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Ministry—A Matter of Death and Life: 2 Cor 2:14-17

BRUCE E. SHIELDS

Paul founded the church in Corinth in the early 50s C.E. and sent them at least two letters previous to 2 Corinthians. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul dealt with disunity among them and with a list of doctrinal/ethical questions he had received from people in the Corinthian church. In 2 Corinthians, Paul describes a worsening situation following a visit he made to Corinth during which he confronted some opponents and was rejected by many of the Christians (see 2:1-8; 7:8). This rejection explains why in this letter he strongly defends his apostolic authority and the validity of his ministry while affirming that the Corinthians had been swayed by his “tearful letter” (2:4) and that his relationship with them had improved.

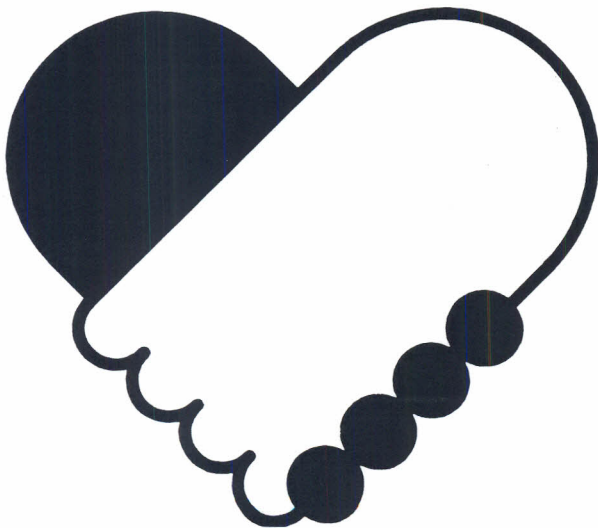
Paul opens the letter¹ with a characteristic salutation and then proceeds to deal with the formerly rocky relationship between himself and the Corinthians. In a brief paragraph (2:12-13), he describes his eagerness to hear from them via Titus. We can assume that he writes 2 Corinthians from Macedonia around 56 C.E., as soon as he hears from Titus that the Corinthians are again supportive of his ministry. Thus, he begins his description and defense of his Christian ministry, which continues through 4:15 and on to 7:16, with thanksgiving.

In this article, I will examine the strong visual language with which Paul describes his ministry and draw implications for our own understanding of Christian ministry.

TEXT—2 COR 2:14-17

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads in every place the fragrance that comes from knowing him. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death,

to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence.²



WHO IS IN CHARGE?

14 But to God be thanks, the one always leading us in triumph in the Christ³

Paul's transition from the good news he received from Titus to his proclamation of victory in Christ is an ascription of praise to God.⁴ The remainder of the verse describes the action of the God who is being thanked.

Paul's terminology here is from the triumphal parades organized to honor victorious Roman armies and intended to display the booty as well as the slaves and prisoners taken in battle.⁵ Some of the booty could be delightful fragrances (2:15-16), perfumes and incense, some treasure (4:7) carried in earthen vessels. In many cases, slaves and prisoners of war were ordered to scatter cinnamon or carry incense along the parade route.

In this passage, God, of course, not Paul, leads the parade. The apostle is so conscious of the grave danger of mistaken boasting that his role in the picture is first that of a sweet fragrance and later of the earthen vessel carrying the treasure of the gospel. God's initiative is made clear by six separate references to God in these four verses.

We should also note that whenever the verb *thriambeuō* appears in Greco-Roman literature those who are being led are captives—slaves and prisoners of war, never the victorious soldiers.⁶ Paul is presupposing God's victory over him and perhaps over his fellow workers. Paul's use of slavery terminology elsewhere⁷ indicates just how deep this issue went for him. God has overcome him; God now owns him; and God can do with him according to his divine will. The victory is God's, and the procession displays that triumph to the world. The common understanding that Paul places himself in the role of one of God's victorious soldiers has no lexical or historical grounding. Paul is a captive of God, and his life is in God's hands.

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In addition, there is strong evidence that the prisoners were scheduled to die at the end of the parade.⁸

This would take place at the temple of Jupiter, where prisoners were often executed.⁹ As Paul writes in 1 Cor 4:9: "God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death."

Accordingly, Paul, as the conquered prisoner on his way to the place of execution, says, "Thanks be to God." Thus, he changes from a picture of being led in a triumphal procession to one's death to a hymn of praise.¹⁰ It is this aspect of Paul's use of the triumph as a metaphor that has caused such disagreement and confusion in scholarly studies of this text. As Kügler points out, Paul does not appear to describe himself as an enemy of God. He is always on God's side.¹¹ So, even though God is the leader of the parade and the apostolic missionaries the ones being led, they are willing instruments of God to accomplish the spread of the gospel of the crucified Christ. They willingly die to themselves—become living sacrifices—to communicate this good news. So Paul uses the metaphor of the triumph to turn accusations about his weakness and sufferings upside down.¹² Far from being signs of failure in ministry, he argues that his weakness is precisely what God (who raises the dead) uses to show the divine glory.

