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# PAULUS INFIRMUS: THE PAULINE CONCEPT OF WEAKNESS

DAVID ALAN BLACK

*This essay is gratefully dedicated to Dr. Harry A. Sturz,  
scholar, teacher, colleague, friend,  
upon his retirement from Biola University.*

*The NT words for weakness have a distinctive place in the theological and ethical vocabulary of the apostle Paul. The central idea in Paul's conception of weakness is that the greatest revelation of divine power has occurred in the person and work of Jesus Christ in the midst of his human and earthly existence. This article explores the way in which the apostle applies this perspective to his teaching on anthropology, christology, and ethics. The author concludes that this unique perspective of Paul is of tremendous importance for the church today. Through weakness the power of Christ finds its fullest expression in the apostle, in his apostolic mission, in the communities he founded, and in all those whom the Spirit of God indwells, both then and now.*

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## INTRODUCTION

**I**N the Gospels and Acts, as well as the majority of NT epistles, there is no development of the theme of weakness into a broad theological motif such as one can discern in the writings of the apostle Paul. It is obvious merely from a count of the occurrences of ἀσθένεια, etc., in the different books of the NT how predominantly it is a Pauline word.<sup>1</sup> It is missing altogether from 2 Peter, Jude, the Johannine epistles and Revelation. In James and 1 Peter, it occurs only once, and in Mark only twice. In all the non-Pauline writings the root appears only 39 times, and of these occurrences the great majority are in the Gospels, where it has the simple meaning of illness. In contrast to this, 44 instances of it occur in the Pauline corpus of letters, more than all the rest of the NT writings combined, and in much smaller

<sup>1</sup>Cf. R. Morgenthaler, *Statistik des neutestamentlichen Wortschatzes* (Zürich: Gott-helf, 1958) 79.

compass, being limited primarily to his chief epistles, Romans and 1 and 2 Corinthians.

Numbers alone prove that ἀσθένεια must be regarded as a characteristic Pauline word, but over and above the significance of quantity is the special meaning it comes to bear in his letters. Paul has made the word the vehicle of a profoundly important element in his teaching and parenthesis. Even a casual reading of the relevant passages reveals in Paul a deeper insight into its essential meaning and content and a stricter unity and consistency than that of any other author. Only the writer of Hebrews, who himself may have been a Paulinist, can be said to approximate the depth and meaning of the Pauline usage.<sup>2</sup>

Although valuable investigations of the terms for weakness have been published in recent years,<sup>3</sup> it may be convenient to have a brief synopsis of Paul's ideas on the subject and of how they differ from those found elsewhere. By so doing, the basic literary unity and theological perspective of the motif in Paul may be brought out in a more integrated manner. At the very least, it is hoped that this synopsis will open up some new possibilities of interpretation which may then be assimilated into further studies of the terms.

#### THE PAULINE PERSPECTIVE ON WEAKNESS

In the Pauline letters there is no complete or fully developed "doctrine" of weakness or description of the circumstances that call it

<sup>2</sup>The author of Hebrews infuses the word with theological significance when he writes that Christ is able to sympathize with the weaknesses of men (4:15), and when he describes the heroes of faith as those whose "weakness was turned to strength" (11:34; NIV), a magnificent summary of the writer's concept of faith as that which overcomes and is always driving forward, never retreating. In the Gospels, scattered instances of a theological usage, such as Jesus' statement on Olivet that the flesh is ἀσθενής in contrast to the spirit which is πρόθυμον (*not* δυνατή !) in Mark 14:38, or John's reference to an ἀσθένεια πρὸς θάνατον (John 11:4), are the exceptions which prove the rule.

<sup>3</sup>See the useful, albeit brief, summaries by G. Stählin, "ἀσθενής κτλ." *TDNT* 1 (1933) 490-93, and H.-G. Link, "Weakness, etc." *NIDNTT* 3 (1978) 993-96. Important studies of the terms in specific contexts include those by J. Cambier, "Le critère paulinien de l'apostolat en 2 Co 12,6s." *Bib* 43 (1962) 481-518; E. Fuchs, "La faiblesse, gloire de l'apostolat selon Paul (Etude sur 2 Co 10-13)," *ETR* 2 (1980) 231-53; E. Güttgemanns, *Der leidende Apostel und sein Herr* (FRLANT 90; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 142-70; E. Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu II Korinther 10-13* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1956) 37-43; M. Rauer, *Die "Schwachen" in Korinth und Rom* (BibS[F]21; Freiburg: Herder, 1923); and G. Theissen, "Die Starken und Schwachen in Korinth," *EvT* 35 (1975) 155-72. Mention might also be made of the popular work concerning the handicapped in the Bible, edited by H.-G. Schmidt and entitled, *In der Schwäche ist Kraft: Behinderte Menschen im Alten und Neuen Testament* (Hamburg: Wittig, 1979).

forth. On the one hand, this is due to the intensely personal character of the theme, which does not always allow it to be described or represented systematically. On the other hand, and even more significantly, account must be taken of the character of Paul's writings as occasional letters to meet specific situations in particular churches, even if there is disagreement with respect to this character of his writings. The Pauline epistles are essentially pastoral in tone and content and, while they presuppose that Paul himself had a fairly well-developed concept of weakness, they give us only sporadic glimpses of its nature and contours. It should not be assumed, therefore, that the apostle's correspondence reveals the whole of his thinking regarding the subject of this study, nor is one entitled to reconstruct from such incomplete data a systematic theology of the apostle's thought concerning weakness.

