

Handout: Corinthians Lesson 2

The question of “letters of recommendation” in 3:1-6 generates a series of metaphors in which Paul defends himself to the Christian community he founded using the word “letter” in verses 2-3:

1. They are Paul’s letter of recommendation (verse 2a).
2. They are a letter engraved on his affections for all to see and read (verse 2b).
3. They are a letter from Christ of the Gospel of salvation that Paul delivered to them (3a).
4. They are a letter written by the Holy Spirit on the tablets of human hearts (3b).

The Corinthian Christians are like a personal letter written in the Spirit, unlike letters written in ink. Their conversion and continuing faith in Jesus Christ are, therefore, the basis of Paul’s confidence in Christ since, through Paul’s ministry, the Holy Spirit has written the law of love on their “hearts of flesh.”

Paul contrasts the New Covenant with the Old in three ways in 3:7-11:

1. The Law of the Old Covenant yielded a ministry of death (verse 7), while life in the Spirit empowers the New Covenant (verse 8).
2. The Old covenant resulted in a ministry of condemnation, while the New Covenant through the Spirit enacts the ministry of righteousness (verse 9).
3. The Mosaic Law of the Old Covenant was temporary (verses 10-11; Gal 3:23-25), but the New Covenant is eternal (verse 11).

4:4 in whose case the god/God [theos] of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, so that they may not see the light of the Gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Who is the “god of this age” or the “god of this world”? The Greek word translated as “age” is *aion* which can denote an age or era. There are two theories concerning this verse:

1. Paul is referring to Yahweh, God the Father, Creator and ultimate Ruler of the world.
2. Paul is referring to Satan as the “ruler of the world” that is captive to sin.

The Gospel of John refers to Satan as the “prince” or “ruler of the world” in John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; and Paul makes the same statement in Ephesians 2:2. Paul mentions Satan in several other passages in this letter to include 2 Corinthians 2:11; 11:14; and 12:7. However, in no other passage in Scripture is Satan ever called “god” or even “a god.”

The early Church Fathers argue that Paul refers to God Himself in 2 Corinthians 4:4:

1. Only God is truly God of this world and every age.
2. When John 1:1-3; 17-18, and Titus 1:3-4 (Paul) refer to Jesus as the *Theos/God* of Creation, those verses refer to Jesus as the true God. Therefore, we shouldn’t see Satan as the “god of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4, and we should interpret the phrase as a reference to the One True God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
3. If Satan is called *theos/god* in 4:4, then it is a statement that refutes monotheism and supports the heresy of Manicheism.
4. Nowhere else in Scripture is Satan called “god.”

Biblical scholars who believe Paul refers to Satan argue:

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1. God wouldn't blind the understanding of unbelievers; only Satan would blind the truth of God.
2. Paul's reference to being in darkness is specifically associated with Satan and Satanic powers (Acts 26:18; Eph 6:12).
3. Paul's reference to spiritual blindness is used many times in the New Testament (Eph 5:8, 11; Col 1:13; 1 Jn 2:11) and supports Satan as the "god of this world."

Paul calls our fragile human bodies the earthen vessels or instruments God uses to continue His Divine Plan for humanity. But, what is the treasure these vessels hold? The context of Paul's earlier passage in 4:1-6 suggests three possibilities:

1. "This ministry" of the New Covenant (4:1).
2. "The Gospel of the glory of Christ" (4:4).
3. "The knowledge of the glory of God on the face of Christ" (4:6).

However, the "treasure" could refer to all three since they are all interrelated.

Paul's body is a fragile "earthen vessel" that experiences suffering in his ministry (4:10-11), yet the paradox is that glory is revealed through suffering in Christ's life and in Paul's as he risks death in his ministry to bring knowledge of eternal life to the Corinthians. Paul lists four pairs of participles to illustrate his point in verses 8-9. In each pairing of verses 8-9, the first participle refers to Paul's suffering and the second to God's deliverance:

1. afflicted in every way, but not constrained
2. perplexed, but not driven to despair
3. persecuted, but not abandoned
4. struck down, but not destroyed

Paul sums up the effect of his apostolic existence in 4:12. He concludes that through his sufferings for the sake of the Gospel the Corinthians benefit in two possible ways:

1. They benefit from Paul's willingness to offer them Christ's self-giving love that makes him their "slave" (verse 5).
2. In uniting his suffering with Christ's redemptive suffering on the altar of the Cross, his suffering on their behalf has redemptive value for the Corinthians. God's grace comes to the community through "the life of Christ" within Paul (verse 10).

In 4:13, Paul quotes from Psalm 116. For Paul, Jesus Christ is the righteous slave/servant of God in Psalm 116:

1. He is God's Suffering Servant born from God's handmaiden, the Virgin Mary.
2. He cried out to God from the Cross of suffering.
3. He raised "the cup of salvation" "in the presence of all His people" in the Last Supper.
4. He continues to offer a "sacrifice of thanksgiving" in the Eucharist, a Greek word that means "thanksgiving."
5. He was caught in the "cords of death" but God rescued Him from Sheol.

In 4:15-5:1, Paul uses a series of contrasts to explain his faith in the afterlife:

1. His "outer self" that is temporal contrasted to his "inner self" that is an eternal spirit.
2. The present "light affliction" that is temporal to the promise of "eternal glory."
3. His temporal, earthly body compared to his resurrected, eternal body.

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