

2 Corinthians
4., 2 Corinthians 2:14–3:18

As he rejoices in his reconciliation with the believers in Corinth, Paul also reiterates and reinforces his defense and description of his own apostleship. To do so he draws heavily on imagery from his Bible (our “Old Testament”). Again we notice as so often in Paul how he seems to presuppose a remarkably rich knowledge of Hebrew scripture on the part of mostly Gentile believers. Does this represent a trust in the kind of teaching they have received from himself and Apollos and other Christian leaders? Are the terms of the discussion set, in part, by the super apostles of chapters 10–13, who may claim particular ties to the Jerusalem apostles and to the heritage of Judaism? If so, Paul is using scripture (however metaphorically) to defend not only his reading of the gospel but his right to preach it. In any case a note of defense lies behind our verses though the major subject is his joy in the sense that the Corinthians are acknowledging him again as their rightful apostle and father in the faith.

Paul’s rhetoric in this section of 2 Corinthians builds on a series of antitheses, new vs. old, interior vs exterior, earthly vs. heavenly, which we find in other highly rhetorical compositions of the New Testament, such as the Epistle to the Hebrews. First-century recipients of the letter would have been attuned to this rhetorical flourish and would have appreciated Paul’s eloquence.

Paul distinguished from the peddlers (2:14–2:17)

In this section of our letter Paul uses mostly the first person plural, unlike chapters 10–13 where he uses mostly the first person singular. The letter is sent from Timothy as well as Paul,

and the “we” may reflect that fact. Perhaps also as our apostle moves from defensiveness to gratitude he does not need to use “I” quite so often to make his point.

These verses are dominated by two images—the image of the triumphal procession and the image of the “aroma.” The Corinthians would surely be familiar with the parades staged by returning generals from a variety of Roman conquests. The victorious soldiers brought behind them the captured peoples and most prominently the captured leaders, chained and disgraced. Does Paul think of the apostles here as the triumphant soldiers of the Gospel trailing behind them the principalities and powers overcome by the power of what they preach? (See 2 Cor 10:2) Or is he in a somewhat more complicated way looking back to what he has said about the weakness of God in 1 Corinthians 1 and (if we are right that this was a previous letter) in 2 Corinthians 12? If this second suggestion is correct, we have a kind of classic paradox: Paul rejoices in his weakness; when he is weak, he is strong, and his weakness serves for the growth of the gospel.

Scholars suggest two possible sources for Paul’s reference to himself and the other true apostles as the “aroma” of God (2:14). Perhaps this refers to the aroma of true sacrifice, once in the tabernacle and now in the temple. If so, we have a kind of reminder of Paul’s sufferings as a sign of his authenticity as a servant of Christ. Perhaps, however, the reference is more to the incense burned at triumphal processions. There, too, of course the incense represents a propitiation of the gods, but its aroma would also have spread among the multitudes witnessing the procession. Yet another alternative is that Paul is referring not to a military triumph, but to a religious procession, in which the presence of a deity would be signaled by the use of fragrance incense and unguents.

The phrase with which Paul ends this section that the apostles speak “for God and in his presence” might suggest that the aroma reaches both to God and also out from God to the growing company of believers (v 17).

Whatever the precise image, a key point for Paul is that the meaning of the aroma is ambiguous. Some sense it as a pointer to death; others sense in it a sign of life (v 14). Moreover, Paul is the source of the smell! Paul may here be reminding the Corinthians of his great claim to them in 1 Corinthians. The same cross and the gospel that proclaims that cross are life to those who believe, but condemnation to those who do not. “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God” (1Cor 1:18). His image also captures some of the dynamics of Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians. He is who he is, an apostle of Christ, but some people perceive him negatively, others positively.

The rhetorical question, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (v 16), asks, in effect, who can sort out the mystery caused by such an ambiguous sign as an aroma that can be read in more than one way. The answer is simultaneously, “No one,” and “God.” The question of sufficiency, adequacy, recurs in 2 Cor 3:5 and may recall the slightly different vocabulary of 2 Cor 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you.”

Paul invokes another image associated with processions of various sorts, the peddlers who would be selling food or trinkets to the crowd. His contrast here with those who peddle their teaching is in general a fairly familiar distinction between the hucksters who teach or philosophize for gain and himself and Timothy who are moved entirely by sincerity. There may also be an allusion to the question raised by the super apostles of why they are willing to take

money for their apostleship, like true professionals, while Paul preaches without charge. What the opponents see as shame he finds as ground for his authenticity.