Despite the fragmentary nature of the data, however, it is evident that Paul's teaching regarding weakness and even the parenthesis resulting from it strongly reflect a high level of understanding on the part of the apostle. Even where we cannot be sure of his meaning due to insufficient data, we can elucidate enough of Paul's insight into Christian weakness to form a fairly clear picture of the subject. For example, the notorious problem of Paul's "thorn in the flesh"—what he calls one of his "weaknesses" (2 Cor 12:7-10)—has given rise over the centuries to a myriad of suggestions regarding the character of the particular infirmity which had afflicted the apostle. No doubt speculative minds will advance fresh proposals, and their suggestions will rightly be welcomed. However, for present purposes, Paul's "thorn" does not demand a final conclusion, for by its very lack of definition it is of more benefit to us than would have been the case otherwise. It is enough to know that Paul "most gladly" and with full eagerness welcomed it because it had made him all the more aware of his Master's all-sufficient grace and dynamic power in the midst of his own weaknesses.<sup>4</sup>

The same thing can be said concerning the specific identity and religious conceptions of the "weak" in Corinth and Rome. To a certain extent it is important to know something of the weak and strong communities in both churches as well as something of Paul's resolution of the controversy between them. But certain matters, such as whether the weak are to be considered individuals or a party; whether their practices stem from a Judaistic, Gnostic, or Hellenistic background; whether they indeed abstain from wine and observe ceremonial holidays; and whether they actually (or only hypothetically) exist in Rome,

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that the emphasis in this familiar verse (2 Cor 12:9) is on the introductory words, "My grace is sufficient for you." The words, "for power is made perfect in weakness," serve only to explain that statement.

are circumstantial questions that do not relate directly to the fundamental principles which Paul introduces into the discussion.

Although these questions are not without significance, it is clear that Paul's main contention, both in Romans 14 and 15 and in 1 Corinthians 8-10, is to show how an established community can maintain its unity despite sharp differences of opinion. His answer is that love can tolerate even the most severe disagreements in matters of personal conviction and that such problems should be resolved in the interests of edification. Because Christ Jesus has accepted the weaker members of the church, for whom he died, so too the strong must accept and support them in an attitude of humility and love (cf. 1 Cor 8:9-13; Rom 14:1; 15:1). Our task at this point, therefore, is not to demonstrate with precision the identity of the weak (even if that were possible), but to demonstrate how Paul deals with them. Indeed, for Paul the issue is not so much the immature view of the weak as it is the spirit of the so-called "strong" who condemn their weaker brothers. Thus the apostle deals with the problem of the rightness or wrongness of eating meat only as a side issue, seeking to give his full attention to the more serious spiritual problem so that he might lead both groups on to a fuller understanding and expression of their Christian liberty.<sup>5</sup>

When we speak of Paul's "theology" of weakness, we must remember too that the theological is subordinated to the practical purpose to which he had devoted his life and labors. Manson wrote of the apostle, "He is a great Christian thinker; but he does not see the Gospel as the manifestation in time of some metaphysical principles or values. For Paul Christianity is not a system of ideas, but a series of events."<sup>6</sup> Thus in the final analysis, Paul is not concerned with defending a doctrine or even with defending himself—"who is Paul and who is Apollos but ministers through whom you believed?" (1 Cor 3:5). In Paul's mind the truth of the gospel was the important matter to be defended at all costs. Hence he is not interested in developing a theology of weakness, for it is at most only the wrapping of the true gospel. Christ himself is the core of Pauline theology; the concept of weakness is used only to defend and to define that core.

One final point should be made by way of introduction: the significance of the Pauline weakness vocabulary without exception grows out of those concrete situations which he addressed in his letters. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the Corinthian letters, in which Paul finds himself forced to answer the criticisms of his opponents regarding his own weakness. If Paul had never been attacked so

<sup>5</sup>R. N. Longenecker, *Paul, Apostle of Liberty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 239-43.

