

2 Corinthians
6. Ministry of Reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5

The richly allusive argument of this portion of 2 Corinthians continues in this chapter. Paul continues to reflect on what his life and work has meant in the light of his relationship with the Corinthians. In the process, he offers an evocative image of what it means to be a disciple of Christ.

Beyond the Present Weakness (5:1–10)

Some scholars have seen in 2 Cor. 5:1–10 an interruption of Paul’s discussion of apostleship. Perhaps, they think, these verses provide a clue to the mistaken theology of Paul’s opponents, and Paul takes these verses to help the Corinthians understand a true, Pauline understanding of the resurrection of believers from the dead—rather like 1 Corinthians 15.

The discussion is further complicated when interpreters try to make these verses entirely consistent with 1 Corinthians 15, whose discussion of the “spiritual body” does not seem to agree completely with Paul’s language in these verses, with its images of “tents” and being “clothed” and “further clothed.”

It seems more helpful to interpret these verses with two observations in mind. First, these verses make most sense as a continuation of 2 Cor 4:16-18 and indeed as a continuation of the whole discussion of true apostleship in chapter 4. The issue addressed continues to be the nature of apostleship and of Paul’s apostleship in particular. Second, Paul’s language here is highly metaphorical. Often interpreters are so eager to discern a consistent theology of resurrection in Paul that they strain to make passages from 1 Thessalonians, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and 2

Corinthians all fit together as a kind of systematic whole. Yet the metaphors of “tents” and “clothing” do not easily blend with Paul’s other passages to produce a consistent view of the resurrection life.

In contemporary terms Paul is far more a practical theologian than a systematic one. He brings to play an array of metaphors, convictions, scriptural allusions and personal reflections in order to respond to some particular issue in the congregations he addresses. Instead of seeking to produce a systematic theology, it is helpful to sketch the general claim that Paul is making in this specific context and to see its implications for the Corinthian believers.

The issue, introduced at the end of chapter 4, is that people are making a contrast between Paul’s claim to apostolic authority and the obvious fact that not only is he not an entirely impressive person physically and rhetorically; he is probably not even as impressive as he used to be. His “outer nature is wasting away” (4:16). Paul responds by contrasting his weakening outer nature to his “inner nature” which grows from strength to strength. His inner nature grows from strength to strength because it is sustained by God and partakes of God’s eternal blessing.

In 5:1-10 Paul argues that God’s eternal blessing will be confirmed and completed beyond life, but that even in this life he participates richly in the mercies of God. Furthermore, the Corinthians as believers also live with a hope for the future, but in the meantime live with faith for the present. The familiar claim that Paul believes that the consummation of God’s reign is “already” but also “not yet” finds confirmation in these verses, where the exact timeline of eternity and the attributes of the resurrected person are hard to discern but where the confidence that the God who renews life now will restore life beyond death remains strong. “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (v 7).

As in 1 Corinthians 15, I Thessalonians 5 and Romans 8, Paul frames his discussion of his personal fate and the personal destiny of believers in the larger context of his trust that God is the final judge of all our lives and all our history. “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ...” (v 10).

True apostleship; true faithfulness (5:11–21)

The great claims of this section can be summed up quickly; the implications of the claims will require some elaboration. Claim one: God’s great act in Jesus Christ was to reconcile the world to God’s self. Claim two: Paul’s mission as an apostle is to proclaim and enable that reconciliation. Claim three: Believers are to be reconciled to God and by implication to each other.

We can see not only the depth of these claims but their pertinence to the situation of the Corinthian believers. Paul’s great hope is that they might be reconciled to God, more specifically to Paul’s gospel, God’s proclamation from God and about God. When they are reconciled to Paul’s gospel they will also be reconciled to the apostle himself. Through God’s grace and Paul’s apostleship, these fractious Corinthians may at last be reconciled to one another.

One of our colleagues who taught preaching for years tells the story of a seminarian who preached at the church where he was an intern. The preacher held forth for twenty minutes on the importance of “reconciliation” without once trying to explain, or illustrate, or embody what the word “reconciliation” meant. In our context it is at least clear that God’s reconciliation, enacted in Jesus Christ, includes “not counting their trespasses against them.” In the immediate context of the Corinthian church this is the good news of forgiveness on God’s part of the trespasses, missteps, unfaithful action of the Corinthians. It is at least implicitly the suggestion

that they not hold the memory of old trespasses against each other. And it is probably implicitly the suggestion that they not hold any old grudges against Paul himself.

Perhaps the clearest biblical story of reconciliation is the familiar parable of the prodigal son, or of the two brothers, or of the merciful father (Luke 15:11–32), when the father runs down the road to greet the wandering son, embraces him, and throws him a feast that is a moment of reconciliation. One distinguished German theologian says that the claim that God in Christ was reconciling the world to Gods-self is the claim that the moment of the father running down the road to welcome sinners is a metaphor for God’s running out to greet us in Jesus Christ. While the older son stays in the field, outside the party, the father goes out again (Is this going out also Christ-like?) and urges the older son to be reconciled to his brother and by implication to the forgiving Father, too.

