

Arsy Varsy

Reclaiming The Gospel

Phillip A. Ross

Pilgrim Platform Books



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KJV or AV refers to the *King James Version of the Holy Bible*, public domain in the United States.

WCF refers to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646.

*For Barack Obama
in honor of his election as the
44th President of the United States of America
and for the people who have called for
change they can believe in*

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Introduction

ARSY VARSY

What kind of title is Arsy Varsy? It's an old Puritan word similar to vice versa. Where *visa versa* means conversely or a change in order, arsy varsy (pronounced *ahr-see-vahr-see*) means "1. (adj.) wrong end foremost, i.e., completely backward, an arsy varsy way of doing things; and 2. (adv.) in a backward or thoroughly mixed-up fashion, i.e., the papers are all filed arsy varsy. Today we might use the expression *ass backward*, which suggests that something is happening the wrong way, with the rear coming first. It indicates the complete reversal of the correct order.

Why would a book like this be dedicated to a President, particularly to a President like Barack Obama? There is a long tradition among Christian writers to provide theological insight where it is needed, where its application can get the most bang for the buck, so to speak. Senator Obama campaigned for President on the platform of bringing needed change to America, and that is exactly what this book is about.

I will put forth the audacity to hope that all Americans want what is best for America, and that the President—any President—is called to provide what he can toward that goal. Granted that my concern is theological and not political, though the two things are intimately related. The old adage is that so goes the (Christian) church, so goes the nation. This is true because politics are the outworking of beliefs and beliefs are the product of theology. Theology is simply the expression of our beliefs about God. And everyone has a theology, even atheists. They *believe* that God doesn't exist.

The theological position espoused herein is neither Left nor Right, neither Liberal or Conservative because it is both Left and Right, Liberal and Conservative. How can this be? Because the traditional Left/Right, Liberal/Conservative dichotomy is inadequate to the reality of life. It is a false dichotomy built upon a false and shallow understanding of reality. And it is our understanding of the reality in which we live that is the subject of this book.

Paul's intent in writing to the Corinthians was to correct a false understanding of success that had captured and perverted the gospel of Jesus Christ into its service. My intent is to reiterate Paul's mes-

sage in a way that is orthodox and makes sense to me—and God-willing, to my contemporaries. This is no more than all Christians are called to do.

The thesis of this book is that Paul thought, wrote and taught that some of the leaders of the Corinthian church had things arsy varsy or ass backwards. And the reason that First Corinthians has been valued over the centuries is that many Christians and churches have found Paul's insights and teachings to be valuable. It's a common problem that has plagued Christianity since the time of the Corinthian church, and before that back into the history of the Old Testament to the Fall of Adam. Being a sinner means getting things wrong. Paul was trying to help the Corinthians get things right, and their getting things right meant that they first come to understand that they had things wrong.

Expositional preaching provides the best exposure to a truly biblical perspective of Scripture. By simply preaching through a book of the Bible we cannot avoid those particular Scriptures or ideas that we don't like. And if we are honest, we will admit that there is much in God's Word that we don't like. If we were God, we'd do things quite differently. Thank God we aren't! God has given us His Word (Scripture) in the order, and with the terminology and the emphasis He wants it to have. Let us endeavor to receive it as He has given it to us, and to pass it forward as we have received it.

The contemporary American churches in the dawning of the Twenty-First Century are in a situation that is remarkably similar to that of the ancient Corinthian church. So, I decided to preach my way through Corinthians with the hope that Paul's work with the Corinthians will have some pertinent analysis of and application to our own contemporary situation. My approach has not been to read everything I could find about Corinthians in the hope of adding something new to the historic dialog. Rather, my intention is less grand. I hope to see and reveal the trouble the Corinthians had gotten into as a church as clearly as possible in order to understand what Paul was saying to them in the hope of shining some light on our own problem because their problem is our problem. It's a recurring problem because it is a problem of gospel reception and transmission.

“Corinth was a city of wealth and culture, seated at the crossroads of the Roman Empire, where all the trade and commerce of the empire passed through. It was a city of beauty, a resort city, located in a very beautiful area, but it was also a city of prostitution and of passion. It was devoted to trade and commerce, but also to the worship of the goddess of sex”¹ Many of the people in the Corinthian church didn't

1 *Expository Studies in 1 Corinthians, The Deep Things of God*, chapter: The Corinthian Crisis, by Ray Steadman, <http://www.raystedman.org/1corinthians/3571.html>.

understand why Paul was so troubled with them. After all, they were a large, successful church. They were growing by leaps and bounds. Membership and attendance statistics were solid. They thought they were doing great.

But Paul was troubled by what they were doing and he made every effort to tell them so. His trouble with the Corinthians is our trouble because his trouble with them would be his trouble with us. Unfortunately, the popular Evangelical approach to Christianity today has left too many people thinking that the pinnacle of Christianity comes at conversion, when we first give our hearts and lives to Jesus Christ. The initial change of heart and mind that captures new Christians is so stark a contrast to life before regeneration that it is described as going from death to life, from darkness to light. And it is exactly that!