<sup>6</sup>T. W. Manson, "Paul the Christian and Theologian," *On Paul and John* (ed. M. Black; London: SCM, 1967) 11.

viciously by the opposition in Corinth, we might forever have gone without his long narrative concerning weakness in 2 Corinthians 10–13. This lengthy passage, so vital to a clear understanding of Paul's concept of weakness, is available to us today (humanly speaking) because of the failures of certain early Christians. Paul develops especially his *christological* ideas of weakness in direct relationship with the church at Corinth, seeing this as the most effective way to handle the issues undermining his work among his converts. The emphasis upon Paul's *personal* weakness is also essentially restricted to the Corinthian audience, apparently because the subject was a matter of heated debate. The language of weakness thus conveyed a special meaning to Paul's Corinthian readers, a fact which explains why the terms are not employed with frequency in his other writings, both earlier and later.<sup>7</sup>

Any study of the Pauline weakness motif must, therefore, take into consideration Paul's concern to be relevant to the Christians to whom he writes. Nowhere in his letters does he attempt to systematize his teaching on weakness. The apostle himself seems oblivious to the pattern and principles which we will offer as "Paul's" theology of weakness. On the other hand, since the apostle certainly does have his own ideas about weakness, every attempt to discern the broad outlines of these ideas is appropriate.

### THREE MAJOR SUB-THEMES

Although it would be unjust to Paul, and to ourselves, to construct a systematic picture from such disparate material and then see the whole complex as determinative in any particular case, nevertheless certain patterns do emerge, not only in those passages where weakness is a comparatively prominent theme, as in portions of 1 and 2 Corinthians, but also in other less salient passages. Broadly conceived, the Pauline weakness motif is composed of three sub-themes:

<sup>7</sup>The Pauline usage from early to late stages reveals an erratic development when analyzed in strict chronological sequence. Yet a broad, bell-shaped developmental pattern emerges. Whereas in his earliest and latest epistles the words are rarely found, they figure prominently in Rom and 1 and 2 Cor, epistles which stem from the middle period of Paul's apostolic career and which are usually designated to be "doctrinal" in content. However, here they are important terms not only in Paul's theology but also in his ethical teaching. He develops the words into a major theme in the Corinthian correspondence, where weakness plays a significant role in the Pauline apostolic *apologia*. In 2 Cor, where the attack against Paul is at its strongest, the largest complex of weakness language in the NT is to be found (14 occurrences). Why is Paul so defensive of his own infirmities in 2 Cor? Only because a misunderstanding of his weakness leads to error concerning the nature and acquisition of divine strength. Paul *is* strong, but *only* because he is "in Christ" (cf. 2 Cor 12:9, 10; 13:4). Otherwise he freely admits to being *Paulus infirmus*.

the *anthropological*, the *christological*, and the *ethical*. These are the three inseparably related components of Paul's gospel as well, and understandably so, since the terms for weakness are used primarily to defend and to illuminate the apostle's preaching.

### *Weakness as a Sign of Humanity*

The Pauline weakness motif is first of all *anthropological* because it presupposes that man's whole being is dependent upon God and that man, as a creature of God (like Adam), is susceptible to the limitations of all creation. Paul views man as a member of the present age which is characterized by transitoriness, suffering, and evil. In particular, the present age is under the control of Satan and has been infiltrated by sin which captures, enslaves, and ultimately kills man. Thus the concept of "weakness" becomes an apt designation for the extent of man's participation in the old aeon insofar as man is mortal and subject to the troubles, illnesses, and temptations of the present age.

Closely associated with man's weakness, but not strictly identified with it, is his flesh (σάρξ). By definition, σάρξ is the earthly part of man, denoting his physical and temporal existence. It may have "lusts" and "desires" (Eph 2:3), but in and of itself the flesh is not sinful.<sup>8</sup> In Rom 6:19 the apostle refers to "the weakness of the flesh" which necessitates that he speak to the Romans using analogies drawn from the sphere of human relations. This is an accommodation to the weakness of man's understanding and to his inability to comprehend spiritual truth apart from a natural medium. Undoubtedly this weakness of understanding is bound up with man's sinful nature, which is "worldly" and "natural" as opposed to what is "spiritual" and "immaterial" (cf. Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 3:1; 2 Cor 1:12). Yet Paul does not equate man's weakness with his sinfulness (even though in another context he can characterize the human condition by both concepts).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup>B. Reicke, "Body and Soul in the New Testament," *ST* 19 (1965) 201-204.

<sup>9</sup>The close collocation of "weak" (ἀσθενεῖς), "ungodly" (ἀσεβεῖς), and "sinners" (ἁμαρτωλοί) in Rom 5:6-8 does not imply a fundamental identification between these three terms, as has been noted by O. Kuss (*Der Römerbrief* [Regensburg: Pustet, 1957] I, 208) and M. Wolter (*Rechtfertigung und zukünftiges Heil. Untersuchungen zu Röm 5, 1-11* [BZNW 43; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978] 170). Paul uses ἀσθενεῖς in the sense that man's helplessness under the law had been exposed and his inability to save himself had become apparent. However, it was not merely the helplessness of man, but also his godlessness and sinfulness that required the sacrifice of Christ on his behalf. The term ἀσθενεῖς must, then, emphasize the saving power of Christ, while the words ἀσεβεῖς and ἁμαρτωλοί underscore the redemptive efficacy of his atoning death. Nevertheless, the difference between what man cannot do (since he is weak) and what man is (ungodly and sinful) is not great, because the ungodly and sinful man is by definition a

The point of Paul's linking weakness with the flesh is simply to underscore the earthliness of his readers' faculties of comprehension, which forces him to describe the spiritual relationship between God and the Christian in such crude, human terms (cf. Rom 8:15). The flesh in this sense denotes the personality of man as directed toward earthly pursuits rather than the service of God.

