

The Message of Second Corinthians: 2 Corinthians as the Legitimation of the Apostle

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Paul does not write abstract theological disquisitions. His word is always a “word on target,” intended to address the needs of his readers at times in which he himself cannot be present with them.¹ All of Paul’s letters are likewise personal. Second Corinthians is intensely so. The question at stake here is the legitimation of an apostle, and not merely any apostle, but the legitimation of Paul as apostle to the Corinthians.² Precisely in its particularity, 2 Corinthians speaks to the present, and it does so profoundly. As the Corinthians themselves recognize, the marks of an apostle are the marks of a Christian. Apostolic existence is Christian existence as large-screen video, set before the eyes of the world, the angels, and all human beings (1 Cor 4:9).

Already when Paul wrote our 1 Corinthians, Paul’s legitimacy as apostle was in question within the Corinthian church.³ The church had divided into factions, each of which promoted the apostolic figure that seemed best to them: “I am of Paul, and I am of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I am of Christ” (1 Cor 1:12). The final claim in the list probably should be understood as an

attempt to outdo all of the rest. Every apostle is of Christ, by definition (2 Cor 10:7; cf. 13:3). The claim to be “of Christ” likely signifies a direct, visionary knowledge of the risen Lord, and anticipates the challenges to Paul’s apostolic authority that arose first within the church (2 Cor 1:23-2:11) and then from without (2 Cor 10:1-12:13). It is this situation to which Paul responds in 2 Corinthians. But it was already incipiently present when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and appears there as the weightiest problem with which Paul had to deal in this troubled church. The first section of the body of 1 Corinthians, with its appeal to “the word of the cross” as the apostolic message (1 Cor 1:18-2:16), is itself a definition of apostolic authority and a defense of the apostolic mission in Corinth. It concludes with a reference to Paul’s dispatching Timothy to Corinth as well as his own subsequent arrival there (1 Cor 4:14-21). This “apostolic parousia” is a usual mark of the ending of the letter-body and the transition to the closing of the letter. While much of 1 Corinthians is yet to follow, the weight that Paul places upon his definition and defense of apostolic ministry shows that it is the fundamental issue at stake already in this letter. Paul likewise interjects a defense of his apostolic calling into his discussion of idol-meats: he cannot appeal to his example in service to the Corinthians, without their understanding the freedom he exercises as apostle in refusing to accept funds from them (1 Cor 9:1-27). More trouble is to follow, but it was already brewing when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.

When Paul writes 2 Corinthians, matters have become much worse. He had made an emergency visit to Corinth, in which an individual within the church had openly resisted his apostolic authority, and had received at least tacit support from the church itself. In the wake of this disaster, Paul wrote a letter to the church “through many tears” that undoubtedly called upon them to confront this offender themselves (2 Cor 1:23-2:11). In the face of the seriousness of this situation, Paul cancelled a promised visit to Corinth, not wanting to bring about another unhappy and unsuccessful confrontation like the one he had just experienced (2 Cor 1:23-2:4). He instead sent Titus as his emissary in an attempt to resolve the situation. In order to communicate his love and concern to them Paul brackets the body of 2 Corinthians with his report of his distress over them as he awaited the report of Titus’s mission and his joy over its success (2 Cor 2:12-13; 7:5-16). Of all the suffering that the apostle has to experience, the burden of the churches is the heaviest of all (2 Cor 11:28-29). The happy end to Titus’s

mission meant that the Corinthian church was reconciled to its apostle, at least temporarily (2 Cor 7:5-16).