God *always* leads us in the triumph, even when it is hard to see the victory. As is true with the ultimate victory, so it is true that in the daily grind of life, in Christ, our expectation of deliverance is a matter of faith not sight. In either case, the victory is God's, because those who are led are being taken to their place of execution. This procession toward the death of the apostle(s), this "march to the scaffold," is highlighted again in 4:10: "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies."

The first-person plural pronoun here is often seen as a "plural of majesty," but although Paul is certainly defending his own apostolic authority,¹³ he is not saying something limited to himself. He could certainly be including his fellow workers and also the faithful Corinthians, which draws even us into the triumphal march.¹⁴

In the Christ is Paul's characteristic way of referring to the Christian life. Paul uses it in one form or another 164 times; therefore, it has great significance both for Paul and for the church through history. In

this context, the phrase surely carries the significance of God's having won the decisive battle by means of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul's use of the visual language of the triumphal parade turns our idea of triumph on its head and lays the foundation for a radically new kind of leadership. In the same way, Jesus contrasted the leadership of his disciples with that of the rulers of the Gentiles.¹⁵ Jesus used the term "servant" in this regard, so that one hears much about "servant leadership" today. However, Jesus showed what he meant by servant in his death, and Paul, in this text, indicates that leadership in God's reign means being conquered and led to death. This is not the picture we are accustomed to of the servant leader; this is, rather, a picture of the conquered leader on the way to execution. How does one lead while dying?

HOW ARE WE TO LEAD?

and manifesting the fragrance of the knowledge of him through us in every place;

Again, God is the actor here. It is God who uses the apostle and his fellow workers to spread the fragrance, which was a common part of the triumphal procession. Fragrance is also used in the Old Testament and elsewhere to refer to burnt sacrifices and by extension to all acts of sacrifice that are acceptable to God (or the gods).

In the first clause, the fragrance is that of a special knowledge (*gnōsis*).¹⁶ The term for fragrance here (*osmē*) is a general term and can refer to either a pleasant or an unpleasant odor.¹⁷ It also seems to reflect the practice in the triumphal procession of sending slaves ahead of the victorious general with incense. This "smell" is more than just information; it is a personal acquaintance with God. Here is where Paul's deep metaphors of the triumphal procession and the fragrance get complicated. God is leading the parade and

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spreading ("through us") the fragrance that is a relationship with God. We are to lead by communicating the knowledge of God.

The verb *phaneroō* (I have translated "manifest") seems a bit out of place. To manifest something refers to the sense of sight, not smell. However, Paul could have in mind portable stages carried in triumphal processions on which pageants of victorious battles were performed in pantomime,

some of which glorified the gods.¹⁸ It is also a common term in Paul's vocabulary of evangelism, appearing thirty times in various forms.¹⁹ In most cases, it is used generally to indicate communication. Because Paul never seems concerned about mixing metaphors,²⁰ we can forgive him for doing it here. The meaning is clear. God is the great communicator. Our responsibility is to testify to our knowledge of God as we show in our lives the victory of God over sin. We are privileged as God's captives and slaves to carry the message of salvation to the world ("in every place").

THE RESULT OF LEADERSHIP

15 because the sweet aroma of Christ we are to God

Here the figure shifts definitely to the sacrificial aroma—the fragrance to God (*tῆ θεῶ*), not to other humans. In the former verse, we saw the generic term for odor. The word here is specifically a pleasant fragrance (*euōdia*), a term associated with sacrifices as sweet-smelling smoke rising to the throne of God. In addition, the odor is no longer the knowledge of Christ, but *we* are the pleasant fragrance of Christ to God. Of course, it is not our fragrance, it is the aroma of Christ in us (or us in Christ) that is pleasing to God.²¹ The first result of sacrificial leadership is that we please God.

