

# *From Privilege to Cruciformity*

**Philippians 3:17-4:1**

**Sermon by Richard A. Kauffman**

**March 13, 2022**

*17Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.*

*4Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

Many of you here know of Michael “MJ” Sharp, I assume. He spent part of his growing up years in Goshen and went to Bethany Christian High School, where he had a bit of a reputation as a trouble-maker. But he was very smart and had an expansive vision of what he wanted to do with his life.

For a while he worked for Mennonite Central Committee in the Congo, talking young soldiers into laying down their weapons and going home. He was very successful at that. Then he worked for the United Nations, also in the Congo, tracing and documenting violent atrocities.

One day when MJ and Serge, a Congolese colleague of his, were returning from a mission, they encountered a bus, parked sideways across the road blocking traffic. Armed and masked men had forced the passengers and the driver off the bus, and made them lie face down and butt-naked on the road. They were bandits taking whatever they wanted from the passengers.

While Serge was shivering in his seat (his words), MJ got out and confronted the bandits: "What are you doing? How can you treat people like this in their own country? This isn't right! Why do you do this?"

The bandits disappeared. MJ asked for the driver. When convinced the bad guys had left, the driver cautiously identified himself. MJ told the people to get dressed and go on their way.

Once MJ was back in the vehicle, Serge asked him: "Michael why did you do that?"

MJ responded: "Don't worry. Two things could happen--we get kidnapped and if we do, my country will look for me, then we'll be freed. Second, they could kill us. And if they do, our spilled blood will bring change to this country."<sup>i</sup>

MJ was a flawed human being; he engaged in some activities I wouldn't endorse. Nevertheless, his life was an example of a cruciformed life (a cross-shaped life). Michael Gorman, Pauline scholar and a friend of mine, says that the key to understanding the Apostle Paul is his cruciform spirituality, a life shaped by the cross.<sup>ii</sup>

The passage I just read starts out thus: **Imitate me** (Philip. 3:17).<sup>iii</sup> Doesn't this sound a bit arrogant? It may conjure up negative feelings we already have against Paul: for example, his apparent suggestions that women are inferior to men and should therefore subject themselves to male leadership; or his seeming lack of attention—even indifference to—the teachings of Jesus.

In thinking about Paul's place in the faith, I have been helped by the perspective of my Pauline teacher at Princeton, J.C. Beker, who said: Paul came after the cross, Jesus before it. Paul isn't a second Christ; he's an interpreter of the Gospel. Jesus isn't an interpreter of the Gospel, he is its incarnation. This positions Paul properly in salvation history.

Paul was a brilliant theologian who rethought Jewish tradition to accommodate the early Christian conviction that Jesus is the Messiah; and he developed a theology that made room for the inclusion of people outside the Jewish community of faith, that is, Gentiles; you and me, in other words. Moreover, he was a tireless preacher of the gospel, putting his own life at risk around the Mediterranean world while planting churches. I doubt we'd be Christians if it weren't for Paul. I don't think we'd be here this morning if it hadn't been for his Christian ministry.

A major reason for this admonition to the people to follow Paul's example was certainly due to the fact that they didn't yet have what we have to guide us in following Jesus: the written gospels. The sharing of the faith at this point was in the oral phase. So not being able to read the gospels, early Christians needed other examples, other models.

Further, Paul is not just calling to attention his own example: it's a communal call: follow the example of other exemplars of discipleship.

By telling his audience to imitate him, Paul was leaning on a well-regarded pedagogy (called *mimesis*), learning by following the example of persons older or more mature than one's self. Children naturally do this without being told. I still remember my children mimicking my actions and realizing I needed to watch what I did or said around them. Adults too mimic the behaviors of other people we admire, even though we do it more unconsciously and subtly.

It is appropriate that we reflect on cruciformed living during Lent. Rather than asking: what should we give up or take on during Lent, we might ask: How should our lives be reshaped toward this kind of cruciformed living—meaning a self-giving, other-regarding lifestyle?

So what does it mean if we're to follow Paul's example:

- Paul was willing to give up his white ... er ... Jewish privilege for the sake of following Jesus (see Philip. 3:4bff): he counted his Jewish tradition as rubbish (could be translated as excrement), compared to the gospel.
- Paul rejected the way of those who made their stomach their god (word for stomach here can mean bowels, loin, or even genitals). In other words, Paul has rejected the way of following our natural human appetites. That too should be an example to his followers—to us. I believe that no genuine spiritual or church renewal happens that doesn't include some prudence about our eating, drinking, and sexual habits.
- Main point: following Paul's example was just another way of saying: follow the example of Jesus. Paul makes this more explicit in 1 Cor. 11:1: *Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.*
- Jesus' self-emptying example is captured well in Philip. 2:5f: *[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

Jesus, not Paul, is the ultimate example of a cruciformed life. He made the ultimate sacrifice, giving up his life on the cross.

So what more can be said about a cruciformed life according to Michael Gorman?

- It's a way of living for Paul, not a way of conceptualizing.
- It's not approving of the subordination or abuse of women or misogyny.

- In fact, Christ's cross provides freedom and liberation from all that, liberation for the abused and the abuser.
- A cruciform spirituality is willing to give up privilege on behalf of those who are not privileged.
- A cruciform spirituality foreswears violence and revenge. Indeed, the cross is God's way of making peace with those alienated and estranged from God. Enemy love lies at the center of cruciform spirituality.
- It is countercultural, providing a prophetic critique against the status quo: it is about giving up self, not finding self; yet oddly, in giving up one's self in conformity to Christ's cross in life and death, we find ourselves, our true purpose—persons for others. It involves a will to love, rather than a will to power—the power of love rather than the love of power.

Back to MJ Sharp: after he and another UN colleague were abducted and killed (5 years ago yesterday, by the way), John Sharp, MJ's father had a chance to speak with Serge, the Congolese colleague who was with MJ the day they came upon the hijacked bus. John asked Serge: "So what do you say now that MJ and Zaida's blood has been shed?"

Serge responded: "Things in Congo are changing. We have a new government. The president has freed political prisoners. Even before the election, things were changing. Michael is still with us, working for change. Everyone knows Michael and Zaida died. Everyone. They will not be forgotten."

A cruciformed life: that's the example MJ left us. He probably could have gone far in the corporate world given his intelligence and ambition. He gave up aspirations for that world in order to enter into the suffering of the people in the Congo. And it cost him his life.

It is definitely an exemplary and sacrificial life that I want to keep pondering for some time, asking, what does it mean for me? What does it mean for you?

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<sup>i</sup> [https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Sharp,\\_Michael\\_Jesse\\_\(1982-2017\)](https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Sharp,_Michael_Jesse_(1982-2017))

<sup>ii</sup> For this sermon I am deeply indebted to Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>iii</sup> There is one possible interpretation of this passage, that Paul was in effect inviting his audience to join him in imitating Christ. It's more likely the NRSV gets it right: that he's inviting them to actually model his behavior. But his call is communal: Paul was encouraging his audience to look at the example of others in their community of faith.