In 2 Corinthians, Paul seeks to build upon that success in the face of the fresh challenge that had come from outsiders who had made their way to Corinth and presented apostolic claims. As a prosperous center of travel and trade, Corinth was also a stopping-off point for early Christian missions, as is evident from the factions in Corinth that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 4:15). It is no wonder, then, that travelling preachers found their way there. They seem to have made their way to Corinth after the resolution of the recent crisis, but it is not impossible that they were there already, and were able to establish their claims within the church after the local, Corinthian leader who had offended Paul had been removed. In any case, the relationship between the apostle and the Corinthians remained fragile, despite their recent reconciliation. In the new threat of apostolic claimants, the fundamental issue, the question of the marks of an apostle came to the fore. Who is the true apostle, Paul or one of the intruders? Now Paul himself stands at the center of the conflict. His calling as apostle cannot be separated from his person. The form of Christ's saving presence within the world is being tested in him.

THE OPPONENTS OF PAUL IN 2 CORINTHIANS

We know very little of the theology of these new opponents of Paul at Corinth. As is always the case, we have to read it off of what Paul says about them in the letter. Paul's direct statements about them appear only in 2 Corinthians 10-13. They based their apostolic claims on the performance of wonders, ecstatic visions, and rhetorical powers (2 Cor 10:10; 12:1, 12). They brought to the Corinthians, "another Jesus, another Spirit, another Gospel" (2 Cor 11:4). Yet Paul does not attack any explicit theological assertion on their part. His argument against them is directed against their claim to apostolic authority based on their personal powers and charisma (especially the "fool's speech," 11:22-12:13). It is hardly likely that Paul holds back from challenging a theology that they offered. It is much more likely that they had no developed theology to offer the Corinthians. It is their practical theology, with its implicit assumptions about Christ, the Spirit, and the Gospel that Paul must address. There were parallels to these sorts of figures within the Greco-Roman world of the first century, in both Hellenistic "divine-men" and Jewish exorcists and wonder-workers. As a cultural phenomenon, Paul's

opponents in Corinth were undoubtedly related to them, especially to the latter. But we gain no real knowledge about their message or the problem that Paul addresses in Corinth from this background. In the most important respect, the opponents of Paul in Corinth were unique. They claimed to be apostles of the risen Christ. Their powers were supposed to have been mediated by him. Their words were his words.

Paul's comparison of his ministry with that of Moses in 2 Corinthians 3:1-18 offers no good reason to think that his opponents were Judaizers or that they appealed to Moses and the Law as a basis of their powers. The question of Gentile circumcision arises only once in the Corinthian correspondence, and appears as the counterpart to Paul's urging circumcised Jews not to undergo epispasm (1 Cor 7:18). It is not too surprising that this fractured church displayed tendencies in opposing directions. But where Jews are tempted to abandon their cultural identity, there can hardly be much pressure on Gentiles to become circumcised. At the very beginning of its existence, the church had experienced a violent expulsion from the synagogue (Acts 18:1-17). It is not too likely that it now was ready to return there. Furthermore, the vocabulary of the disputes over circumcision does not appear in 2 Corinthians 3. Paul speaks of "the letter" and "the Spirit" rather than "the Law" and "Christ," and of "the sons of Israel" rather than of "Jews" or "circumcision." He does not appeal to his readers to reject Judaizing nor does he attack his opponents in this chapter. Instead he draws upon Scripture to expose the nature of the apostolic mission and the realities that it entails. By way of contrast, the story of Moses's ministry of the Law becomes a mirror in which the apostolic ministry—the glory of which presently is unseen—becomes visible. Paul likewise connects the Corinthian demand for letters attesting the validity of an apostle to God's written address to Israel (and therewith to all humanity) in the written code of the Law. The purpose and intent of that ministry was to bring death and condemnation, so that Christ might bring life and righteousness. The proof of apostolic ministry does not lie in any letter that Paul might bring. It lies in the Corinthians themselves, and in their faith in Christ (2 Cor 3:3). The whole of 2 Corinthians is thus centered on the legitimation of Paul as apostle to the Corinthians, in the face of the challengers who offer their outward and visible powers (together, most likely, with letters of commendation) as proof of their apostolic authority.

