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Able Ministers in the New Year

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Able Ministers in the New Year

By LORENZ WUNDERLICH

2 Corinthians 3:4-6: "Such trust have we through Christ toward God, not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God; who also has made us able ministers of the New Testament, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

This Word of God through St. Paul the apostle is preeminently for those who are privileged to stand in the diaconate of our Lord and who perform diaconal functions for Him. To be sure, it does not offer the catena of one and one-half dozen qualifications which the same apostolic writer forges in his letters to Timothy and Titus. Nevertheless many of the ministerial qualities there prescribed are properly classifiable under some of the key expressions of the passages above: *πεποιθήσιν δὲ τοιαύτην ἔχομεν διὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ πρὸς τὸν θεόν, ὃς ἡ ἰκανότης ἡμῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ, ὃς ἰκάνωσεν ἡμᾶς διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης.*

Key words indeed: *πεποιθήσιν, ἰκανότης, διάκονος!* not primarily because they stand high in the vocabulary of the apostle to the Gentiles—though, parenthetically, it is of note that one of them in its various forms recurs more than four dozen times in the Pauline corpus and no less than five times in this pericope, and another is repeated three times within a sequence of 17 words—not primarily because of this fact, but because the Spirit of God led St. Paul to know that these concepts form basic qualities of Christian dedication in ministerial service.

Thank God therefore that the same life-giving Spirit of God also prompted Saint

Paul to articulate this truth so simply and yet so profoundly in this pentalog: "Our sufficiency is from God." Simply, because these words proclaim some elementary facts of ministerial service: humility and glory; profoundly, because they enlist and require the will, the power, and the grace of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to establish and sustain them.

Humility was one of the hallmarks of St. Paul's life and profession. Saul, the legalistic zealot, had become a child of grace under Him who sought him out on the Damascus road. The nature, extent, and completeness of his divine transformation are nowhere more vividly revealed than in these familiar conclusions: "Man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law" (Rom. 3:28), and again: "By grace are ye saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:8,9). And yet, even this child of grace deploras the sins which so easily beset him: "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present within me, but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18). Even this child of grace still laments: "The good that I would I do not, but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Rom. 7:19). Even this child of grace still agonizes: "O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24). And the resolution of his spiritual dilemma, of this rending dualism of his existence? Where else than in Him to whom this humble eucharist is offered:

"I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:25)

As in this apostle's life, so also in his profession. He who found Saul on the Damascus road and constituted him a child of grace also established him as an apostle of grace. This miracle of God's grace in his life remained rooted in St. Paul's contemplation, constantly generating deep humility, adoring amazement, and reverential awe. So great was this humility that only a superlative could capture it: "I am the least of the apostles, that am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God" (1 Cor. 15:9). So great was this humility, in fact, that nothing less than a super superlative could do justice to it: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). And once more, the immediate result which this mercy of God achieved? What else than this humble thanksgiving: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord . . . for putting me into the ministry, who was before a blasphemer and a persecutor." (1 Tim. 1:12, 13)

But this humility of St. Paul was not a diffident, fawning, simpering Uriah Heep type of meekness. Though absolute and unconditional toward God, yet, by its very origin, it engendered confidence, courage, and glory for and in the divinely appointed position and task. Yes, properly understood, St. Paul's humility was an aggressive humility. Therefore he pointedly identified himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ in nine of the 13 letters which bear his name. Therefore in the salutation of his letters to the Corinthians, among some of whom his apostleship was questioned, his motives

impugned, his appearance ridiculed, his speech derided, he significantly founded his official position on the will of God. Therefore this "least of the apostles" had the divine audacity to assert: "But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace which was bestowed on me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all" (1 Cor. 15:10). Therefore this "less than the least of all saints" was bold to add: "that I should . . . make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery which from the beginning of the world has been hid in God" (Eph. 3:9). Therefore this "blasphemer and persecutor" could insist: "For this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth His mercy for an example to those who were to believe on Him for life everlasting" (1 Tim. 1:16). Therefore in the overall appraisal of the demands and experiences of his ministry, in abundance and in want, in joy and in heartache, and under the thorn of the flesh, St. Paul could confidently maintain: "I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me." (Phil. 4:13)

The glory of his apostleship, the glory of his ministry, the glory of his mission, the glory of his message—all this the Spirit of God led St. Paul to be quick to see, eager to acknowledge, zealous to proclaim, vehement to defend, fervid to exalt, because they comprised the treasures of his life, because they composed the ingredients of the sufficiency which God alone supplied, because they made him and all others who attain to that high privilege "able ministers of the New Testament."

Thus St. Paul aligned himself with all

the saints of the centuries whose brightest insignia is that of Gospel service. Thus he walked in the footsteps of God's ministering angels and echoed the angelic chorus in its irenic doxology. Above all, thus the apostle emulated and exemplified the precept and the pattern of his Lord: "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto but to minister." (Mark 10:45)

To find the pertinence of all this to every minister is left cheerfully and confidently to each one individually. For he too shares this trust through Christ toward God. He too is not sufficient of himself,

but his sufficiency comes from God. He too by the life-bestowing and life-sustaining power of the Spirit of God, is a minister of the New Testament. May he then, humbly, in the maximum awareness of his own weaknesses and imperfections, but also courageously and gloriously, in the full conviction of the grace of our God, reflect, enact, and convey his trust in God through Jesus Christ—both in the days of the year immediately ahead and in all the days of his ministry which the gracious God may still allot to him.

St. Louis, Mo.