



HOLY TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Principles, Week #4 **ABRIDGED VERSION BY DUSTYN EUDALY**

What is True Ministry, Biblically Defined?

Geerhardus Vos was born in 1862 in the Netherlands to godly parents, his father serving as a Dutch Reformed minister. The Vos family moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan when Geerhardus was nineteen years old. Geerhardus showed keen intellectual ability and quickly progressed in his studies in Grand Rapids, Princeton Seminary and then Europe. After a teaching post in Grand Rapids, he was called as professor of biblical theology at Princeton Seminary where he served until his retirement, teaching alongside his dear friend, B.B. Warfield, with whom he would take daily walks in which they discussed the truths of God's Word. Vos was also Cornelius Van Til's most influential professor there at Princeton Seminary. (In fact, Van Til preached Vos' graveside funeral service.) The essence of Vos' theological contribution is that he accented the marvelous truth that the Bible in its entirety is the unfolding of the history of redemption for God's people, a history which culminated in the arrival of the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ. Vos saw the Bible as God-centered, Christ-centered to the core. Many liberal theologians were pitting history against an orthodox view of God: "History is the realm of man and so the place of errors and contradictions." Vos dismantled such misguided thinking, reminding us that history belongs to the eternal God and that biblical history is the actual means in which God revealed himself as Redeemer of his people. When we read the Scriptures and of the redemption revealed therein, we see nothing less than the meeting of eternity (God) and time (man) in the incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity who bore away God's eternal wrath for us in this world. We should bow down and worship in response.

This is a sermon preached to seminary students at the chapel of Princeton Seminary. Vos' goal was to define new covenant ministry in its surpassing glory to ministry of the old covenant. Paul was answering godless attacks upon his ministry, attacks which had emerged from within the church. Not surprisingly, Paul's answer to his critics, while referencing himself, centered upon the exalted Lord Jesus Christ whom he knew by grace and was intent on proclaiming in times of peace and times of duress. Paul's Gospel is our Gospel. His new covenant ministry is our new covenant ministry. Pray we will follow in this apostolic train. **Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-4:6 before reading the sermon and pray for the Spirit's illuminating guidance.**

[K:NWTS 8/1 (May 1993) 3-19]

The More Excellent Ministry (ABRIDGED) *by Geerhardus Vos*

2 Corinthians 3:18

1. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in the context of ruthless attacks upon his apostolic ministry; attacks against his person and his teaching.
2. Even his sacrificial willingness to decline a financial remuneration was used as evidence against him; and in the same breath he was accused of financial impropriety. He was also accused of teaching a different gospel than the other apostles.