THE STRUCTURE AND UNITY OF 2 CORINTHIANS

We have noted the way in which Paul structures the letter around his grief over the Corinthians and his relief over Titus's fruitful mission there (1:23-2:17; 7:5-16). Chapter 3 begins the body of the letter as a presentation of the nature of the apostolic ministry. Paul then begins to speak about himself directly, first in relationship to God and the message of the Gospel that he bears as an apostle of Christ (4:1-5:10), and then as God's agent with respect to the Corinthians (5:11-21). The body of the letter concludes with a direct appeal to the Corinthians (6:1-7:16). The two final units of the letter serve as the hortatory conclusion to Paul's argument (8:1-9:15; 10:1-13:14).

Paul's call to the Corinthians to complete their promised contribution to the collection for Jerusalem is a practical extension of his appeal to them to recognize him as their apostle (8:1-9:15). He does not seek to bind them to himself, but to Christ and therewith to the other churches, especially Jerusalem (11:2; cf. 1:24). In a tangible way, the collection serves this end, just as their completion of it entails submission to the apostle.

The final unit of the letter, returns to the theme of the legitimation of the apostle, and more precisely, to the legitimation of Paul as the apostle to the Corinthians in the face of the challenge from his opponents (10:1-13:14). Paul has spoken of himself frequently in the body of the letter already. But now his appeal to the Corinthians is much more personal and direct, especially in his "fool's speech," where he ironically commends himself in the terms that the opponents use in their self-commendations (11:22-12:10). The change in tone over against the irenic and conciliatory body of the letter is understandable in more than one respect. It is the minds and hearts of the Corinthians for which Paul battles. It would do very little good to challenge the opponents if the Corinthians are blind to the issues at stake. The body of the letter serves as a preparation for the bold assault on the opponents and equally sharp words he has for the Corinthians in these chapters. Likewise, it makes good sense rhetorically for Paul to capitalize on the recent victory that had been won in Titus's visit to Corinth. At least for the moment, the church had been reconciled to the apostle. The body of the letter concludes with his rejoicing over this happy event, and his expression of confidence in the Corinthians. Nevertheless, there are clear indications that all is not well in the relationship between the apostle and the church, from his explanation for his failure to visit Corinth (1:15-2:4), to his appeal

to them to be reconciled to God—and to him (6:1-7:1; 7:2-4).⁴ Paul's tone does not change entirely in 2 Corinthians 10-13, and is in fact correlated to the argument of 2 Corinthians 1-7. Paul opens his argument by appealing to the Corinthians on the basis of "the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (10:1). His ironic appeal to be bold while he is absent (10:2), together with his following request to speak "as a fool" (11:1, 16), implies the impropriety of his forced "self-commendation" and thus presupposes the argument of the preceding chapters. Even more so, his open appeal to his weakness, which does not appear *expressis verbis* in 2 Corinthians 1-7, serves as an obvious complement to the argument there (11:21, 29-30; 12:5, 9-10; 13:3-4, 9). It may be prompted in part by the charge of his adversaries (10:10), but it also sums up the apostolic existence that Paul describes in the earlier chapters (see esp. 12:9-10). Likewise, and decisively, the argument on the basis of weakness most likely would not be persuasive to a church intent on power. Without the background of the argument of 2 Corinthians 1-7, in which Paul presents the life of an apostle as one of suffering and deliverance, his words in 2 Corinthians 10-13 would likely fall on deaf ears.

THE THEOLOGY AND MESSAGE OF 2 CORINTHIANS

As we have noted, the message of 2 Corinthians cannot be separated from Paul, the messenger. This truth remains to this day. It makes a world of difference that this defense of apostolic ministry comes from the suffering—and delivered—apostle, and not from one of his comfortable opponents. The comfort that the apostle received in his affliction has been passed on through his word to countless others through the centuries, and still comes to us through him even now. In its own way, 2 Corinthians underscores the unique and irreplaceable role of the apostle in interpreting the message of the crucified and risen Jesus to the world. The life of the apostle is the life of the Christian written large. Very few have been called to bear the hardships that Paul bore. But all are called to bear hardship in some measure, and likewise to share in the hardships of others. As the apostle of Christ, in suffering and deliverance, Paul offers true comfort to all of us.