But for far too many Christians the emotional high that accompanied their initial conversion and the wonderful feelings associated with the release from the burden of sin establishes a kind of emotional “high water mark” in their lives. It is a “mountain top experience” and tends to fade as people return to the daily drudgery of ordinary life. The release from sin releases a stream of endorphins into the blood stream. This, of course, is not a bad thing, but a good thing because it associates good feelings with God. However, being awash in an endorphin high is not the state of heart and mind that God wants His people to live in day in and day out. Nor does God want His people to get stuck in an emotional rut, forever pining for and pursuing the pleasures of emotional indulgence.

Too many Christians today are like converted hippies of a former time. “I used to get high on drugs, but now I get high on Jesus!” Too much Christianity today is patterned after an endorphin rush. Please understand me. There is nothing wrong with feeling good, but our own good feelings are not the heart of Christianity.

Rather, God wants His people to grow—emotionally, intellectually, relationally, in every way. We are to grow “until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:13-16). And more often than not growth—real growth—is hard work.

It is amazing how much application Paul’s words to the Corinthians

have to the contemporary churches at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century. It is amazing how Paul's analysis of their problem fits the contemporary situation. And of course it is true that Paul was writing to them in their time about some very specific problems. So, understanding Paul's words from their perspective, from the perspective of that First Century Corinthian church is very important to the study of Corinthians today. However, if we only understand Paul from a First Century perspective, as applying only to the Corinthian church, we will only have a history lesson. As important as it is to understand what Paul was saying to those who first received his letter, to place our primary focus there will blunt the sharp edge of Paul's analysis and prescription, and quench the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19) who is also speaking to us.

Of course Paul was writing directly to those First Century Christians. I'm not disputing that. And it is important to understand what he was saying to them. But we must understand that Paul was not writing *merely* to them. Paul was quite aware of his own position as an apostle of Jesus Christ, of the importance of his words, and of their place in history should God be willing to preserve them. And He did preserve Paul's words for us. Why did God preserve Paul's words for us? Because they were not just for those First Century Christians at Corinth, but they were intended by God and by Paul for us who would come later (1 Corinthians 10:11). Consequently, our task is to understand, not merely what Paul was saying to the Corinthians, but also what he is saying to us today.

It is in this sense that the Scriptures are living documents. They are alive, just as Christ Himself is alive, and they speak the Words of Christ to us through Paul across two millennia. This is the sense in which I have approached this series on Corinthians. And I pray that the Lord will bless these meager efforts to help make Paul's words come alive in the minds and hearts of His people in our day. It is a difficult task because, like the Corinthians, many contemporary churches are caught up in their own apparent success. Their numbers are good, people are coming, they're growing. So, what's the problem? Well, that is the subject of this book.

I pray that you will see and hear Paul's words—God's Word—through my feeble and fallible efforts. Whatever success toward this end that may accrue to this work belongs to our Triune God who lives in the words of Paul, the words of Scripture, the Word of God. Where my words fail to communicate God's message accurately the fault is my own. I am a weak reed. But our God is truly great! And I pray that He will intercede between writer and reader to communicate and bless you as you engage these words, that He may show you His purpose in Paul's words and

their application to your life and to His churches today.

THANKS

I want to thank several people who helped improve this book. Paul Williams, a neighbor and confidant, also proofread the text. While Paul and I have many theological disagreements along the classical divides of the Sixteenth Century, we are sufficiently committed to the unity of the church and interested in the deeper things that we have become good friends. I never satisfy all of Paul's concerns, but he keeps me sharp.

Other friends have provided me with a lot of meat to chew on regarding various features of this work. Many good questions have helped to clarify various arguments, though I have not satisfied some of their most basic concerns. Three things stand out as the source of the discomfort of some people regarding this treatment of First Corinthians. First, my presuppositional approach is different from an evidential approach to biblical study. Second, the integration of Trinitarian categories regarding human nature as a genuine reflection of God's nature result in additional complexities found in the biblical text. And third, the application of the above presuppositionalism and Trinitarianism to Paul's treatment of Spiritual gifts yields richer explanations, more diverse applications and a more foundational position for Spiritual gifts regarding both the lives of individual Christians and the structure of the church. These interactions have given me a greater appreciation of the importance of epistemology and its impact on theology.

My wife, Stephanie, continues to be a blessing to me as I have grown over the years. No one knows the extent of my growth like she does. We have gone through many twists and turns together, and weathered many storms. My work would not be possible apart from her continuing love and support.

My children, Adam, Austin and Justin, provide the teleological impetus for my efforts, and for them I am thankful. I have appreciated them all of their lives—and increasingly so as they have become young men. They are familiar with the material here and I expect—hope, really—that they will take it and run with it in the years to come. I am not pressing for their agreement, but for their serious engagement.

Underneath and above all of this runs my thankfulness to God for Jesus Christ, apart from whom nothing would matter, and in the light of Whom everything matters so dearly.

Phillip A. Ross
Marietta, Ohio
November 2008

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