3. He was accused of teaching about a veiled Jesus which was merely the result of his allegedly wild ecstatic spiritual experiences. False teachers said his message was incomprehensible and “veiled.” Paul’s opponents demanded instead that the clarity of the Mosaic Covenant be reinstated and that a Messiah be proclaimed who conformed to their understanding of the Mosaic Covenant. This error of the false teachers, like all false teaching, struck at the heart of the Person of the Savior. “A certain gospel requires a certain kind of Christ, and a certain type of Christ a certain gospel.”
4. Paul’s office of apostle was attacked as weak and ignoble because of his commitment to an allegedly weak Savior. Paul overlooked personal slights unless their unjust claims endangered the churches he served. But he had to answer the charges against his apostolic office because of the implications of such claims. “The pride of office was stronger in him than the sense of personal honor.” Paul had to defend his office because he had to defend his Christ, for the sake of Christ’s honor and the spiritual well-being of the church. Ironically, the attack of these false teachers led to what is preserved for us in 2 Corinthians 3-4 as one of the great statements in the entirety of the New Testament regarding the glories of New Testament ministry. (What these opponents intended for evil, God intended for good; even for our spiritual good today!)
5. Paul’s opponents claimed his message was one of weakness. Paul answered by setting forth the glory of his message and therefore the distinction of being its message-bearer. He gloried both in the message and in his privilege of being a participant in it. By this he was not referring to his or other ministers’ personal ministerial gifts, but to the glory of the realities of the New Covenant to which he belongs and of which he partakes. Moses was a minister of the Old Covenant; Paul was a minister of the New Covenant. Each was enabled to become a channel through which supernatural currents flow. Paul’s participation in the New Covenant involved a triumphal procession with God as the conqueror and Paul a follower in God’s train.
6. Paul contrasted Old Covenant glory with New Testament glory. He wanted to show that not only was his ministry not a ministry of weakness, but one of surpassing glory more than even that of the Old Covenant. He showed a contrast between pairings: God and Moses in contrast with Christ and Paul, the punchline being that New Covenant ministry (embodied in the apostle Paul) is greater than Old Covenant ministry (embodied in Moses). “Than Moses no greater name was known in the annals of Old Testament redemption. Prophet, priest, lawgiver in one, he towers high above all the others. And to Paul, the son of Israel, all this wealth of sacred story gathered round the head of Moses must have been a thousand times more impressive than it can be to us. What an overwhelming sense then of the greatness of his own ministry must Paul have possessed, when he dared conceive the thought of being greater than Moses! ‘Verily that which has been made glorious has been made not-glorious in this respect by reason of the glory that surpasseth’ (2 Cor. 3:10).”
7. Paul spoke of the greatness of his ministry. **His first point:** *He contrasted the transitoriness of Old Covenant glory (it passed away) with the eternal, abiding/remaining New Covenant glory.* “The day was bound to come when its splendor would vanish. On the other hand, the New Covenant is final and abiding. The times cannot outgrow, the developments of history cannot antiquate it, it carries within itself the pledge of eternity.”

8. Moses and Paul were aware of the fading and abiding nature of their respective glories. Moses wore a veil over his face to hide the disappearance of his glory. Paul, on the other hand, ministered with open face in contrast to Moses (2 Corinthians 3:13).
9. The Old Covenant was subject to the wasting power of time affected by sin, even as it was a religion of the grace of redemption. The Old Covenant demanded something to come which would fulfill it and not be subject to such “bitter taste of transitoriness.”
10. The New Covenant brought with it the triumphant song of life and assurance of immortality. “The note of futility and depression has disappeared, and in place of this the rapture of victory over death and decay, the exultant feeling of immersion in the atmosphere of eternity prevail...The joy of working in the dawn of the world to come quickens the pulse of all New Testament servants of Christ. Paul felt that the product of his labors, the output of his life, would shine with unfading splendor in the palace of God.” IS IT JUST ME, OR DOES THAT SOUND LIKE A JOYFUL DESCRIPTION OF TRUE, NEW COVENANT MINISTRY?! WE ARE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ETERNAL ORDER THROUGH THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST. LET’S THANK GOD AND BE FAITHFUL TO THIS GREAT CHARGE!
11. **His second point:** *A difference between Old Covenant and New Covenant clearness/openness.* Moses veiled his face’s glory which reminded Israel that his ministry did in fact involve glory. But it also showed the transitory nature of his glory and that Israel was ignorant about what was taking place. Because of the provisional period of the Old Covenant as God’s people awaited Christ, there was an overarching provisional quality even to their knowledge. “Every preparatory stage in the history of redemption can fully understand itself only in the light of that which fulfills it. The veil of the Old Covenant is lifted only in Christ.” Certainly, Israel was guilty for her misunderstanding of the Old Covenant and for not seeing it was a preparatory stage of the covenant which would culminate in Christ. After all, she for the most part rejected Christ when he came even as he “who alone could interpret Israel to itself.”
12. In contrast to these Old Covenant realities, Paul says he ministered with unveiled face, openness, self-intelligence and transparency. He spoke fully and freely and plainly the whole counsel of God. “Not the delicate procedure of the diplomat, who hides his aim, but the stately stepping forward of the herald who renders an authoritative pronouncement, characterizes his task to Paul's own mind. He discards all human artifice and invention, all unsincere and undignified devices evidently employed by some at the time, as they are still not infrequently at the present time, to render the gospel palatable to his hearers. He scorns, where principles are concerned, all compromise and concession: “Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy, we faint not, but we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the Word of God deceitfully, but by the manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God” (2 Cor. 4:1, 2). NOW THAT IS A MOUTHFUL OF WISDOM FOR THE MODERN CHURCH. SOUNDS LIKE VAN TIL, DOESN’T IT?!
13. Vos develops Paul’s thinking with five points: **i)** “There is a straightforwardness, a simplicity in preaching, which is proportionate to the preacher's own faith in the absoluteness and inherent truthfulness of his message. No shallow optimism about the adjustableness of