The word that has been placed within the apostle bears profound hermeneutical implications. Paul does not require credentials (2 Cor 3:1-3; 1 Cor 4:1-5). His authentication rests in those to whom he has been sent and in their faith (2 Cor 3:1). The Corinthians are to exercise judgment in a whole

range of matters, and especially with regard to Paul's opponents. In the end, however, they are not in a position to interpret and judge the apostle or the Gospel that he bears. The word and work of God are not subject to human judgments. At the point of the Gospel and God's saving work in Christ, human reasoning must submit. Paul has introduced the Corinthians to this matter already in 1 Corinthians. "The word of the cross" is foolishness to those who are perishing. Only to those who are "being saved"—those who believe—is Christ the wisdom of God (1 Cor 1:23-25). The Gospel is a "mystery," even in its open proclamation (1 Cor 2:1, 7). The apostle, who bears the Gospel, is therefore likewise inscrutable to human beings who operate with the practical reasoning of human judgment (1 Cor 2:15-16).

Our fundamental problem is that we cannot see or understand ourselves or God rightly. Our salvation entails our coming to the truth about ourselves and about God. It means our coming to confess the painful reality of our blindness and rebellion, and the condemnation and death in which we live. It is this hermeneutical dimension of God's saving work that Paul sets before the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 3. Although he speaks of Christ in this chapter (3:14), he describes salvation primarily in terms of the work of the Spirit, filling in the "christological gap" only in 5:21. This emphasis on the work of the Spirit is bound up with the profoundly *material* hermeneutic that Paul sets forth in the chapter. Our understanding God and ourselves does not take place through our own reason and understanding, or by any bare rules of interpretation. It must be given to us by a word from God, a *material* address to us in our condition of sin and death. God has the first word as well as the last. The ministry of Moses, who delivered the written commands of God ("the letter") was necessary to the ministry of the apostle, through which the Spirit of God is given. Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 3:6 might well be translated: "The letter kills *and* the Spirit gives life." Life is given to us only through death, righteousness only through condemnation. To our practical reasoning this statement is absurd and foolish, because we can see neither ourselves nor God rightly. That was the case for "the sons of Israel" who were unable to look at Moses' face on account of its glory, and whom Moses prevented from looking upon it by placing a veil over his face (3:7, 13). Only "in Christ" is this divine judgment on the human being done away with, so that we see that "the letter" that brings our death has its end in Christ, in whom the Spirit gives us life. In Christ it is revealed that "the old covenant" has been done away (3:14).

Paul's emphasis throughout this chapter rests on the work of the Spirit within the human heart. We cannot by our own reason and strength come to Christ or know God. Only where the Spirit is present—namely, in Christ, just as once in the tent of meeting—is there freedom (3:16-18). This freedom is a freedom of communication between God and the human being in which we share in the divine glory revealed in the crucified and risen Christ (3:18; 4:6). That glory is God's power revealed in weakness, God's righteousness revealed in sin, life revealed in death itself.