Because this clause is positioned as the ground of 14b (*hoti* = because), Paul views himself as the sweet aroma of Christ, which he links with spreading the odor of God. This corresponds very well with Paul's

statement in 2 Cor 4:6 that the creator of light has given us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” So Paul is linking sacrificial terminology with his mission to spread the gospel.

among those being saved and among those perishing

Even though the destination of the aroma is God, the aroma originates from us as we are among other humans—both those in the process of being saved and those in the process of perishing. The mention of two classes of people takes us again to the triumphal scene, where both victors and vanquished marched in the parade and smelled the incense. Of course, for Paul and all early Christians the two designations here have eternal overtones. *Those being saved* are those believers in whom Christ has vanquished sin and its effects. They are now new creations, reconciled to God, and commissioned to carry the message of reconciliation (see 5:16-19). *Those perishing*, on the other hand, are still under the control of sin, subject to the weaknesses of the old, fallen creation, and estranged from God.²² Another result of Christian leadership is that we prompt people to make critical choices for or against God’s reign in their lives.

The choices we lead people to make are not about secondary matters; they are matters of death and life.

16 for some on the one hand the odor from death unto death,

Paul continues the contrast between those who respond positively to the gospel and those who reject it, emphasizing the eternal consequences of such a choice. The structure of verses 15 and 16 is chiasmic.²³ He deals first with the people he mentioned second in the preceding clause—the perishing. For them this manifestation of the knowledge of God in Christ is an odor (stench?) of death. The same contrast appears in several texts of rabbinic literature, where the Torah or Wisdom is called a drug or medicine that gives life to those who accept it seriously and results in death for those who reject it.²⁴ By structuring the statements thus (ABBA), Paul indicates that salvation and life are the primary aims of his life and ministry.

The meaning of Paul’s use of the pair of prepositions, *ek . . . eis* appears to be that the rejection of the gospel leads to the total destruction (v. 15) we call death. Plummer²⁵ is likely right in comparing it to our saying, “from day to day” or “from strength to strength.” The tenor of the statement is of total, ultimate death. The choices we lead people to make are not about secondary matters; they are matters of death and life.

but on the other hand for some the odor from life unto life.

Similarly, for those being saved, the result is total, ultimate life. So Paul sees his life and ministry as a matter of death and life for the whole human race. He is being led to his death every day, and that sacrifice becomes both a pleasant fragrance to God and also a showing forth of the knowledge of God in Christ to the world, resulting in the salvation of those who receive that knowledge in faith and the destruction of those who refuse it. We pray that people will choose life instead of death.

THE WHO QUESTION AGAIN

and for these things who is competent?

Whoa! We are dealing with life-and-death matters here. We are not worthy. We are not equal to the task, not competent. This question seems at first glance to be rhetorical only in the sense that it points to a human impossibility. It echoes the reaction of Moses to God’s commission. Exod 4:10 (LXX) quotes Moses as saying, “I am not competent.” Paul puts it in a general question, as does Joel 2:11 (“who is competent for it?”),²⁶ and Paul will answer it rather directly in the affirmative in 3:5, 6, where he points out that God makes us adequate: “our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new

covenant.” This does not make us worthy in an ethical or religious sense, but it is a promise of God’s blessing so that we can accomplish the ministry to which God has called us.

This question functions as the fulcrum of the paragraph. The metaphor of the triumphal parade disappears here, and the balance between Paul’s refusal to boast and his insistence on apostolic authority begins here. As we shall see, that authority depends solely on God—God’s call, God’s commission, God’s message, God’s presence, and ultimately God’s victory.

APPROPRIATE STYLE FOR CHRISTIAN LEADERS

17 For we do not, as many people do, peddle the word of God,

Here Paul begins another sentence, but again with a conjunction that connects what follows with what went before, as a sort of reply to the question, “Who is competent?” Paul does not describe his competence; he merely points out that he is fulfilling the commission God gave him. Therefore, his competence is not in question—only God’s will and Paul’s methods.

This is the only appearance of the word *kapēleuō* (peddle) in the New Testament. It appears in other Greco-Roman works often with a pejorative connotation, and many commentators and lexicographers have given it the meaning of adulterate.²⁷ Paul uses it here clearly in a pejorative sense, but the emphasis is not on what people do to the message but on peddling for personal profit.²⁸ Paul claims that many are, as we might say, hawking the word of God for personal profit. That is not Paul’s way. He has already pointed out (1 Cor 9) that his practice in Corinth was to support himself instead of receiving gifts from the Christians there, even though such “living from the gospel” is appropriate.

It appears that his opponents were questioning his legitimacy as an apostle on several grounds, including that he was refusing his rightful apostolic support from the young church in Corinth. With this designation of the market peddler, he turns the tables on their argument and reminds the Corinthian believers that it was out of love and precisely because he was a called-by-God apostle that he refused their help. He will develop

So Paul sees his life and ministry as a matter of death and life for the whole human race.

this even further in chapters 10 and 11.²⁹ Paul will continue to preach God’s message without cost to those he is evangelizing.