If the picture of reconciliation sketched in the parable of the Prodigal Son is the heart of Paul’s pastoral claim in this second half of 2 Corinthians 5, we may understand that claim a little better by noting a few features of the passage.

The next verses (11–15) remind us that this whole remarkable restatement of the gospel comes as Paul continues to defend his apostleship. His opponents boast of outward accomplishments; he lives out the inward gospel. As the Corinthians are his letter of recommendation, so his boasting is not for his own sake, but so that they may boast in their apostle and through him boast in the Lord. His apostleship and their faithfulness are all enabled by the love of God. It is that love (not self-love, not ambition) that propels the apostle. It is that love that can and should drive and motivate the Corinthians. Christ’s death becomes the grounding of the possibility and even the promise that believers may “die” to their old selves and find new life in Christ.

The next section (vv 16–21) is so packed with images of that new life that we will comment briefly on each verse.

In v 16 Paul continues to draw on the distinction between outer and inner truth—the human point of view and the Godly point of view. When he says that he once regarded Christ from a human point of view, this does not mean that he participated in some first century version of the Jesus seminar trying to discover who the “historical” Jesus really was. He means that in his life before his remarkable experience of conversion and call he thought that Jesus was a crucified pretender: entirely foolish and weak. Now he knows that what he sees in Christ is the foolishness and weakness which is also the wisdom and power of God.

In v 17 the Revised Standard Version translated the phrase: “If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation.” The New Revised Standard more helpfully says: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.” The Greek actually lacks an explicit verb, so the rhetoric is even more striking: “If anyone is in Christ—new creation!” The succeeding contrast between the old and the new suggests that the claim that the whole world has changed for believers is a better translation of our text.

In v 18 Paul moves to his claim that all this newness in Jesus Christ is the work of God, and that he, Paul, participates in the new creation—living it and declaring it.

In vv19–20, the RSV reads “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,” the NRSV reads “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself.” Either is a fair translation of the Greek. The NRSV seems more suited to the context, which is not primarily a discussion of incarnation but a discussion of the work God has done and continues to do in Jesus Christ.

The talk of “ministry of reconciliation” and “ambassador for Christ” reminds the Corinthians that like a true ambassador or a true minister, Paul is sent with a mission. The words

he speaks are not his own; the message he declared has been entrusted to him. Of course, just behind these words is the reminder of the Corinthian doubts about Paul's qualifications for apostleship. But the job of the ambassador is not to be strikingly presentable but to present a strikingly true message.

One familiar short hand for Paul's teaching is that he combines the "already" with the "not yet." Another is that when it comes to instructing his churches he moves from the indicative to the imperative. So powerfully stated here is the claim that God has reconciled the Corinthians that it becomes the imperative: "Be reconciled." If you are the younger brother, come home. If you are the older brother, come in.

In v 21 "atonement" is a term like "reconciliation" -- easy enough to use but hard to grasp. Atonement encompasses restored relationship between God and humankind, understood in Luke's Gospel as forgiveness of sin and in Paul's writings as the gift of God's righteousness for those who believe.

Paul does not have a "doctrine" of the atonement. He presents a remarkable array of terms, pictures, metaphors and allusions to suggest the richness of his claim. This verse is one of the richest and in some ways one of the most puzzling. At least the claim is this, what God did in Jesus Christ God do for those who have faith. Because believers participate in Christ they participate in a remarkable interchange. He takes on their sin; they take on his righteousness. Of course that is a very provocative claim. Paul thinks it is also a saving one.

Questions for discussion:

1. How do you react to the images that Paul uses for the Christian life in this chapter? Are they useful for framing the life and work of Christians today?
2. What language do you find appropriate to discuss your sense of Christian mission?
3. What role does an effort to find reconciliation, personally, or on a larger social stage, play in your understanding of your Christian faith?

Further Reading:

Reimund Beiringer, “Reconciliation to God in Light of 2 Corinthians 5:14–21,” in *Reconciliation in Interfaith Perspective: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Voices* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011) 39–58.

Hulitt Gloer, “Ambassadors of Reconciliation: Paul’s Genius in Applying the Gospel in a Multi-cultural World,” *Review and Expositor* 104 (2007) 589–601.

Murray J. Harris, “Paul’s View of Death in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10,” in R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney, eds., *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974) 317–28.

N. T. Wright, “On Becoming the Righteousness of God: 2 Corinthians 5.21,” *Pauline Theology II* (ed. David M. Hay; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 200–08, reprinted in N. T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 68–76.