And here again lies the problem between the Corinthians and the apostle. The communication of life within death, power within weakness, wealth within poverty, and so on, is alien to their thinking, as it is to ours as well. As the apostle of Christ, Paul bears the presence of Christ within the world in special measure. That much the Corinthians understand. But they imagine that the presence of the risen Lord brings with it the charisma and power that they find in the other apostolic claimants, and seems to be missing in Paul. The power of Christ should be manifest in the power of his apostle. But they thereby overlook the nature of God's saving work. They strive upwards for power and success, not realizing that God has come down to them to meet them in their misery and distress. It is there, in the midst of death and condemnation, that God has established in Christ communication between himself and the human being: "He made him, who knew no sin to be sin, in order that we might become the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor 5:21). God made Christ to be our sin in order that we might be a new creation in Christ and find our righteousness in him. It is for this reason that Paul already announces in 1 Corinthians that the Gospel is "the word of the cross" and that he proclaims and will know nothing other than Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:8, 23; 2:2). The risen Lord remains none other than the crucified Jesus. This truth is fundamental to the apostle and his mission: "He was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God." Thus Paul is also "weak in him, but lives by the power of God" given to him (2 Cor 3:4). Just as God's power is present in the crucified and risen Jesus, so it is also in the apostle. While Jesus' crucifixion took place at a definite time and location in the past, it also transcends that time and place: the crucified Lord is present in the apostle and also in all believers. Paul's entire message to the Corinthians is bound up with this truth. The sufferings given to him are the sufferings of Christ, just as the comfort given to him comes through Christ (1:5). It is

this very comfort that is communicated through him to others, including the Corinthians, who themselves share in sufferings—if they are indeed Christians (1:6-7). Just as Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross, God leads the apostle to death in a Roman triumph, so that the knowledge of Christ might be manifest everywhere (2:14-17). The treasure of the knowledge of God’s glory in Christ is placed in an earthen vessel in order to manifest the communication that is taking place between God and the apostle (4:7). Paul constantly bears in his body the “deadness of Jesus” in order that the life of Jesus might be manifest in him and effect life in the Corinthians and all others (4:10-12). The apostle lives a life of suffering and deliverance, being thrust into difficulties beyond his powers in order to be delivered by the power of God. In the midst of it all, he believes and therefore speaks (4:13; Ps 116:10). Consequently, although he is poor, he makes many rich (6:10). It is this paradox that is offensive to the Corinthians. God’s saving work in Christ and Christ’s apostle turns their distorted view of the Christian life upside down. That is precisely what is necessary for their salvation.

The false judgment in which the Corinthians remained trapped has at least two dimensions. In the first place, they have lost the horizon of the final judgment and the life to come. For a long time that has been so for them: “Already you have been satisfied, already you have been made rich, without us you have begun to reign as kings!” (1 Cor 4:8). Paul must remind them again in 2 Corinthians that this present body and life are a mere tent and pilgrimage to an eternal house and home, a body and life of a different order, in which the mortal will be “swallowed up by life” (5:4). All earthly deliverance is an anticipation of this final deliverance from death itself (cf. 1:10). What is taking place before their eyes in the life of the apostle is a mere display of what is finally true for all who believe in Jesus — if, in fact, the Corinthians do believe. There will yet be a final judgment before Christ himself (5:10)! If they do not believe, the apostle is merely a portent of their own end, an “aroma from death, unto death” (2:16). The Corinthians have become short-sighted, judging things by the mere appearances and false standards of the present world (5:12, 10:7).

Secondly, in their self-satisfaction and assumed role as judges of the apostle, the Corinthians have turned the gift of salvation into a benefit and possession. They are therefore in danger of cutting themselves off from the salvation that is present in the crucified and risen Jesus, and the communication with

God established there: “Test yourselves, if you are in faith!” (13:5). Just as Paul earlier had to remind the Corinthians that the “manifestations of the Spirit” (πνευματικά) are “spiritual gifts” (χαρίσματα), and not mere personal powers (1 Cor 12:1-11), so in 2 Corinthians he repeatedly reminds them that their salvation is bound up with him and the message that he bears as their apostle. He is their boast, just as they are his in the day of the Lord (1:14). It is as death is at work in Paul that life is at work in the Corinthians (4:12). They are to open their hearts wide to him, just as he has done so to them (6:11-13). Their salvation rests in the communication with God, in petition, lament, thanksgiving, and confession that has been established by the Gospel that the apostle bears. It remains a gift that is present in their reception of the apostle and his message.