A Living Covenant (3:1–18)

All of 2 Corinthians 3 is based on a contrast between the old covenant given through Moses and the new covenant given through Paul and the other true apostles. The background to the whole section is Jeremiah 31:32–34, with its promise of a “new covenant,” written on the hearts of God’s people.

The chapter seems to follow abruptly from the complex imagery of the procession in the previous verses. Yet, like the imagery of the process, the next block, focusing on the theme of covenant, treats the issue of how it is that God is made known to humankind.

The chapter begins with a discussion of “letters of recommendation” (3:1) and moves quickly to a discussion of the “letter of the law” (v 7). It seems likely that Paul is referring to the letters of recommendation that itinerant teachers would have used to gain access to new audiences. Even today a congregation searching for a new pastor or a faculty searching for a new colleague will rely on letters of recommendation from trusted sources. It may well be that Paul’s opponents, the inspiration for chapters 10–13 of our letter, came with letters of recommendation to the Corinthian congregation, perhaps even letters from the indisputably authentic apostles in Jerusalem like Peter and John. Paul needed no such letters; and as some scholars have pointed out, since he founded the Corinthian church, Paul would have had no one to receive such letters.

Nonetheless what follows is the main point. Paul claims, as he does in other passages such as Gal 1:11–12), that his apostleship comes not from human beings but from God. But it is

almost equally important to him that his apostleship is validated by his relationship to his congregations. He insists that he is their father, and like all fathers sees his children as evidence of his parenthood.

2 Corinthians 3:4–18 is one of those passages where Paul, like a good interpreter, discovers the implications of the Old Testament stories he recalls. And, as elsewhere, like an enthusiastic poet, he piles image on image to draw forth the implications of his contrast between the covenant formed through Moses and the covenant formed through Jesus.

Note that the contrast between Moses' covenant and Jesus' covenant is not between a bad covenant and a good one but between a good covenant and a better one. God has moved from glory to glory (v 7–11).

The distinction between the two covenants (the one on stone, the other on flesh; the one of condemnation, the other of mercy) becomes a contrast between those who receive the covenant. As told in Exodus 34, Moses had to put a veil over his face to protect himself from the glory (v 13). The Corinthian believers can read the covenant “unveiled.” Those who follow Moses without knowing Jesus still have a veil over their faces, because they do not see clearly that the covenant points to Jesus. Those who believe in Jesus behold the covenant in all its glory; because the secret of the covenant, now revealed, is in fact Jesus. The covenant unveiled points to him.

If this were Galatians we could be sure that Paul is associating his opponents with the old covenant and his own gospel with the new. Here we know so little of the claims of the super apostles that we may surmise that they cite Moses as the source of their claims. Whether Paul has any implicit reference to his opponents here, it is clear enough what he claims for himself:

the covenant of glory, the covenant of life, promised by Jeremiah, is the covenant of Jesus Christ; that covenant leads to life; Paul is its apostle.

In the last verses of our chapter (vv 17–18), the claim that the Lord (usually Christ) is also the Spirit may seem somewhat unusual, although Paul affirms elsewhere that the resurrected Christ has become a “life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). We saw in looking at the benediction at the very end of our canonical letter that Paul acknowledges the reality of God, the Son and the Spirit without claiming (or even pondering?) any developed doctrine of the Trinity. Paul’s reference is primarily to the spirit that is at work in the community of believers, a spirit unleashed by Christ’s triumph over death.

Here we can suspect that the Lord is the Spirit because the covenant that comes in Jesus the Lord is the covenant of Spirit to be distinguished from the covenant of the letter. In any case we know that the new covenant provides the gift of freedom.

Questions for discussion:

1. Is the notion of a “covenant” between God and humankind meaningful in our time?
2. How do you understand the “Spirit” of God in the lives of faithful Christians?
3. Paul’s use of imagery in these chapters is graphic and evocative. Are there images that appeal to you today to help to describe your relationship with God and with the Christian community?

Further Reading:

Harold W. Attridge, “Making Scents of Paul,” in John Fitzgerald, et al., eds., *FS Abraham Malherbe* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 71–88.

Paul Brooks Duff, “Transformed ‘from glory to glory’: Paul’s Appeal to the Experience of Readers in 2 Cor 3:18,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127 (2008) 759–80.

James D. G. Dunn, “2 Corinthians III.17 - ‘The Lord is the Spirit,’” *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1970) 309–20.

Jane Heath, “Moses’ End and the Succession: Deuteronomy 31 and 2 Corinthians 3,” *New Testament Studies* 60 (2014) 37–60.

Matthew David Litwa, “Transformation Through a Mirror: Moses in 2 Cor 3:18,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34 (2012) 286–97.