Christianity to ever changing conditions, about its self-rejuvenating power after apparent decline, can possibly make up for a lack of this fundamental conviction.” I FIRST READ THESE WORDS OVER TWENTY YEARS AGO AND HAVE PRAYED EVER SINCE THAT MY OWN PREACHING MIGHT BE TRUE TO THE BIBLICAL GENIUS HERE OF VOS’ WORDS. In contrast, consider those who alter the message for the sake of palatability to and the allegedly “new” needs of one’s hearers while still wanting to be considered biblical in one’s handling of God’s Word: “Something that needs the constant use of cosmetics to keep up the appearance of youth is a caricature of the Christianity of the New Testament. Its case is worse than it imagines: it has not merely passed its youth, but is in danger of losing its very life.”

14. **ii)** New Covenant ministry is bound up with the person and work of the Savior. The New Covenant is “a Christ-dispensation in the fullest sense of the word. What is possessed by the New Covenant is not the glory of God as such, but the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Buckle your seatbelt for these marvelous words and pray that this Christ-centered truth will shape our ministry here!! “Paul beholds the glory of Christ as in a mirror, or, according to another rendering, reflects it as a mirror. His entire task, both on its communicative and on its receptive side, can be summed up in his reflecting back the Christ-glory caught by himself unto others. To behold Christ and to make others behold him is the substance of his ministry. All the distinctive elements of Paul's preaching relate to Christ, and bear upon their face his image and superscription. God is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. In the procuring of righteousness Christ is the one efficient cause. In Christ, believers were chosen, called, justified, and will be glorified. To be converted is to die with Christ and to rise with him. The entire Christian life, root and stem and branch and blossom, is one continuous fellowship with Christ.”
15. **iii)** “But to say that the gospel is full of Christ is still too general a statement. What the apostle affirms is that it is particularly the gospel of the glory of Christ...the Savior’s exalted state since his resurrection...” “The rendering, ‘beholding as in a mirror,’ admirably fits this representation. As a mirror is not an end in itself, but exists for the sake of what is seen through it, so the gospel serves no other purpose than to bring men face to face with the glory of Christ. It is naught else but a tale of Christ, a Christ in words, the exact counterpart of Christ's person and work in their glorious state. Because of the consciousness of this, Paul felt himself greater than Moses, for the partial light that shone on the latter's face has now become omnipresent and fills the New Covenant. Under the Old Dispensation the servants of God saw only from afar the brightness of the Messiah's rising. Now he is visible from nearby, the One filling all in all, occupying the entire field of vision. The humblest of preachers surpasses in this respect the greatest of Old Testament evangelists. He carries a gospel all-fragrant and all-radiant with Christ.”
16. **iv)** Paul’s New Covenant ministry is “a ministry of abundant forgiveness and righteousness.” “This too is related to Christ’s glory which he received subsequent to his self-sacrificial death. Consequently the servant of the New Covenant can attach his ministry of pardon and peace to the glory of Christ. Hence Paul in working out the comparison between Moses and himself with special reference to the question of righteousness reduces the difference to terms of glory: ‘For if the ministry of condemnation is glory, much rather does the ministry of righteousness exceed in glory’ (2 Cor. 3:9).” PEOPLE OF GOD: WE GET TO

PROCLAIM SUNDAY AFTER SUNDAY THE PEACE THAT SURPASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING WHICH COMES THROUGH THE BLOOD OF CHRIST THAT WAS SHED ON THE CROSS ONCE AND FOR ALL FOR OUR SINS. THE GOSPEL OF THE GLORY OF CHRIST.