This same connotation of weakness as human powerlessness over against God is found in Rom 8:26, where Paul refers to that infirmity of the Christian which requires the help of the Spirit's power, particularly in the matter of prayer.<sup>10</sup> According to Paul, nothing lays bare the helplessness of the believer like his "prayer-weakness." This consists in the fact that he does not know what to pray for as he ought, that is, as is suited to the occasion and his necessities require. It is at this point that the Holy Spirit comes to his aid, praying for him in words which transcend articulated formulation, yet which ascend to the very throne of grace. This is one example among many passages in Paul where weakness is made parallel to the antithetical concept of power (usually *δύναμις*).<sup>11</sup> The impotence and incapability of man that characterize the whole range of his earthly existence require divine intervention. In turn, man's infirmity becomes the place in which the help and power of God come to expression.

The corresponding concept of man's "salvation-weakness" belongs unquestionably to this same category. In its negative aspect,

man without strength to help himself. Thus man's weakness is not sin, but the inability to save himself which the saving power of God's justifying act in Christ has overcome (cf. Rom 8:3).

<sup>10</sup>Much has been written on the participation of the Holy Spirit in the prayer-life of the believer. See A. Dietzel, "Beten im Geist," *TZ* 13 (1957) 12-32; E. Fuchs, "Der Anteil des Geistes am Glauben bei Paulus. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis von Römer 8," *ZTK* 72 (1975) 293-302; K. Niederwimmer, "Das Gebet des Geistes, Röm 8, 26f.," *TZ* 20 (1964) 252-65; P. Meyer, "The Holy Spirit in the Pauline Letters," *Int* 33 (1979) 3-18; C. Mitchell, "The Holy Spirit's Intercessory Ministry," *BSac* (1982) 230-42; P. von der Osten-Sacken, *Römer 8 als Beispiel paulinischer Theologie* (FRLANT 112; Göttingen; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975) 85-86, 93-95; and esp. W. Marchel, *Abba, Père! La prière du Christ et des chrétiennes* (AnBib 19; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963). The section of Marchel's dissertation dealing with "La prière 'Abba' et l'action du Saint-Esprit" (pp. 232-46) is well worth reading.

<sup>11</sup>Integrally connected with the understanding of Paul's concept of weakness is the opposite notion of strength. In some cases this background is brought into focus and the concept of strength is mentioned explicitly, whereas at other times the contrast is only implied. Paul specifically connects weakness with the opposite idea of power in 1 Cor 1:25,26; 4:10; 15:43; 2 Cor 10:10; 12:5,9,10; 13:3,4,9; Rom 4:19; 5:6; 8:3; 14:1,2; 15:1, passages which show the importance of both words in Paul's vocabulary. Paul often desired to remind his readers that the powerful apostle is also the weak and suffering one: *Paulus potens* is also *Paulus infirmus*.

salvation refers to man's deliverance from sin and from bondage to the world with its decay and corruption. To execute this judgment upon sin the law is totally impotent, as Paul says, because it is "weakened by the flesh" (Rom 8:3).<sup>12</sup> But what the law was powerless to do is precisely what God did by sending his son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin. The law, as it is confronted with sin, reveals its own utter lack of redemptive efficiency, being deprived of its power by reason of the flesh.<sup>13</sup> It has become impotent; hence the person who looks to the law, and especially to the works of the law, as the way of salvation and acceptance with God remains in bondage to sin and its guilt, defilement, and power (Gal 4:9). Law as law, as commandment which demands obedience, does not have any potency or provision for the salvation of the sinner, who must therefore rely completely upon the power of another to accomplish his justification. The time of man's greatest helplessness was, however, the proper and fitting time for God's efficacious work to be wrought by the death of his son (Rom 5:6). The crucifixion of Christ belongs to "the fullness of the time" (Gal 4:4) and to "the consummation of the ages" (Heb 9:26) inasmuch as it was the time in which Christ subdued sin, thus fulfilling what the law and the flesh were powerless to accomplish.

In another vein, Paul can also use the words in several instances in the specific sense of bodily weakness, i.e., physical illness, thus approximating the fundamental usage common to all literature in antiquity. He clearly uses the root for sickness with reference to his close companions in the ministry—Epaphroditus (Phil 2:26, 27), Timothy (1 Tim 5:23), and Trophimus (2 Tim 4:20). Paul probably uses the root for sickness with reference to himself when he speaks of an "infirmity of the flesh" as the cause for the initial preaching of the gospel among the Galatians (Gal 4:13).<sup>14</sup> If we are correct in concluding that Paul is referring to a physical infirmity, we can think of this weakness as a particular disease or ailment, the specific diagnosis of which is, however, a mystery.

