



Reformation Society of Western New York

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**FROM GLORY TO GLORY:
THE PREACHER'S EVER-GROWING LIKENESS TO THE CHRIST WHO IS PREACHED
2 CORINTHIANS 3:18**

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I. Introduction

- A. The conundrum of approaching the Bible topically
- B. The benefits of exploring the Bible's hard sayings (especially when no vital doctrine is at stake!)

II. Paul's complicated relationship with the Corinthians

A. Probable historical reconstruction

1. Established during Paul's 2nd missionary journey, stayed longer than 18 months (Acts 18:1-18)
2. During Paul's extended stay in Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey (1 Corinthians 16:8):
 - a. Paul writes an initial lost letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 5:9)
 - b. Paul receives visitors from Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11-12, 16:15-18)
 - c. Paul receives a letter with questions from the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 7:1, et al)
 - d. Paul writes 1 Corinthians
 - e. Paul states his intention of visiting them after passing through Macedonia (1 Corinthians 16:5-7, Acts 19:21)
 - f. Around this time Paul also sends Timothy (Acts 19:22, 1 Corinthians 4:17, 16:10-11)
 - g. At some point, Paul changes his itinerary to include two visits to Achaia, with a stop in Macedonia in between (2 Corinthians 1:15-16)
 - h. Receiving bad news (from Timothy?), Paul makes an unscheduled (unrecorded in Acts) 2nd visit, later called the "painful visit" (2 Corinthians 2:1)
 - i. Having been despised by an individual in the church and receiving little support from the church, Paul returns to Ephesus and writes a 2nd lost letter, severe enough in character to make them grieve and leading them to punish the offender (2 Corinthians 2:5-11, 7:8). This letter was perhaps delivered by Titus, who had been deputized by Paul to spend time with the Corinthians and prepare them for the collection for the church in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:6, 16).
 - j. Paul moves from Asia towards Macedonia, stopping first to preach at Troas. Unsettled while awaiting news from Titus about the Corinthians, he heads to Macedonia during which time he faces grave dangers for the Gospel (2 Corinthians 7:5) even as the poor Macedonian Christians encouraged him with their generosity in the collection (2 Corinthians 8:1ff).

k. Finally hearing from Titus about the response of the Corinthians to the severe letter, Paul rejoices (2 Corinthians 7:4); and yet as he writes **2 Corinthians** to prepare them for his third visit soon at hand, there are still warnings and affirmations of authority which he is willing to yield if necessary (2 Corinthians 13:1-4).

l. Paul makes his **3rd visit to them**. During this 3 month stay, he writes Romans (Romans 15:25-26, 16:23 in light of 1 Corinthians 1:14).

m. As Paul prepares to return to Jerusalem via Macedonia, he has a sizeable travel party of faithful brothers accompanying him (Acts 20:4-6)

B. Palpable tension – despite the Apostle’s love and attentiveness, the Corinthians are somewhat ambivalent and even doubtful and closed towards him

1. 1 Corinthians 4:15, 18-19, 9:1-7, 14:37-38, 15:12-15

2. 2 Corinthians 1:17, 23, 3:1, 5:11, 6:11, 7:2-4, 10:1-2, 7, 12:11, 19-21, 13:9-10

C. Personal opposition – though their identity is unclear, a group of false teachers – perhaps with an essentially similar message to Paul but clearly a very different methodology (2 Corinthians 11:20) – is actively undermining Paul’s authority by sowing seeds of doubt about him (2 Corinthians 3:1, 5:12, 10:10-12, 11:1-15, perhaps 12:13, etc).

D. Pastoral solution

1. In 1 Corinthians, Paul applies the necessary implications of Gospel truth to each area of his pastoral concern for the Corinthians, whether their arrogance, divisiveness, indulgence of sin, litigiousness, triumphalism/over-realized eschatology, attitude towards weaker brethren and personal rights, misuse of spiritual gifts and worship ordinances, and sacrificial Christian service.

2. In 2 Corinthians, Paul’s more personal defense involves connecting his character and his ministry methodology with the Gospel in general and with the person of the Lord Jesus in particular. In other words, there is to be total consistency between the Christ who is preached and the personal integrity of the preacher and the ministry philosophy he employs (tellingly, Paul uses *diakonia* 11 of the 21 occurrences in his writings in 2 Corinthians). This strategy comes to the fore in the stunning Gospel summaries that are placed strategically throughout the letter, interweaving the personal experiences of the apostle with the objective facts of God’s redeeming work through Jesus Christ. See 1:9, 20-22, 2:15, 4:6, 14, 17-18, 5:14-15, 18-21 8:9, 9:13, 12:9-10, 13:4.

How then does our key text relate to this overall framework of Paul’s pastoral intentions?

III. Context of 2 Corinthians 3

A. Contrasting letters of recommendation (2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

1. Determining the validity of a ministry by two very different types of letters of recommendation (that Paul is not opposed to a literal letter of this sort can be seen in 1 Corinthians 16:3)
2. There is a subsequent “humble confidence” in ministry when God rather than the servant is the source of the competency and sufficiency for the accomplishment of the work. See 4:7 ff & 12:9 ff. When we are nothing and Christ is everything, certainty of true success in ministry explodes exponentially!