17. The Old Covenant promised a Redeemer while convicting the world of sin. The Gospel came through the language of symbols. But now the veil has been rent “and through it an unobstructed view is obtained of the glory of God on the face of Jesus Christ. And with this vision comes the assurance of atonement, satisfaction, access to God, peace of conscience, liberty, eternal life.”
18. v) Note the personal quality to New Covenant ministry! It is a high privilege to be a minister of the New Covenant and to get to handle these transforming realities with regularity. “... the Christ-glory is a living and self-communicating power, transforming both those who mediate it and those who receive it from glory to glory into the likeness of the Lord. Paul here again has in mind the difference between Moses and himself. Moses' own condition and appearance were only externally and temporarily affected by the vision on the mount. After a while his face became as before. And what he was unable to retain for himself he was unable to communicate unto others. Over against this the apostle places the two facts, first that the servants of the New Covenant are internally and permanently transformed by beholding the image of the Lord, and second that they effect a similar transformation in others to whom through their ministry the knowledge of the glorified Savior comes. In its first part this representation was doubtless connected with the apostle's personal experience. There had been a point in his life at which the perception of the glorified Lord had been for him attended with the most marvelous change it is possible to undergo. The glory that shone around him on the road to Damascus had in one moment, in the twinkling of an eye, swept away all his old beliefs and ideals, his sinful passion and pride, and made of him a new creature, to whom the past things were like the faint memory of some distant phase of existence. And what had happened there, Paul had afterwards seen repeating itself thousands of times, less conspicuously, to be sure, but not on that account less truly, less miraculously. To express this aspect of his ministry he employs the formula, that it is a ministry of the Spirit, that is of the Holy Spirit, whereas that of Moses was one of the letter. The Spirit stands for the living, energizing, creative grace of God, the letter for the inability of the law as such to translate itself into action.”
19. The relationship between the glory of Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit transformed Christ's human nature at his resurrection and made it “glorious beyond description.” The Spirit remains with Christ in his exaltation state. So, v. 17: “The Lord is the Spirit” does not confuse Christ with the Holy Spirit in terms of the Persons of the Trinity, but speaks to “inseparableness of the exalted Christ and the Holy Spirit in the world of salvation.” WE WILL SEE THIS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRIST AND THE SPIRIT AS WE STUDY THE BOOK OF ACTS AND ESPECIALLY THE DAY OF PENTECOST WHEN CHRIST BAPTIZED THE CHURCH WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT WHOM HE HAD RECEIVED IN HIS EXALTATION.
20. More on the relationship between Christ and the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 15:45, Christ “became a life-giving Spirit”, is best interpreted by reference to 2 Corinthians 3:17 which we

saw above. That is, Christ received the Spirit as life-giving power in his exaltation. And the glory of Christ now communicates itself and reproduces itself in the believer and transforms him by the power of this Spirit. “The minister of the law, the letter, can never taste that sweetest joy of seeing the message he brings incarnate and reincarnate itself in the lives of others. The minister of the New Covenant does taste of this joy: he writes with the Spirit of the living God in tables that are hearts of flesh.” RECALL WINK’S SENIOR SEND-OFF CHARGE! AND AS FOR THIS FOLLOWING QUOTE, ALL I CAN SAY IS **WOW. WOW.** IF YOU HAVE A LOW VIEW OF THE CHURCH AND OF TRUE GOSPEL MINISTRY, SIT WITH THE FOLLOWING: “Paul had the sensation of coming through his ministry into the closest touch with the forthputting of the saving energy of God himself. He was aware that to his preaching of the gospel there belonged an invisible background, that at every step his presentation of the truth was accompanied by a ministry from heaven conducted by the Christ of glory. His work was for him imbued with divine power, the life-blood of the supernatural pulsed through it. His service, at each point where it touched men, marked the line and opened channels for the introduction of divine creative forces into human souls. So vivid was this consciousness of involvement in the supernatural that nothing short of a comparison of God's word through him with the divine word at the first creation could adequately express it to Paul's mind: ‘God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, has shined into our hearts for the purpose of our imparting the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:6).” WE ARE ON HOLY, HEAVENLY GROUND WHEN GOD’S GOSPEL IS GIVEN US FROM GOD’S WORD. AND KEEP IN MIND, PAUL WAS REFUTING HIS CRITICS HERE. HE WASN’T INTIMIDATED BY THEM ONE BIT; HE ONLY ANSWERED THEM BECAUSE THE GLORY OF HIS SAVIOR WAS ON THE LINE, AND PAUL KNEW HIS PEOPLE NEEDED TO BE REMINDED OF WHAT **TRUE** GOSPEL MINISTRY ACTUALLY IS.