Cases of illness among Christians in NT times indicate that the apostolic commission to heal (cf. Mark 16:18) could not be effected indiscriminately to heal oneself or one's friends. Normal means of

<sup>12</sup>Among the discussions of law in this section of Romans, that by M. Limbeck stands out for its perceptiveness: *Von der Ohnmacht des Rechts. Untersuchungen zur Gesetzkritik des Neuen Testaments* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1972) 84–91.

<sup>13</sup>"Das Gesetz offenbart den Willen Gottes. Aber es kann nicht die Erfüllung bewirken—es ist 'schwach' (Röm 8,3)." H. Conzelmann, *Grundriss der Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1967) 249. Similarly H. Hubner says the law was "depraved" by the flesh (*Das Gesetz bei Paulus* [FRLANT 119; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978] 127).

<sup>14</sup>Cf. D. A. Black, "Weakness Language in Galatians," *GTJ* 4 (1983) 15–36.

healing were available for Timothy's gastric problem, for instance; and even in the company of Paul, Trophimus became too ill to travel any further. The classical Pauline passage on illness (2 Cor 12:7-10) is in this respect most striking of all, in that Paul's "thorn in the flesh" remained with the apostle despite even the most intensive prayer for its removal. Paul states three reasons for its existence: to keep him from becoming proud because of his revelations and visions (v 7); to enable him to experience the power of Christ (v 9); and to teach him the true purpose of hardships, persecutions, and personal difficulties (v 10). Indeed, the entire passage is more concerned with the power and grace of the Lord than with the weakness of the apostle. Physical infirmity is evidence that the body "is sown in weakness" (1 Cor 15:43) and is a cogent reminder of the creature's dependence upon the Creator. In this respect, the case of Paul is remarkably like that of Jacob, who learned to depend totally upon God only after he had been inflicted with a physical injury (Gen 32:24-32). These instances of illness suggest that the real issue in the matter of human suffering is man's relationship to God rather than his own physical condition, as painful as that may be.

Sometimes there is a link between individual sin and individual suffering, though in the case of disease a direct connection may not be obvious. From the account of the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11:17-34 it is clear that in the early church the penalty for unworthy participation at the Eucharist was sickness, at times even death (1 Cor 11:30).<sup>15</sup> The Lord himself had caused this judgment to fall upon the Corinthians in order that they might repent. However, if they had "discerned" themselves they would not have been judged and punished (v 31). The sin which Paul rebukes is therefore all the more serious, because the Christian who eats without respecting the body (of Christ) is in danger of attributing his own physical illness to natural causes, thus ignoring its purpose.

Finally, it is important to realize that the Pauline conception of weakness in the anthropological sense is different from the common Greek conception of the body as something inherently evil. In Paul, human finiteness is emphasized, but never deprecated, in stark contrast to the neo-Platonic concept of the created world as a corruption of the original divine ideal. The Pauline conception is that of the *weakness* yet *nobility* of man, for in his thinking the human problem is *sin*,

<sup>15</sup>The implicit progression of thought from ἀσθενεῖς to ἄρρωστοι to κοιμῶνται in 1 Cor 11:30 suggests that ἀσθενεῖς is not merely synonymous with ἄρρωστοι (despite their similar etymologies), but a term denoting a physical punishment of a less serious nature. "Weak" would suffice as a translation for the word, but perhaps the better term would be "sickly," signifying a disposition towards illness which ἄρρωστοι more explicitly connotes.

not the infirmity, finiteness, and mortality which characterize all dependent life. Although the limitations of this physical life will be eradicated in the kingdom, weakness is a fact of human existence which cannot be evaded. Weakness is therefore not simply the occasional experience of sickness or powerlessness, but a fundamental mark of the individual's worldly existence. This emphasis permeates the whole of Paul's understanding of man and rests fundamentally on an anthropological basis.

### *Weakness as the Showplace of God's Might*

In a second line of thought, Paul speaks of weakness as the platform from which the power of God is exhibited in the world. This aspect of weakness is quite different in character from the preceding anthropological category. In general, weakness as mere humanness is directed toward man's participation in the created order, with no further thought in mind and (in secular authors) no consideration of divine intervention. Now, however, weakness takes on a whole new dimension as it is focused and defined by Paul's christology. Through the death and resurrection of Christ God's power becomes operative in man's mortal existence so that the believer in Jesus is one who is united with Christ in weakness and power. This emphasis upon the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, seen most clearly in Romans and 2 Corinthians,<sup>16</sup> is of great importance as it concerns the significance and meaning of the Pauline weakness motif. When Paul speaks of "weakness" in this sense, he is no longer speaking of generic human weakness but of weakness "in Christ," the one who "was crucified in weakness" (2 Cor 13:4). Thus Paul asserts that it is in the sufferings which he experiences as an apostle that divine power is most clearly revealed, having been told by the Lord himself that "power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). This christological aspect of the Pauline weakness motif is disclosed especially in the course of the apostle's arguments against his Corinthian opponents in 2 Corinthians 10-13.

