 5). The non-descript character of their own social, cultural, educational backgrounds should have made them realize that 'to shame the powerful, God has chosen what the world counts weak' (1, 27), and they must persuade themselves that Paul and Apollos were called to serve them 'as Christ's subordinates and stewards of the mysteries of God' (4, 1). Yet Paul, ever conscious of his task as healer, hastens to assure them that 'I am not writing thus to make you uncomfortable, but to admonish you as my beloved children' (4, 14). Accordingly, when he commands that the man guilty of incest 'be consigned to Satan for the destruction of his body', his chief concern is 'that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord' (5, 5). Likewise, in forbidding these christians to sue one another before pagan tribunals, Paul repeatedly reminds them that they are 'brothers', and should gladly let themselves suffer injury, even be robbed, rather than disrupt family solidarity (6, 1-8). Paul's inexhaustible compassion is set in relief particularly in his efforts to settle the continual bickering between 'the weak' and 'the strong', which came to a head in Corinth over whether meat that had been sacrificed to idols, then offered for sale in the meat-market, might be bought and eaten. The man of 'weak conscience' is precisely weak in faith: and so he is unfree, because he cannot bring himself to believe fully in God's love of himself (8, 3). Hence he must refrain from 'raising questions of conscience' for himself, and strive to deepen his belief in God's disclosure of the truth (Ps 24, 1) that all creatures under heaven are God's, and thus, good in themselves (10, 25-26). The christian who

is 'strong' must, on the other hand, curb his legitimate freedom, refraining out of christian love for the 'weak', from any action that might 'wound the conscience of this brother for whom Christ has died' (8, 10-13). Interestingly, it was by his efforts at healing the rift created in the community over this issue of sacrificial meat that Paul became the first New Testament writer to develop a theology of the christian conscience. He shows how it is meant to put a brake upon the liberty of 'the strong' by demanding his submission to God's commandment of fraternal love for 'the weak', on whom it is intended to confer a new sense of freedom in Christ, not possible in judaism or paganism. In discovering this new christian reality of 'conscience', Paul owes nothing to the Stoics, as Rom 14, 23 demonstrates, where 'faith' becomes synonymous with 'conscience'.

Paul further displays his awareness of the role of the corinthian church as a healing community in the celebrated passage (1 Cor 12, 12-27) which concludes with the arresting statement, 'You are Christ's body'. 'Body' for Paul is an aspect of the human person, which not only makes him unique, but creates the possibility of his communication with others. Hence, for a christian, the evil of impure acts with another (6, 12-20); hence too the primary effect of the Eucharist, sacrament of the risen body of Christ, creating and maintaining christian fellowship: 'since there is one bread, we though many are one body, as we all share in the one bread' (10, 17). In 12, 12-27 Paul is seen to make two principal points. Firstly, it is the christian's uniqueness as a person that explains the necessity of his union with Christ and with all other christians (vv 14-18). His personhood is the matchless gift he can make to Christ and to Christ's body, the community, since by this he brings something no one else can contribute. In the second place, Paul draws attention to what is now called the 'principle of subsidiarity' in the Church, by underscoring the complementarity of every member for the good of the entire body (vv 19-27). Paul is very conscious that this unity is a personal one, a communion of persons; that it is moreover, by reason of each Christian's union with the risen body of Christ, much more than a moral union among men of good will; and finally, that as 'Christ's body' it carries on his work of healing as the action most characteristic of itself, 'that there may be no sense of division in the body, but that all its members may feel the same concern for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together: if one is in a healthy state, all rejoice together' (vv 25-26).

An anguished solution to a delicate problem

The variegated difficulties which Paul had to confront in 1 Corinthians pale into insignificance beside the traumatic impasse he had subsequently to face in his relationship with this same community. The details of this painful controversy are obscure, yet it appears he was attacked ruthlessly by a not inconsiderable element in that church. It was a bitter, personal onslaught, in which Paul was arraigned for acting with duplicity (1, 12-17), of compensating for his insignificant presence and bumbling efforts as a preacher (10, 9-10) by writing missives whose ambivalence rendered them incomprehensible (1, 13), while revealing a posture harshly authoritarian (10, 10). He had acted the dictator by tyrannizing over christian belief (1, 24); he had preached a 'veiled gospel' (4, 3), through which he was really proclaiming himself as 'lord' (4, 5). 'Over-boastful' where his own prerogatives were concerned (10, 8), he was a weakling when it came to the exercise of that authority (11, 21), a sadist in causing pain (2, 4; 11, 29), with complete disdain for corinthian sensitivities in adamantly rejecting their proffered support (12, 13), while 'stripping other congregations' (11, 7-9) for his own livelihood. In fact, it was even suggested, 'Paul is insane!' (5, 12).

