

2 Corinthians

1. The Fool's Vision, 2 Corinthians 10-11

According to the reconstruction of Paul's correspondence with Corinth followed here, chapters 10-13 are part of a letter (Letter C) written to Corinth after a "painful visit" by Paul to his congregation. In that visit there had been a confrontation with at least one member of the community who had a serious disagreement with Paul, perhaps over matters such as Paul's admonitions on sexual behavior in 1 Corinthians 5. But there was something else afoot that made Paul's relationship with the Corinthians precarious, a group of other "apostles" had appeared on the scene. Either they, or perhaps the individuals in Corinth with whom Paul was having difficulty, compared these apostles to Paul, much to Paul's detriment. In these chapters Paul responds to the comparisons that have been made, sometimes directly, sometimes rather obliquely. In the process of this apologetic discourse, Paul offers his understanding of the gospel that he preaches and the Lord whom he serves. The challenge of understanding 2 Corinthians, in general, and this section in particular, is that we have access to only one part of a difficult conversation and have to use our imaginations to construct the other half.

Structure of 10-13

Unlike many of Paul's other letters, the structure of chapters 10–13 is not immediately transparent. The likelihood that these chapters have been excerpted from a longer letter may explain some of the difficulty. Nonetheless, it is possible to see some patterns.

At the heart of this section is what Paul himself calls a "fool's speech" (11:16), in which

he “boasts” about his pedigree and his accomplishments as an apostle (11:21–12:10). This speech is framed by remarks that ironically apologize for speaking so “foolishly” (11:16-21; 12:11–13). Prior to the carefully framed “fool’s speech”, Paul offers a series of appeals to the Corinthians that at the same time refute charges that he believes have been made against him (10:1–11:15). After the speech he discusses his plans to make a “third visit” to Corinth (12:14–13:10) and an epistolary conclusion (13:11–13).

The initial appeal (10:1–11:15)

One way of understanding this section is to note the passages where Paul apparently alludes to charges made about him. They are:

10:1-10: That Paul is humble in person but bold when away.

10:12–18: That Paul overstepped his authority in evangelizing the Corinthians

11:1–6: That Paul is inferior to other apostles, particularly in his speech.

11:7-11: That Paul insulted the Corinthians by not accepting their financial support.

11:12-15: That Paul is inferior to others apostles, a charge to which he responds with biting invective.

The other apostles

Paul was not the only person to be travelling the eastern Mediterranean preaching a form of the “good news” about the significance of Jesus for humankind. Hints about competitors are found scattered through the pages of the New Testament. Acts names several:

Prisca and Aquila, a Jewish man and his wife (possibly gentile) from Pontos in northern Asia Minor, who had lived in Rome until Jews were expelled under the

emperor Claudius (Acts 18:2). They worked with Paul and were greeted by him in Rom 16:3.

Apollos, of Alexandrian Jewish background, whose defective understanding of baptism was corrected by Prisca and Aquila (Acts 18:24–28).

Unnamed disciples who only knew of the baptism of John (Acts 19:1–6).

Judaizing apostles who challenged Paul’s message in Galatia (Gal 3:1–3; 4:17; 5:10–12).

These missionaries, and the many people on the list of greetings in Romans 16, had varying relations with Paul, from close associates to hostile competitors. The major issue for the competitors in other letters seems to be whether Gentile converts to the Jesus movement needed to observe Torah. That issue is not involved in the debates of 2 Corinthians, which seems to focus instead on an apostle’s spiritual attainment. Hence, the opponents in this text cannot be easily identified with those in other letters.

Paul’s epistolary behavior (10:1–11)

The first charge against Paul is repeated twice, once allusively in 10:1, and then again, as a quotation of what the opposition says in 10:10: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak.” The opponents may have had in mind not only Paul’s stern admonitions preserved in 1 Corinthians, (especially 1 Cor 5), but also things that he wrote in the first, now lost, letter to Corinth (Letter A). If, as some suspect, the intrusive paragraph 6:14–7:1 is a lost letter (perhaps from Letter A), it would also provide support for the claim that Paul could write severely, even if his presence was milder. It is also possible that the opponents knew of Paul’s letter to Galatians, with its strongly worded polemical passages.

Paul's response to the charge is of a piece with his strategy throughout these chapters. He begins by affirming the critique and describes himself as a superhuman warrior (10:1-6), whose potent weapons can take down strongholds (v 4). But those strongholds are simply "arguments," and what he takes captive is "every thought" (v 5). Paul acknowledges in hyperbolic terms the complaint against him, and concludes by mimicking an imperial Roman general, saying that his behavior aims to punish disobedience and secure complete compliance (v 6).

Paul probably knows that his ironic affirmation of the complaint might well be misconstrued, so immediately adopts a more ironic tone. He asks the Corinthians to look to the fact that both he and they "belong to Christ" (10:7). Paul acknowledges that he "boasts too much" about his authority (v 8), a note that also hints at the theme of "boasting" that will stand at the heart of these chapters. He does not, he argues, want to frighten his congregation (v 9). Instead he has a serious purpose and will act as he writes (v 11). The implicit threat abruptly introduced in the last verse undercuts the ironic gestures of the previous verses. The edgy rhetoric of this letter fragment stands in mark contrast to the tone that Paul adopts in 2 Corinthians 1-7.