Since the key to Pauline theology is to be found in the apostle's thought regarding Jesus Christ, it is not surprising that Paul relates human weakness to the life of faith which bears the marks of God's redeeming power. His theology of weakness is christocentric because his view of the Christian life is essentially a response to the relationship he enjoys with his crucified, resurrected, and ascended Lord. Paul's doctrine of weakness is thus subservient to his doctrine of Christ, for in Paul's view weakness can truly be understood only in relation to

<sup>16</sup>See R. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (BZNW 32; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967) 7-47 (for Rom) and 84-100 (for 2 Cor).

Jesus Christ. Although Paul, like the OT writers, relates man's weakness to his fallen nature in Adam, insisting that by his participation in creation, the world, and the flesh man as a whole is a weak being, he does not leave man there. He further asserts that in Christ human weakness takes on a whole new significance by becoming the place where divine power is revealed.

There are therefore two counterbalancing emphases in Paul's teaching: a solidarity with Adam by which all men under the influence of the natural sphere inherit the generic characteristic of weakness, and a solidarity with Christ by which human weakness under the influence of the Holy Spirit is transformed into a showplace of the divine on earth and a badge of honor. Hence from a purely theological point of view, the most distinctive meaning of weakness in the NT is detected in the christological character which the words acquire when Paul asserts that the power of God is operative in man's earthly existence (which is otherwise weak and corruptible). In the very impotence and mortality of the flesh is concealed the resurrection power of God, operative both in the life of the church (cf. Acts 4:7, 22; 6:8) and in the life of every believer (cf. Phil 4:13; Col 1:11).

This aspect of Paul's understanding of weakness is expressed most profoundly in the famous statement of 2 Cor 12:9 that divine power finds its full scope in human weakness. This promise of the Lord, predicated upon his pronouncement, "My grace is sufficient for you," is the vantage-point from which the whole of the Pauline motif can be seen in its proper perspective. Paul is well content with weaknesses, not because they are desirable in and of themselves, but because they are the vehicle through which the all-sufficient power of God becomes prominent. *Human weakness paradoxically provides the best opportunity for divine power.* It is this principle that makes weakness more meaningful to Paul than to his opponents. Whenever he feels himself to be weak—a fragile earthen vessel, persecuted, insulted, beset with afflictions of every kind—he feels Christ's strength. Behind all his doubts, insecurities, and anxieties is the assurance that God is manifesting his son in and through his life. Paul's message, as well as his person, was the revelation of that fact.

Thus one cannot understand correctly the emphasis Paul gives the words in 2 Corinthians apart from a recognition of the close connection in his thought between Christ and weakness. The christological orientation of Paul's weakness language is clearer here than in any other of his writings. In this letter the terms "Christ" and "weakness" are more than just somehow related: they are co-functional. In contrast to the false apostles who boast in their fleshly wisdom and strength, Paul declares that for him all boasting is excluded except in the "weakness" (cross) of Christ, of which Paul retains a permanent

witness. Therefore, because the gospel is most clearly presented in human weakness, Paul not only preaches Christ crucified but also gladly bears in his body the death of Jesus as the means to manifest his life. This bearing of the weakness of Christ is the apostle's greatest mark of legitimacy.<sup>17</sup>

As a consequence, in marked contrast with his opponents Paul asserts the positive significance of weakness and suffering inasmuch as such weakness reveals the power of Christ and the true meaning of the gospel. As Fuchs writes:

Ce qui autorise l'apôtre, c'est qu'il est appelé par le Christ lui-même à signifier l'évangile dans son existence même. C'est pourquoi, sans paradoxe, l'apôtre peut revendiquer avec force sa faiblesse, parce qu'elle désigne l'honneur qui lui est fait de participer ainsi à l'évangile lui-même.<sup>18</sup>

Thus Paul views his participation in Christ's weakness not only as a means of experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection, but also as a means of fulfilling his own ministry of preaching the gospel. In itself, weakness indicates that Paul is still a part of the created order and that he awaits ultimate redemption; but when weakness becomes a means by which the Lord exercises his power, it shows that God's might has indeed manifested itself in the world through the death and resurrection of Christ, thereby overcoming the inability of the law and the flesh (Rom 5:6; 8:3).

Thus, it may be concluded that the most important contribution Paul makes to the development of the weakness motif is the relation he establishes between the idea of weakness and the cross of Christ. The gospel, for Paul, is nothing more than the weakness of Christ, who "was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). Without the cross of Christ, man would never have known true weakness and learned its deepest meaning. Likewise, Paul also says there is no power available to the Christian except that of the resurrection. For Paul, both weakness and power are inseparably tied up in the death and resurrection of Christ. Therefore if we desire a formal designation of the Pauline idea of weakness at the height of its development, we can hardly do better than call it the *weakness of the cross*; for when we ask Paul what weakness is, he points us to the cross of Christ. Nowhere else in the NT can we find a revelation of weakness comparable to this in degree or scope. In the death of Christ is

<sup>17</sup>To borrow Käsemann's expression (see note 3).

