

2 Corinthians

5. Clay Vessels, 2 Corinthians 4

In this chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul continues the meditative reflection, begun at 2:14, on his apostolic ministry and his relationship with the Corinthian community. The meditation continues to work through an evocative image, that of the Gospel message as light for the world (4:1–6). That image in turn evokes the image of the vessel that contains the light (4:7). The fragility of that vessel is the point of comparison to the fragility of Paul’s very human self. The remainder of the chapter (4:8–18) focuses on the tension that Paul feels between his own fleshly self and the power of God’s grace at work in his ministry.

The Light of the Gospel (4:1-6)

The “ministry” to which Paul refers in v 1 is that of the Spirit, which he had celebrated at the end of chapter 3. In that ministry and through that Spirit, Paul has found “mercy,” which he showed to the offending member of the congregation (2:5–11). As frequently in this meditation, Paul interweaves celebration of fundamental values with hints of apology, as he does in the next verse, claiming that he “renounces the hidden things of dishonesty” and “commends himself” to all “in the sight of God.” The wording of the next verse, “if our Gospel be hidden,” suggests that these verses are a reaction to a criticism once lodged against Paul by his opponents in Corinth, perhaps to the effect that his teaching was obscure and hard to fathom. No, Paul says, if some make that kind of claim, it is because they have been blinded by “the god of this world” (v 4). Precisely what Paul has in mind at this point is not immediately apparent. He was certainly familiar with the cosmological framework presupposed in much Jewish apocalyptic literature,

such as many of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In such texts a demonic angelic figure, variously named Satan, or Beliar, or Melchiresha (“King of Evil”), presided over the realm of sinful humankind. Further evidence of this framework will appear in the explicit allusion to Beliar in 6:15. Such a framework also probably underlies Paul’s most famous description of the woeful condition of humankind under the reign of Sin (Romans 7).

Whatever its source, spiritual blindness is the condition that Paul says obtains when his critics did not understand his gospel message. Paul proceeds to characterize that message in a series of evocative images. Paul first labels his message as “light” that emanates from the “glory of Christ” (v 4). Paul here combines two images that were common in early Christian circles. Jesus himself used the image of “light” for his disciples (Matt 5:14–16) or for the insight within them (Matt 6:22–23; Luke 11:33–36). The author of the Fourth Gospel gave special prominence to the image, both in his prologue (John 1:4–5) and in the declaration by Jesus himself that he is the “light of the world” (John 8:12).

Christ’s “glory” (v 4) evokes the exalted status of Jesus that resulted from his resurrection and ascension, when he was “seated at the right hand of the majesty on high” (Heb 1:3; Ps 110:1). Like “light,” the theme of Christ’s “glory” plays a major role in the Gospel according to John (e.g., John 1:18; 2:11; 12:28; 17:1). Paul reinforces the character of the “light” that comes from Christ, and points to its ultimate source, when he goes on to describe Christ as the “image” (*eikon*) of God. The Epistle to the Colossians (Col 1:15) deploys just that term in its celebration of the cosmic centrality of Christ. Such language probably builds on Jewish reflection on the role of divine wisdom, often equated with Torah, as the image of the divine. Such reflection appears in texts such as Wisdom of Solomon 7:26 and in the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria. Paul does not explain what the images of “light,” “glory,” or “image” mean. He assumes that

members of his Corinthian community are familiar with this language.

Paul does, however, exploit the combined images to summarize what his apostolic ministry is about (vv 5–6). It is not about himself, as all the controversy about his pedigree and accomplishments (2 Cor 10–11) might suggest. Instead, it is about a divine light that has “shined in our hearts.” It is a light that has provided “knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (v 11). Such knowledge motivates and enables the kind of reconciling move that Paul made in chapter 1.

The Vessel that Holds the Light (4:7–18)

The next stage of Paul’s reflection begins with a famous image of “clay jars” or “earthen vessels,” which hold the treasure of the gospel message of which he has been speaking. Since that treasure has been likened to “light,” Paul probably has in mind the kind of vessels that “carried” (v 10) light, small clay lamps, which could be held in the palm of one’s hand, which were a common feature of life around the Mediterranean in the first century. Such lamps sported various decorative patterns, but often there were images of gods or mythical beings carved into them. It may be that when Paul speaks of the life of Jesus being manifested in his flesh (v 11) he compares his body to such decorated lamps.

A typical decorated oil lamp. The hole on the pointed end held a wick.