Paul and apostolic boundaries (10:12-18)

A legend widespread in early Christian apocryphal literature was that the apostles divided up the world among themselves for purposes of missionary activity (See, e.g., *Acts of Thomas* 1.1). Although that kind of arrangement was certainly legendary, there were apparently some boundaries that early apostolic missionaries agreed to. The most famous of these is the agreement that Paul reports he reached with Peter that Peter would bring the good news to "the

circumcision,” and Paul to the gentile world (Gal 2:7–8). How such a division of labor actually worked is unclear. The Book of Acts claims that Peter made the first gentile converts (Acts 10), and that Paul regularly preached first to the Jews (e.g., Acts 13:5, 14-15; 14:1) in the cities that he evangelized. Whether or not the report is factual, it shows that Luke at least understood early missionaries not to be strict observers of boundaries. Whatever the overall situation, some missionaries apparently thought that Corinth was their territory and that Paul had “overstepped his limits” (v 14). In response, Paul claims that the Corinthians were within the borders of what God had assigned to him (v 13). More important are the results, the increase in faith that has come from his action and that is a foundation for further work (v 15–16).

Claims of Paul’s inferiority to the “super apostles” (11:1–6, 12–15)

That someone was comparing Paul unfavorably with other apostles is clear, although at this stage of the argument the grounds for those claims remain murky. What is crystal clear, however, is that Paul was deeply upset by the comparison to other apostles and he yields to vitriol, which he ascribes to his “jealousy” for the “chaste virgin” that is his congregation (11:2). The opponents, whom he sarcastically labels “super apostles” (v 5) are like the serpent who deceived Eve (v 3), proclaiming not simply a different version of the gospel, but “another Jesus” (v 4). Those who do so are “false apostles, deceitful workers,” Satan in disguise (v 13). Paul does not expect that they will have a happy ending for their ministry (v 15). In these passages Paul emerges as all too human in his response to his competitors.

Financial Support (11:7–11)

Thus far Paul does not say much about what the “super apostles” are claiming for

themselves; but he does indicate one point of friction: that he did not accept support from the Corinthian congregation, whereas they apparently did. This complaint, which apparently reflected negatively on Paul's status, deeply disturbed Paul, because he in fact took pride in the fact that he paid his own way and did not burden congregations to which he was ministering with requests for support. He uses that practice as an argument in 1 Corinthians 9. He did not, he claims, make use of a right he had as an apostle to receive support from his congregation: (1 Cor 9:18: "What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.") Therefore, Paul argued, the Corinthians should not make use of their conscientious right to eat meat sacrificed to idols if it offends their fellow believers. To have Paul's strategy now used as a ground for his inferiority to other apostles must have stung.

The Fool's Speech, Part I (11:16–33)

The Greco-Roman culture of which Paul was a part was no stranger to people who made claims to their honor and status, who would "boast" about their pedigree or their accomplishments. Paul knew of these cultural practices and used them ironically in other contexts. For instance in Galatians 6:14 he prays that he might never boast except in the cross of Christ, but he will also boast about those whom he has brought into Christian fellowship (1 Cor 15:31), or in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31; Rom 5:11). He is now confronting a situation in which his rivals make what he construes as "boasts" about themselves, which he must counter. His addressees may well remember his rejection of "boasting" as their contemporary society understood it. Hence, Paul has to be careful in presenting what could be a conventional exaltation of his own qualifications as an apostle. He does so, but labeling it the work of a fool

(11:16). In the process of developing that label, he also manages to chide his addressees as people who “put up with fools” (v 19), and with those who “make slaves” of them and “prey upon” them (v 20).

Once he begins the “fool’s speech” proper, it becomes clear what was being claimed by or for the “super apostles”: first, their status as genuine Israelites (v 22). Paul can counter those claims to illustrious pedigree but trumps them by offering a list of ironic “accomplishments.” What he offers as achievements instead is a catalogue of suffering (vv 23-27). His ironic “boasting” is thus consistent with his claims elsewhere. He boasts not in what the culture values, but in what shows his identification with Jesus.

The climax of this list of accomplishments is exactly the opposite of the kind of deed that would crown a Greco-Roman hero’s list. Paul tells of an episode that probably concluded the time he spent as a missionary in Arabia (cf. Gal 1:17). He had apparently caused an uproar in Damascus during the time when Romans, under the emperor Claudius, allowed the local strong man, Aretas, to rule the area. Instead of standing up to a tyrant, Paul ignominiously escaped his clutches, hardly the subject of a conventional boast (vv 30–33)!

Questions for discussion:

1. How does Paul handle the challenge from rivals? Does his strategy serve as a model of how a Christian might handle social conflict?
2. Is there anything in contemporary culture that functions in the way that “boasting” about pedigree or accomplishments did in the Greco-Roman world? Is that cultural convention something that Christians should employ? If so, does Paul’s strategy about boasting serve as a useful model?

Further Reading:

Thomas R. Blanton, “Spirit and Covenant Renewal: A Theologoumenon of Paul’s Opponents in 2 Corinthians,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010) 129–51.

Doyle Kee, “Who Were the ‘Super-Apostles’ of 2 Corinthians 10–13,” *Restoration Quarterly* 25 (1980) 65–76.

L. L. Welborn, “The Identification of 2 Corinthians 10–13 with the ‘Letter of Tears,’” *Novum Testamentum* 37 (1995) 138–53.