21. Every Christian participated in the same New Covenant glory which Paul did as an apostle! “When the Apostle says "we all are transformed" (2 Cor. 3:18– typo in the manuscript regarding the verse), it is evident that the statement is not limited to the apostles or preachers of the gospel, but includes, so far at least as the passive experience is concerned, all believers.” THIS MEANS **YOU!** SOAK IN THIS TRUTH. “It was a reason for profound satisfaction to Paul that he needed not stand in the midst of the congregation of God as another Moses, partaking of a light from God in which the others could not share, solitary in his splendor, but that the larger share of what he affirmed of himself had through him become the possession of the simplest believer, a transfiguration of spirit like his own by the beholding of the Lord. Refracted from numberless mirrors, the light multiplied and intensified itself for each on whom it fell. Nevertheless, even so a measure of incommunicable distinction remained.”
22. Ministers have much contact with these Gospel realities. Ministers must therefore, of all people, be godly men!!!!!!! PRAY FOR STEVE LIGHT, JAMES RITCHEY AND ME TO BE THESE SORTS OF MEN: “Since the reproduction into the likeness of Christ is dependent on and proportionate to the vision of the Savior, and since this vision from the nature of the case is more constantly present to the minister of the Gospel than to the common believer, it follows that in the former an altogether unique result may be expected. So it was undoubtedly with Paul. He had no need of testing the principle in others; a more

direct and convincing evidence lay in its effect upon himself. He was aware of a renewal of the inner man, progressing from day to day, and in which there was observable this law of increase, that the more he did to make Christ known, the deeper the lineaments of the character of Christ were impressed upon his soul. [AND DO NOT MISS HOW PAUL'S VIEW OF SUFFERING FITS INTO ALL OF THIS.] Even the hardships befalling his flesh in the service of the Lord were contributory to this: 'We are always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh' (2 Cor. 4:10). And: 'Our light affliction, which is for the moment, works for us more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory' (v. 17). 'Therefore we faint not, though our outward man decay, yet the inner man is renewed day by day' (v. 16). Thus the apostle's ministry, while exercised upon others, became unto him an unintermittent ministry to his own soul, ever increasingly assimilating him to the glory of Christ." BOW DOWN AND PRAY AFTER READING SUCH TRUTH.

23. Paul spoke to specific circumstances in Corinth, but his description of New Covenant ministry abides for us today as much it did back then "for it is drawn from the nature of the gospel itself, and the gospel is the gospel of him who remains the same yesterday and today and forever." The errors of yesterday always encroach upon the church in subsequent times because the sinful human heart is the same. "In modernized apparel they [old errors] confront us still to the present day. There are still abroad forms of a Christless gospel. There prevails still a subtle form of legalism which would rob the Savior of his crown of glory, earned by the cross, and would make of him a second Moses, offering us the stones of the law instead of the life-bread of the gospel. And, oh the pity and shame of it, the Jesus that is being preached but too often is a Christ after the flesh, a religious genius, the product of evolution, powerless to save! Let us pray that it may be given to the church to repudiate and cast out this error with the resoluteness of Paul. There is need for her ministers of placing themselves ever afresh in the light of the great apostolic consciousness revealed in our text. They should learn once more to bear their message out of the fulness of conviction that it is an unchangeable message, reliable as the veracity of God himself. Grant God, that it may become on the lips of his servants truly from age to age, a gospel from which the name of Christ crowds out every other human name, good tidings of atonement and righteousness and supernatural renewal; to preacher and people alike, what it was to Paul and his converts, a mirror of vision and transfiguration after the image of the Lord." AND ALL GOD'S PEOPLE SAID...**AMEN**.