Much graver than these innuendoes and personal sniping in Paul's eyes, however, was the repudiation of his authority as their apostle and founder. The high priority he accorded to this issue is readily perceptible in the compendious, carefully worked-out theology of the apostolic office (2, 14-16. 10), which constitutes such a lengthy digression between the two narrative-passages dealing with Titus and his mission to Corinth (2, 12-17; 7, 5-7).

Titus, it appears (7, 7-12), finally brought good news from Corinth to Paul in Macedonia. He spoke reassuringly of that community's 'longing' for its apostle, of the 'devotion and eagerness to see justice done' (7, 11) on the part of the majority, of their punishment of 'the offender' (7, 12). Paul reacts at once in the interests of 'healing', and urges forgiveness for the culprit, 'since Satan must not be permitted to get the better of us' (2, 5-11).

Prior to sending 2 Corinthians, it seems, Paul had made a visit to his recalcitrant christians, whose allegiance to him had been undermined by certain highly competitive (jewish-christian?) evangelists, inimical to the founder of the community. The visit was not only painful (2, 1; 12, 14; 13, 1); it was fruitless, despite Paul's efforts to point out that the 'injury was not so much to me, as to you - or

at least, to some of you, not to be too hard upon you all' (2, 5). He would continue to regard his adversaries as 'pseudo-apostles, devious in their dealings, masquerading as apostles of Christ' (11, 13): they were indeed tools of Satan, 'disguised as purveyors of uprightness' (11, 15). Upon his return to Ephesus, a prey to discouragement, grief and anxiety, Paul dictated a letter 'with many tears' (2, 3-4), dispatching it to Corinth with Titus (7, 7-12).

Here it is of paramount importance to gauge accurately the great delicacy of the problem and Paul's profound insight into this rejection of his apostolic authority. It was a matter of principle where there could be no possibility of compromise.

Although I may live an ordinary human life, I am not conducting a merely human campaign, and the weapons I can wield are not poor human things, but divinely potent enough to demolish fortresses. I can demolish arguments, or anything that rears its arrogant head against the knowledge of God. I compel every merely human attitude to surrender obediently to Christ. I am prepared to punish all signs of revolt, once you have made your obedience to me clear (10, 3-6).

At the same time, Paul is acutely conscious that to exercise his apostolic authority can only mean to act out of love, for that authority belongs to Christ, who had really issued but one all-embracing injunction, 'You must love your neighbour as yourself' (Gal 5, 14; Rom 13, 8-9). Indeed Paul was later to interpret this command as meaning, 'You must act as slaves to one another through love' (Gal 5, 13b), and, 'Love cannot wrong the neighbour; consequently the whole law is summed up by love' (Rom 13, 10). Thus Paul could only counter the corinthian disclaimer of his authority as apostle by taking the initiative in teaching these converts an all-important lesson in christianity they had not yet mastered. Even hasty skimming of 2 Corinthians will make us appreciate how faithful to this principle of authority as love Paul strives to keep himself, how aware he is of occasional failures in his resolve.

Exercise of authority, initiative of love

The exercise of authority as an act of love may be aptly described as mercy (Lk 6, 36): 'Seeing then that I hold this service as a recipient of God's mercy, I never lose heart' (4, 1). 'All these things come from God who has reconciled me to himself through Christ and given me this service of reconciliation' (5, 18). Paul reminds himself constantly that only he who has experienced mercy can exercise

apostolic authority, only he who has felt reconciliation personally can reconcile, only the healed can efficaciously administer healing. He alone who keeps before his eyes the truth that 'we must all have our true characters laid bare before the tribunal of Christ' (5, 10) can properly shoulder the responsibilities of apostleship. 'It is because I know what this fear of the Lord means that I can address my appeal to men' (5, 11). Hence he will say, 'Now I, Paul, address my appeal to you by the gentleness and magnanimity of Christ' (10, 1). 'It is in full reliance upon God, through Christ, that we make such claims. No question of my being qualified of myself: I cannot claim anything as my own' (3, 4-5).

We catch a precious glimpse of Paul's ideals in his descriptions of his own relationship to this turbulent community of Corinth. 'We proclaim . . . ourselves as your slaves, for the sake of Jesus' (4, 5). 'Indeed, it is for your sake that all things are ordered' (4, 15). 'I try to give no offence in any way to anyone, that my service may not be brought into discredit. It is as a servant of God that I try to commend myself in all circumstances . . . through purity of life, my grasp of truth, my patience and kindness . . . through a sincere love' (6, 4-7). 'My entire aim, dearly beloved, is to build you up' (12, 19). Paul can twice assert the positive orientation of his authority: 'an authority given by the Lord to build you up, not pull you down' (10, 8). 'My intent in writing this letter before my visit is to spare myself on my arrival any sharp exercise of authority, since the Lord gave it to me to build you up, not pull you down' (13, 10).