We might wonder who are “the many” with whom he contrasts himself. In 1 Corinthians, he had aligned himself with the true apostles, so he would certainly not want to claim that he was the only

apostle. “The many” must have been his opponents in Corinth, whom he calls (12:13-15) “false apostles.” They were attempting to undermine his authority. The problem behind 1 Corinthians seems to have been a multiplicity of authorities, including Paul. 2 Corinthians appears to deal with an even more basic question: “Is Paul an apostle at all?” So he defends his apostolic authority as a preacher of God’s word by pointing out that he voluntarily refused financial support that would have been appropriate for him to receive. This should be evidence of his sincerity.

but as out of sincerity

The word *eilikrineia* (sincerity) is appropriate here, stemming from two words that together mean “tested by the light of the sun.”³⁰ Again Paul applies business terminology to ministry to contrast those who market God’s word for personal gain with his self-sacrificing approach to spreading the word. The purity of the product is matched by the purity of the motivation out of and by which Paul carries on his ministry.

but as from God in the presence of God in Christ we speak.

Paul comes back to his commission as the foundation of his ministry, but he compresses three distinct claims into a few words here. First, he claims to be from (or “out of”) God (*ek theou*), or at least that his

ministry has its source there. Most English versions add a verbal form to clarify, such as “sent from God” (see NIV, NRSV).

Next, he claims to be working in God’s presence. *Katenanti* is an adverb meaning “opposite” with reference to place or, by extension, “in the sight of” someone.³¹ It usually appears with the genitive case of the noun as it does here and in Rom 4:17 and 2 Cor 12:19. This latter appearance is also in a defensive context.

Paul also intimates in this way that God is his only rightful judge and, by inference, that neither the Corinthian Christians nor his opponents have the right to judge him (cf. Rom 14:4).

**Christ is the reality
that puts us into this
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Finally, he claims to do everything in Christ. In Christ (*en Christō*), as we saw earlier, is Paul’s general term for the reality of the Christian life. He brings the reality of Christ explicitly into the picture four times in these four verses; but here it bears even greater weight than before. Here, it is part of the whole line of thought: from God, in the presence of God, and in Christ is where and how he speaks/we speak. There is no room here for dishonesty, for personal gain or pride, or for changing the message to make it more palatable. God leads the parade. God gives the message. God is the source of the ministry. God is the presence in whose sight we work. Christ is the reality that puts us into this complex and profound relationship with God.

CONCLUSION

In these few verses, Paul outlines a radical concept of ministry. He bases it in the image of the Roman triumph in which the role of conquered army is played by the Christian minister(s), with God leading the parade as the conquering hero. Because such conquered people were usually being led to their execution, the radical side of the picture emphasizes the weakness of the minister and the corresponding power of God.

The next aspect of the image is the work being done by the conquered company—the fragrance spread abroad to lead people to a relationship with God in Christ and the fragrance wafted to God as a sweet-smelling sacrifice.

He continues to work with the fragrance motif by pointing out the life-or-death nature of the possible responses of the people to this revelatory fragrance. Those who receive it in faith will go from life to life, and those who reject it will go from death to death.

This argument leads Paul to recognize his incompetence for such a responsibility—a theme he will deal with in 3:5-6 by pointing out that God makes us competent—but in this text, the theme leads him to point out the importance of using appropriate methods in our ministry. To Paul, appropriate methods mean not peddling the message for personal profit but working sincerely and selflessly in the knowledge that everything we do is seen by God because we who are in Christ live in God’s presence.

Might it be time to update our ministerial terminology once more? The term “servant leader” once sounded so oxymoronic that it described rather well what Paul says in this and other texts, but we have used it so much that it no longer shocks. In Paul’s triumph metaphor, we have the picture of leaders doing a marvelous task of revealing God as they walk as captives toward their own death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it well in dealing with the call to Christian discipleship:

He [Levi] is called out, and has to forsake his old life in order that he may “exist” in the strictest sense of the word. The old life is left behind, and completely surrendered. The disciple is dragged out of his relative security into a life of absolute insecurity (that is, in truth, into the absolute security and safety of the fellowship of Jesus), from a life which is observable and calculable (it is, in fact, quite incalculable) into a life where everything is unobservable and fortuitous (that is, into one which is necessary and calculable), out of the realm of the finite (which is in truth the infinite) into the realm of infinite possibilities (which is the one liberating reality).³²

Bonhoeffer then sums up his discussion of discipleship in his familiar saying, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."³³