<sup>18</sup>["That which authorizes the apostle, is that he is called by Christ himself to signify the Gospel in his very existence. That is why, without paradox, the apostle can claim with vigor his weakness, because it shows the honor that is given him to participate thusly in the Gospel itself."] Fuchs, "La faiblesse," 253.

revealed "the weakness of God" (1 Cor 1:25). Consequently when Paul speaks of weakness he identifies it with the crucifixion of his Master. This is exactly the same conception that finds expression in the doctrines of the incarnation and humiliation of Christ (cf. Phil 2:5-11). Yet, the weakness revealed in the death of Christ is in no way independent of the apostle's own weakness; it is "in Christ," says Paul, that he is weak (2 Cor 13:4). Thus the apostle does not merely tolerate his weaknesses; he boasts in them and bears with joy the crucifixion of the Lord in his own body as the surest sign of true apostleship. This principle finds its most fundamental and impressive expression in the words of 2 Cor 12:9b: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, in order that Christ's power may rest upon me."

### *Weakness in the Church*

In the third and final place, the terms in the group are developed in relationship to their *ethical* significance for the Christian. After all that has been said on "being weak in Christ," experiencing God's "power perfected in human weakness," etc., this significance of weakness as something which must be overcome is maintained with a great degree of consistency, especially in hortatory contexts. Both 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 refer to the weak in the church who lack the full knowledge of faith, expressed in ascetic and legalistic behavior. While Paul's sympathies very clearly lie with the weak, he admits that they are still immature and need to grow in knowledge and faith. Yet Paul is careful to point out that there is a place for weak Christians in the believing community. They must never be condemned by their stronger brethren; indeed, Paul explains in great detail that the stronger have a special responsibility for the weaker members of the church. In 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14 they are to put aside their differences and live together with the weak in love before their common Lord. In 1 Thess 5:14 they are to stand by their weaker brethren, tenderly and sympathetically consoling, encouraging, and upholding them.<sup>19</sup> In every situation the strong are to fulfill their special duty

<sup>19</sup>Nothing in 1 Thess suggests that the weak in Thessalonica had such difficulties with diet or holy days as the "weak in faith" in Corinth and Rome faced, as is usually suggested. It seems more natural in terms of the context of the parenetic portion of the letter (4:1-5:22) to interpret the expression "the weak" (5:14) as referring to those Thessalonians who were worried about the delay of the parousia and who consequently were in danger of giving up hope. These believers are "weak" in that they have grown weary of waiting for the end and thus face the danger of being overcome by spiritual sleep (cf. 5:1-11). For detailed supports for this view see the writer's study, "The Weak in Thessalonica: A Study in Pauline Lexicography," *JETS* 25/3 (1982) 307-21.

toward the weak in a spirit of unity and love lest they lead them astray, cause them to fall, and ultimately bring about their spiritual ruin.

It is clear that this ethical aspect of weakness in Paul's writings grows out of the apostle's teaching regarding the reciprocal, mutually edifying love of believers. For Paul, the church is composed of individuals who have been vitally united with Jesus Christ and thereby inextricably joined to all others confessing the same Lord. As members of the same spiritual family, Christians are to live together in a spirit of mutual dependence and unity, serving each other in love (Gal 5:13) and in oneness of soul and purpose (Phil 2:1-2). Therefore, Paul again and again speaks out against every form of spiritual individualism, particularly the more refined form which crops up in regard to standards of spirituality in the church. The Corinthians, for example, had turned Paul's preaching of freedom into the libertarian axiom, "all is permitted to me" (1 Cor 6:12), in order to justify their individualistic application of Christian liberty to the eating of meat offered to idols. Although Paul gives due recognition to Christian liberty on the one hand, he emphatically warns the libertarians against abusing their freedom in Christ by giving the weak an occasion to sin (1 Cor 8:9). If the strong wish to assert their liberty without the restraints of love, they will be sinning against the spiritual Head of the church, Christ himself (1 Cor 8:12). Hence, Paul's teaching is not against the expression of Christian liberty, but he insists that the Christian must exercise his liberty before God on the basis of what is good for the entire community and not only for himself. Similarly, Paul warns the stronger Christians in Rome against the same abuses of liberty, for the freedom wrought by Christ is to be tempered by love, concern, and respect for the "brother for whom Christ died" (Rom 14:15).

Another example of Paul's ethical teaching regarding weakness is in the same line and directs itself likewise against individualism in the church. It concerns the special *charismata* in the church, i.e., the "spiritual gifts" which the Holy Spirit imparts to each believer. Especially in Corinth, there existed the danger of individualism interfering with the harmonious and fruitful ministry of believers within the community. From the context of 1 Cor 12-14 it can be inferred that those who claimed a "pneumatic" status in Corinth had placed an inordinately high premium on the more spectacular gifts.<sup>20</sup> Especially the gifts of tongues and of ecstatic prophecy were taken to be the most important pneumatica. 1 Cor 13:1 suggests that these Corinthians perhaps thought they could even speak a type of "heavenly