Paul needs no reminder that in the course of the exquisitely painful trials he has borne, thanks to the recent fractiousness of his Corinthians, God has manifested himself as

our compassionate Father, our God who is all encouragement. He keeps encouraging me in every one of my tribulations, so that I in turn am able to encourage others in each tribulation they suffer, through the encouragement I myself experience from God . . . So when I suffer tribulation, it is in view of your encouragement and salvation: when I am comforted, it is in view of the encouragement you may feel in staunchly enduring the kind of suffering I myself bear (1, 3-6).

Still more recently, since Paul's last communication with Corinth, as he tells these same christians, he has been grievously afflicted by some mysterious threat to his very existence.

I do not wish you to be ignorant, brothers, of the tribulation I endured in Asia. I was crushed by an excessively heavy burden, beyond my power to bear, so that I even despaired of living. In fact, in my heart I have accepted the death-sentence. It was intended to teach me, not to put my trust in myself, but in the God who raises the dead. He it is who rescued me from such grave perils of death, and so it is he who will continue to rescue me. Upon him I have set my hope irrevocably . . . (1, 8-10).

As repeated references in this letter indicate, Paul is well aware that he has been granted only a temporary reprieve. 'Death is at work in me, and life in you' (4, 12).

If my outward humanity is wasting away, my inner being is renewed day by day. My troubles are slight and short-lived, while their outcome, eternal blessedness, far outweighs them . . . It is God himself who has prepared me for this change, and as a pledge of it he has given me his Spirit (4, 16-5, 5).

The weakness he has experienced in himself is, to faith, a sharing in the very weakness of the earthly Jesus, who 'crucified out of weakness, yet now lives by the power of God. I am indeed weak in him, but I shall live with him by the power of God in your service' (13, 4).

Beset as he is by bodily weakness, Paul senses that his power lies in his healing offer of love to his Corinthians, and so he does not hesitate, in the exercise of his apostolic authority, to take the initiative in deploying it as an act of love.

I have spoken to you, men of Corinth, in all candour: I have opened my heart wide to you. There is no inhibition on my part towards you: any there may be must lie in your own affections. Pay me back then (may a father so speak to his children?) by opening your hearts wide to me! (6, 11-13) Please make room for me again in your hearts! I have wronged nobody, harmed nobody, got the better of no one! I do not say this as a reflection upon you. Indeed, as I have told you before, the place you hold in my heart is such that we go through death together, we meet life together. I am speaking to your face with utmost frankness, and behind your backs I boast about you endlessly. It fills me with consolation: my joy overflows after all my tribulations! (7, 2-3) I wish you would bear a little with my folly! Please put up with me! I am jealous over you with a kind of divine jealousy, for I once betrothed you to Christ, presenting you as a chaste virgin to her true and only husband (11, 1-2). Yes, I kept from being a burden to you in the past, and so I intend to do in future . . . and why? is it because I do not love you? God knows I do! (11, 9b-11) Here I am ready to visit you a third time and I am

still determined not to be a burden to you. It is yourselves, not your money, that I desire! . . . For my part, I shall be delighted to spend, yes, strip my purse bare for your sake. Am I then to be loved the less for loving you beyond all limits? (12, 14-15)

There is the apostolic ideal as Paul has been granted to comprehend it. Yet, another theme, perceptible throughout 2 Corinthians like a contrapuntal melody, makes itself felt: Paul's deep sensitivity to personal affronts, or coldness, or rebelliousness, or slander, perhaps even detraction. Strive manfully as he might, Paul never succeeded (and he remains only too painfully aware of his weakness) in overcoming his feelings entirely. Sensibility flares up unbidden; it can repeatedly catch him unawares. This, I suggest, is a plausible explanation for the impression which so many critics have received from 2 Corinthians, as a jumble of jigsaw-puzzle pieces that resist every effort at creating a consistent, intelligible picture. Might not the explanation for the strangely renewed virulence of chapters 10 to 13 lie perhaps in a failure to repress the extreme sensitivity of the very loving heart of Paul?

Paul's sensitivity as weakness

Paul knows full well that to exercise authority as an act of love, particularly where it had been challenged, it was crucial to subjugate his personal feelings, and forget (and forgive) every affront to himself. Still he was deeply hurt indeed by the false and unkind interpretations put upon his decision, when the storm of controversy was at its height, not to pay a visit to Corinth.