The Apostle Paul pictures the way of Christian ministry as a life of death following a Savior who made life possible by dying and who lives and makes our company of the conquered be life-giving, God-pleasing revelations of the life the creator made us for. It's a matter of death and life.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The composition of the letter as we have it is a big issue among scholars because Paul mentions other letters and because the tone of the first part differs so much from that of chapters 10-13, but this article is not the place to deal with these compositional questions.
- 2 The *New Revised Standard Version*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989). Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from this version.
- 3 These heading translations of the Greek text are my own literal translations.
- 4 This is not unusual. See Rom 6:17, 7:25; 1 Cor 15:57; 2 Cor 8:16, 9:15. Cf. James Thompson, *The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, (Austin: R.B. Sweet, 1970), 39.
- 5 The term "lead in triumph" (*thriambeuō*) appears also in Col 2:15.
- 6 Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit: Paul's Defense of His Ministry in II Corinthians 2:14-3:3*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 31.
- 7 See Dale B. Martin, *Slavery As Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
- 8 Hafemann, 19-34.
- 9 William R. Baker, *2 Corinthians* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1999), 118-121.
- 10 John Fitzgerald, *Cracks In An Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardship in the Corinthian Correspondence*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 163.
- 11 Joachim Kügler, "Paulus und der Duft des triumphierenden Christus: Zum kulturellen Basisbild von 2 Kor 2,14-16" in *Von Jesus Zum Christus: Christologische Studien, Festgabe für Paul Hoffmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 170-3.
- 12 Paul Brooks Duff, "Metaphor, Motif, and Meaning: The Rhetorical Strategy behind the Image 'Led in Triumph' in 2 Corinthians 2:14," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991): 91-92. The rhetorical strategy here seems to be what the ancient rhetorical handbooks call *insinuatō*, which is a subtle way of arguing a case when the one arguing can't assume the good will of the recipients.
- 13 For a full presentation of this issue, see Hafemann, 12-16.
- 14 David Filbeck, in "Problems in Translating First Person Plural Pronouns in 2 Corinthians" *Bible Translator* 45:401-9, details the difficulties of translating pronouns into *Mal*, a language of a tribal society of northern Thailand. That language has multiple first-person plural pronouns, so the translators had to choose one in each case. He classifies those in 2:14-3:17 as "plural exclusive," (p. 404), which means Paul was including his fellow workers but excluding, for the sake of the argument, his audience.
- 15 Matt 20:25-28: But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."
- 16 Bonnie Thurston, "2 Corinthians 2:14-16a: Christ's Incense," *Restoration Quarterly* 29/2 (1987): 65-69.
- 17 Johannes Louw, Eugene Nida, et al., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains Vol 1* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 699.
- 18 Duff, 901.
- 19 Cf. Rom 3:21; 2 Cor 4:10-11; Col 1:26, 4:4.
- 20 Strict consistency in the use of metaphorical language appears to be one of several "rules" of communication that came into practice only as literacy began to compete with orality as a medium of human communication.
- 21 Cf. Kügler, 164. The two terms for fragrance in these verses are often used together as a technical designation of the pleasing aroma of sacrifices to God. They are used thus in the LXX to translate two Hebrew words that often appear together. They also appear paired in Eph 5:2 and Phil 4:18, in definitely sacrificial contexts. The text most like Paul's usage in our passage is in the apocryphal book of Sirach 24:15: "Like cassia and camel's thorn I gave forth perfume [*osmēn*], and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance [*euōdias*], like galbanum, onycha, and stacte, and like the odor of incense in the tent [tabernacle]." Here, the terms are separated, as in 2 Corinthians, but they clearly appear in the context of Jewish sacrifices because the scents mentioned appear in tabernacle/temple sacrifice descriptions such as Exod 30:23-38. In Sirach 24, it is Wisdom whose person becomes the aroma; then in Sirach 39:14 the responsibility of being the

fragrance is passed on to those who have received wisdom; and, in our text, it is Paul as an extension of the sacrifice of Christ, the wisdom of God, who is and spreads the aroma.

- 22 Paul uses the exact same terms in 1 Cor 1:18 to contrast people's reactions to the hearing of the message of the cross. It is "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."
- 23 John D. Harvey calls it "inversion" in his *Listening to the Text: Oral Patterning in Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 198. He sees it as a readily apparent oral pattern.
- 24 See Strack-Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, Vol III, 498-99.
- 25 Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC), (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 71.
- 26 Both of these quotations are my translation of the LXX.
- 27 Walter Bauer, F.W. Gingrich, and Frederick Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 403.
- 28 Hafemann, 101-26.
- 29 Hafemann, 127-60.
- 30 Friedrich Büchsel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol II, Gerhard Kittel, ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 397-8.
- 31 Bauer, 421.
- 32 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 62ff.
- 33 Bonhoeffer, 99.