As an apostle, Paul has been made a “minister” (διάκονος) of the new covenant (3:6) and given the “ministry” (διακονία) of the Spirit (3:8). While interpreters have tended to emphasize “service” in their interpretation of these terms, it is the basic idea of “agency,” or “acting on behalf of another” that lies behind the language.⁵ As Paul earlier informs the Corinthians, he is “an assistant of Christ and steward of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). He is not going to be judged finally by the Corinthians, but by the Lord. Moreover, he is not going to be judged for his gifts, but whether or not he has been faithful in his stewardship (1 Cor 4:2). The Corinthians have misunderstood the nature of an apostle entirely. They are looking for giftedness: powerful rhetoric, charisma, deeds of power. To be sure, the “signs of an apostle” have been performed through Paul among the Corinthians: “both signs and wonders, and deeds of power,” but these have taken place “in all perseverance,” namely, in suffering and deliverance (12:12). In place of the genius and hero that the Corinthians were seeking, Christ sent them Paul, the suffering apostle, in whom he himself is present as the crucified and risen Lord (13:3). Paul speaks to the Corinthians in the presence of God (2:17). They are not the final audience and judge. God himself is both.⁶ They themselves will be called to account for their reception or rejection of the apostle. Yet the apostle’s role as an agent of Christ does not mean that he sets himself above those to whom he is sent. Just the opposite. He will not lord over the Corinthians: in their faith, they stand and thus are his equals (1:24). In fact, he is beneath them: his proclamation includes not only Jesus as Lord, but himself as their “servant” on account of Jesus (4:6). It is the apostolic pretenders who operate otherwise, and abuse the Corinthians

(11:20-21). Paul's apostolic ministry defines the nature and form of all Christian ministry. It liberates all those called to ministry from introspection concerning their weaknesses or fear of human judgments. It teaches us the fear of God.

As apostle to the Corinthians, Paul teaches them and through them all of us a basic truth of the Christian life. It is fundamentally passive. Contrary to what the Corinthians suspect in his cancellation of his promised visit, Paul has purposes, makes plans, and actively engages in his mission. Yet his purposes, plans, and actions are not final. In his weaknesses, he is being led by God in God's triumph in Christ, so that apart from and beyond his work, God is performing his work in and through him (2:14-17). As we have noted, his life is one of difficulty and deliverance. Precisely in the midst of the direst difficulties he speaks, because he has been given the Spirit of faith (4:13). This speaking in the midst of affliction is the most important ministry of all, because it is intended to reach the Corinthians and to reach us at the point of our misery, where God has deigned to meet us in Christ. Paul's life is not a purpose-driven life, but a God-driven life. That makes all the difference in the world, to a world that lives under the power of sin and death. It is reported that Karl Barth, when asked to summarize his massive theological writings in a word responded, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so!" If we were to summarize the whole of Paul's message in 2 Corinthians in a word, we might take up the second line of that hymn, "Little ones to him belong, they are weak, but he is strong." In essence, those are the words of the crucified and risen Lord to his suffering apostle: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (12:9). As the Corinthians both suspected and feared, these words apply not only to the apostle, but to all Christians. They run counter to our imagination and desires. But they are the essence of our life as Christians.

¹ J. C. Beker, *The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 12.

² Käsemann's interpretation of the final chapters applies to the letter as a whole. See Ernst Käsemann, *Die Legitimität des Apostels: Eine Untersuchung zu II Korinther 10-13* (Reihe Libelli 33; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1964).

³ First Corinthians was not his first letter to Corinth, of course (see 1 Cor 5:9).

⁴ The appeal to the Corinthians to separate themselves from unbelievers, which appears here, is most likely directed to their relationship with the apostolic claimants (6:14-18).

⁵ See J. N. Collins, *Diakonia: Re-Interpreting the Ancient Resources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁶ See the discussion of a devotional address in S. Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (trans. and introduced by D. V. Steere; New York: Harper and Row, 1948), 181.