I have acted above board with utter sincerity before God, and not with worldly craftiness but with God's grace. This has been especially true of my dealings with you. The letters I write you have no double meaning; they mean just what you understand them to mean when you read them. I only hope you will come to grasp them fully! You *do* understand me to some extent, and realize that you have as much reason to boast of me as I of you on the day of the Lord Jesus. And because I felt so sure of all this, my original intention was to visit you first, to give you a double pleasure, visiting you en route to Macedonia, then coming back to you again from Macedonia, to let you see me off for Judaea. That was my original plan. Surely you cannot think that I lightly changed my mind? or that, after the fashion of the world, I am ready to say 'Yes' and 'No' in the same breath? As truly as God can be relied upon, I have never sent you a communication meaning 'Yes' and 'No' at once! We (I mean

Silvanus and Timothy as well as myself) proclaimed the Son of God, Christ Jesus, to you. You surely did not find him wavering between 'Yes' and 'No'. With him it has always been 'Yes'! . . . (1, 12-19). I call on God as my witness and I stake my own life on what I tell you: it was to avoid hurting you that I did not come to Corinth after all! I am not playing dictator with your faith: your faith is firm enough. I want to work with you for your own joy. So I made up my mind not to pay you another painful visit. If I hurt your feelings, then who is left to cheer me up, except you whom I have offended? That very letter I wrote you was born of deep tribulation and heartfelt anxiety. It was not my intention you should be hurt, rather it was that you should realize the love I have for you – a love that knows no bounds! (1, 23-2, 4)

In his anxiety over whether he has wounded love, Paul returns yet again to the sharp letter he wrote from Ephesus:

Even if I did hurt your feelings by my letter, I now have no regrets. I may have regretted it when – as I still do – I realized that the letter hurt you, if only for a brief moment. But now I am happy, not that your feelings were hurt, but that the hurt has caused a change of heart. You took it as God meant you to do, so that you are not losers by what I did! (7, 8-9). And so, though I did send that letter, my main concern was not the offender, nor his victim! It was to make you see, in the sight of God, how devoted you are to myself! That is why I have been, and remain, comforted! (7, 12-13). I don't wish to seem to scare you by my letters! 'Ah!' (they say) 'his letters are impressive and heavy-handed, but let him appear in person, and he has no presence! And his speaking is beneath contempt'. Let my critic know that I can be just as impressive in person through my actions, as he claims I am by my letters! (10, 9-10)

Paul appears to have been cut to the quick by the suggestion that he was weak in defending himself. 'Do you think that when anyone is weak, I do not feel for his weakness? Does anyone have his faith upset without my burning with indignation about it?' (11, 29) And now the hurt is almost palpable:

You like to bear with fools, being so wise yourselves! Yet you don't mind if someone lords it over you, exploits you, or takes you in, or puts on airs, or slaps your face. And I, you claim, have displayed weakness! I admit the charge! (11, 19-21) Actually, I fear that when I come, I may not perhaps find you as I should like to find you; hence you will find me different from what you wish . . . I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me, as I stand in front of you, that I may have to shed tears over many who have clung

to their old sins and not repented of the impurity, immorality, sensuality, in which they have indulged (12, 20-21).

Paul's assessment of his limitations

Paul is a realist, first and last. And in the centre of his panegyric on the glories of the apostolic office, he takes time out to assess his own physical and psychological limitations as apostle.

Yet I carry this treasure in a vessel of clay, which proves that its transcendent power belongs to God, not to myself. Harried on all sides, I am never stymied; at a loss, but never driven to despair; routed, but never abandoned to my fate; struck down, but never finished off. Always I carry the dying of Jesus in my bodily person, that Jesus's life may in its turn be revealed through my body. For every day I live I am being handed over to death like Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may radiate through my mortal flesh. So death is at work in me, but life in all of you (4, 7-12).

He returns to consider the paradox somewhat later:

Honour, dishonour, praise, blame, these constitute my vocation. I am the impostor who tells the truth, the nobody who is a celebrity, at the point of death, yet here I am alive, severely disciplined, but not found dead, a man of sorrows ever filled with joy, a pauper I make others rich, penniless I own the world! (6, 8-10).

As we have seen, his reiterated explanations of 'the letter written with tears' indicates his anxiety that he has possibly failed to exercise his authority as a gesture of love for the corinthian church. While he tries bravely to subordinate his personal dignity to that of his apostolic commission, he is conscious that he has not been entirely successful. Nor can he always resist the almost involuntary movements of his injured feelings to retaliate with irony (10, 9, 11, 16), or sarcasm (10, 1-2; 11, 21; 12, 13), or 'boasting' (11, 16-33; 12, 1-11). Certainly it must be granted that Paul has nothing but harsh criticism for his rivals in the apostolate (2, 17; 10, 12-17; 11, 4-6, 12-15, 20, 22-23). Paul was doubtless right when he confessed to the Philipians, 'I have not yet reached perfection... Brothers, I do not deem myself to have yet reached the goal' (Phil 3, 12-13). At the same time his constant concern to avoid wounding love when wielding authority, and his worry about his many human imperfections in exercising that authority, are powerful lessons for all in positions of responsibility in the Church. They are also patent proofs of Paul's magnanimity and his intense sensitivity to treat persons as their personal dignity demands.