<sup>20</sup>See B. Pearson, *The Pneumatikos—Psychikos Terminology in 1 Corinthians* (SBLDS 12; Missoula, MT: University of Montana, 1973) 46.

dialect" as evidence that they had attained to the highest degree of spiritual awareness. They had forgotten, or perhaps not known, that only those gifts that exalted Christ as Lord were suitable for Christian worship.<sup>21</sup> Although Paul was willing to acknowledge the validity of the more spectacular gifts of the Spirit, he insisted that love was basic to all other gifts (1 Corinthians 13). He taught further that there are *many* gifts of the Spirit and that *all* are necessary, be they didactic, therapeutic, miraculous, or ecstatic. But Paul also emphasized that no gift in and of itself has any value, no matter how spectacular it may appear, for the essential question is whether or not the gift edifies the church as it is exercised in love. For example, the apostle defends the use of tongues; it was a gift of the Spirit and one which Paul himself possessed and practiced. But because it did little to edify the church (1 Cor 14:2-5) Paul could say that he preferred to speak five words with his mind than thousands in a tongue (1 Cor 14:9). Thus it is not a surprise, in light of the exaltation in Corinth of certain charismatic powers, that the gifts which the Corinthians praised the most are relegated by Paul to the foot of the lists given in 1 Corinthians (12:8-10, 28-30). In the service of Jesus Christ there is no place for individualism, no matter how great or impressive one's abilities may be.

Conversely, Paul must also emphasize that those members of the church who appear to be weaker (1 Cor 12:22) are just as indispensable as the other members for the proper functioning of the body of Christ. Despite their apparent secondary nature and less glamorous appearance, their presence and functioning are vital in sustaining life. To follow Paul's analogy of the human body, we may think of these weaker members as the sensitive internal organs such as the lungs or the liver which are so susceptible to injury and whose only protection is that which the surrounding members afford. These organs, hidden from view and often taken for granted must, however, be present and operative or there is no functional body. All other members, including those possessing greater external beauty and recognition, are dependent upon their existence.

For this reason the apostle is emphatic that all believers, even the "weaker" members, are important, for they are included in the body as a necessary part of the church's development and ministry (1 Cor 12:22). Hence those who have not yet reached a full knowledge of the faith and are still "weak" have their place in the church as a community of growing saints. The many individual members of the community, including those who are less mature, are actually demonstrating rather than negating the purposes of Christ within his church. And in

<sup>21</sup>E. Schweizer, "The Service of Worship: An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 14," *Neotestamentica* (Zürich: Zwingli, 1963) 337.

the final analysis, by virtue of the Christian's redemptive fellowship with Christ weakness is never merely human weakness but an opportunity to manifest God's power. "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor 1:27), and that explains why Paul constantly refers the Christian acceptance of weak individuals back to their relationship with God. Because weaker members are chosen by God, stronger members have no basis to reject them.

This leads us to one final feature that is characteristic of the Pauline concept of weakness: its markedly theocentric character. God depends neither upon man's strength nor his achievements, not even in the church. Instead he seeks out the weak, ungodly, and hostile to redeem them and to fit them as vessels of his strength (Rom 5:6-8). Weakness is—as the Lord had expressed it to Paul—the place where *God's* power is perfected. The Christian has nothing to give of himself; the strength he exhibits is the strength God had infused into him. Thus between Christ and the Christian there is such an intimate identification in weakness that both are said to live "by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4).

#### CONCLUSION

Paul's view of weakness, regardless of how highly developed it may be, is not to be understood only as an abstract doctrine, for it was developed in view of actual conditions. In the first place, weakness impresses upon us the reality of our finiteness and dependence upon God. Human attempts are completely useless to please God; with all of man's effort, he can do nothing. It is just this attitude that Paul declares when he says he is weak. He can claim no credit for any of his successes for he knows he has been sustained by God. If he has achieved anything, it is only by God's power working through a weak, yet yielded vessel. Thus human initiative, human boasting, and human merit have no place in the thought of the apostle Paul.

Likewise, Paul teaches that God's way of exhibiting power is altogether different from man's way. Man tries to overcome his weakness; God is satisfied to use weakness for his own special purposes. Too many Christians become disheartened over their infirmities, thinking that only if they were stronger in themselves they could accomplish more for God. But this point of view, despite its popularity, is altogether a fallacy. God's means of working, rightly understood, is not by making us stronger, but by making us weaker and weaker until the divine power alone is clearly manifested.

Finally, for Paul weakness is the greatest sign of discipleship because it openly identifies the Christian with his crucified Master. By his death Christ proved that God's weakness was stronger than man's

strength. This same Christ has now become the example which Christians are to follow. By bearing the cross of Christ and dying daily with him, they participate in the weakness of Christ. This identification with their Lord enables them to glory in their weaknesses, not merely endure them.

Therefore, rather than wrestle with God for freedom from their weaknesses and limitations, the faithful see in these the power of another, who promised, "My grace is sufficient for you, for strength is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9), and of whom it was written, "He is not weak toward you but is powerful in you. For indeed he was crucified because of weakness, yet he lives because of the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4).