The basic feature of the “clay jar” for Paul is its fragility. Whatever other allusions to the image Paul makes in what follows, he highlights that fragility in order to continue putting himself in proper perspective. At the same time he focuses on the content of his gospel, the message of hope and consolation that the clay vessel contains. A series of parallel phrases illustrates the contrast. At this point Paul continues the play on various antitheses that runs through these chapters, initially contrasting interior and exterior. That contrast that will resolve into further antitheses between life and death, heaven and earth.

The contrasts pair off aspects of Paul’s situation, on which he reported in 1:8–11. He is “crushed,” “perplexed,” “persecuted,” “struck down” (vv 8–9). Yet he is not overwhelmed by adversity, because whatever he experiences is making manifest the “life of Jesus” (v 10).

Paul often insisted on the closeness of his relationship to Christ, perhaps no more vividly than in Gal 2:19–20), “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” He also often

spoke of being “in” Christ, enveloped in a powerful and transformative reality that defined who he was and gave his life shape and meaning (Rom 3:22; 6:11; 8:1, 10; 1 Cor 1:30; 4:15). Paul’s identification with Christ in this passage dramatically reflects his distinctive spirituality.

The introduction of the life of Christ manifest in Paul’s own suffering prompts a transition to the second major antithesis of this passage, between death and life. That antithesis was familiar to Paul not only from his knowledge of the story of Jesus, but also from the Christian ritual of baptism to which he alludes on several occasions (Gal 3:27–28; Rom 6:1–4; cf. also Col 2:11–12). As Paul explains in Romans, the key point of undergoing the baptismal ritual is to effect a participation in the death of Christ from which resurrection life emerges. The fundamental conviction that believers participate in Christ’s resurrected life undergirds Paul’s expression here, although, as he does time and again in these chapters, he relates the conviction to his relationship with the Corinthians. In his persecution he experiences a taste of death, in imitation of Christ, but from that emerges “life in you” (v 12).

Paul next signals how that “life” is transmitted, through the “faith” that he has taught the Corinthians that he and they share (v 13). In describing his teaching he alludes to scripture with the phrase “I believed, so I spoke” (a citation of Ps 116:10 from the Greek translation, the Septuagint). The Corinthians share Paul’s faith, which has as its center the belief in the resurrection of Jesus (v 14). That faith, which Paul had been at pains to defend and explain in 1 Corinthians 15, grounds the hope that Paul and his congregation will share reconciled fellowship and that God will “raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into his presence” (v 14).

The belief in the resurrection of Jesus remains for Paul the ground of his eschatological hope. That hope, and the transformation for which it yearns, is a gift of God’s grace (v 15). Here Paul uses another term characteristic of his understanding of God’s salvific work in Christ.

Gratitude for the gift and hope in what it promises, participation in the glory of God (vv 14, 17), grounds the positive attitude that Paul displays in the face of the weakness of his “clay jar.” It is the source of renewal “day by day,” not of the external covering, but of the inward self (v 16). A final web of antitheses drives home the point. The realm of suffering and sin is temporary, and visible; the object of hope is invisible but eternal (vv 16–17).

The hope that Paul expresses here, based on the conviction that he participates in the life of God’s Spirit made available by the resurrected Christ, will reappear in an even more striking form, without quite so many interlocking antitheses, in Romans 8 where Paul describes the way in which the Spirit groans with us as we wait for consummation of God’s promises. He concludes that passages with his famous paean to the love of God in Christ from which nothing whatsoever can separate us. Chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians is written in very much the same spirit. Paul’s reflection on the life in the spirit here is used not as part of an argument about how Paul’s gospel is compatible with Torah but as an appeal to the Corinthians to celebrate the shared hope in resurrection life that can enable their reconciliation.

Questions for discussion:

1. Is it clear how Paul makes the connections between basic elements of his gospel, his own self-defense and his appeal for genuine renewed fellowship with the Corinthians?
2. What role does the resurrection of Christ play in your religious beliefs and in those of your congregation?
3. Are the hopes for “glory” that Paul expresses ones that in some way or other you share?
4. Is the strategy of emphasizing shared beliefs to lay a foundation for reconciliation that Paul uses in this chapter effective?

Further Reading:

Wes Avram, “2 Corinthians 4:1–18,” *Interpretation* 55 (2001) 70–73.

Douglas A. Campbell, “2 Corinthians 4:13: Evidence in Paul that Christ Believes,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009) 337–56.

George W. MacRae, “Anti-Dualist Polemic in 2 Cor 4:6?” in F. L. Cross, ed., *Studia Evangelica IV/1: The New Testament Scriptures* (TU 102; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1968) 420–31.