B. Contrasting ministries (2 Corinthians 3:7-18)

1. Though the language of Spirit, letter and tablet assists the transition, Paul’s argument is still somewhat unexpected by instigating a comparison between his work as an apostle and that of Moses as covenant mediator at Sinai. We can thereby infer that at least some portion of the opponents/‘super-apostles’ are Jews (although not necessarily Judaizers). These apparently leverage a powerful (and not uncommon) draw towards the outwardly glorious aspects of previous administrations of the covenant of grace, an approach which seems especially appealing for the Corinthian church. Do we find beauty in the simplicity of the Gospel ordinances – flowing out of but ultimately displacing the ordinances of the Old Covenant – which are capable of use by every people, tribe, and nation impacted by the Gospel?
2. Paul draws out an extended comparison of his ministry with the practice of Moses found in Exodus 34:29-35. It is vital to remember at each stage of our discussion that this comparison relates to a paradigm not of the experience of the Christian believer in general but of the Christian minister/preacher in particular. Though there are many privileges ascribed to Israel as a redeemed people throughout the latter half of Exodus (including referring to them in language employed by Peter of the New Testament church, so Exodus 19:6 and 1 Peter 2:9), this account in Exodus 34 is in the midst of:
 - a. The context of fearful warnings surrounding the giving of the law (Exodus 19:12 ff, 34:3; see Hebrews 12:18-21). As Paul says, it was a ministry of death!
 - b. The context of fearful implications regarding rebellion against the law (Exodus 32:9-10, 28, 35). As Paul says, it was a ministry of condemnation!
 - c. The missing dimension in the Mosaic announcement of God’s decrees to the people, namely of the glory of Yahweh’s covenanted grace and goodness as revealed to Moses and in response to his intercession (Exodus 33:15-19, 34:6-7). His task was exclusively to impart “what the Lord commanded” (Exodus 34:32,

35:1, 4). In that sense, Moses' writings as a whole contain far more grace than the specific component of his ministry that transpired at the foot of Sinai.

- d. Possible/probable understanding of a vital detail: when does Moses veil his face and why? "When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face" (NASB 2020). It does not seem that Moses' face was veiled for the entirety of his communication to the people despite their initial fear, but only after he concluded relaying the commands of God as specified in Exodus. In other words, it's not because they couldn't bear to look at Moses that he veiled his face, but because there was something Moses was to keep from the Israelites, a mystery yet held back, at least in connection with the giving of the law.
3. Paul highlights the difference between Gospel ministry and Moses' ministry by indicating that apostolic boldness is the antithesis of Moses' veil (2 Corinthians 3:12-13).
 - a. He uses redemptive historical language in clarifying his meaning in 3:13: "He veiled his face so that the Israelites might not gaze intently at [the end attained/outcome/result/consummation] of that which was being nullified."
 - b. What is the "end" or "outcome" of the law, properly and ultimately considered? Jesus Christ is the consummation and goal of the law! Compare Paul's statement here with Romans 10:4 and Galatians 3:19, 23-29. It is not only that Jesus terminates the law in its administrative position in the covenant, but preparation for Christ's coming has been the God-given goal of the law all along. See John 1:45 & 5:46.
 - c. Summary: in calling the Sinai covenant a ministry of death and condemnation, Paul isn't denying that some Israelites received the substance of the promises of the covenant nor that grace and faith were present for some individuals, but that the law as given at Sinai (including both civil and ceremonial aspects) and proclaimed by Moses had the particular assignment of preserving the distinctiveness of Israel in the midst of the paganism of the surrounding nations for the sake of/with an eye towards the coming of Christ in fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 & 15:18 (see Galatians 3:16). The law by no means could save in and of itself, but it could be used to preserve the circumstances necessary for the Messiah to appear as promised for the sake of the salvation of the elect.
 - d. So, Moses is not guilty of some sort of duplicity (hiding the fading glory of his face to maintain the mere appearance of lasting glory). Rather, the veil belongs to the fundamental character of Moses' ministry as given by God. In contrast, there is hope and boldness through Jesus Christ found in the apostolic ministry of Paul, as well as others who are with him and who are like him.

4. Note then the comparison between apostolic proclamation and Jewish practice in Paul's day of the public (not private) reading of scripture as alluded to in Acts 15:21 (2 Corinthians 3:14-16).
- a. How hard hearts must be to be satisfied with and then to promulgate the types and shadows of the law when Jesus the substance has come (Colossians 2:17)! Yet Paul had experienced that reality time after time, including when he shook out his garments in Corinth itself when turning from the Jews to the Gentiles (Acts 18:6). Obdurate Jewish leaders don't put a literal veil over their faces, of course, so Paul locates their confusion and the incomplete nature of their teaching in their hearts. But the veil depicted still covers the revelation of grace in Christ rather than the subjective apprehension of that grace in an individual convert.
 - b. Therefore the veil is removed when Christ is proclaimed (see also 4:5). Apostolic preaching makes known to the fullest extent the radiant glory of what God momentarily had shielded from view at Sinai (except to Moses) – that he is a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. God intended thereby to eliminate all doubt that none are saved by works of the law. The prospective unveiling to which Paul alludes is not then a reference to conversion taking place (though reprobation or regeneration/conversion are described in 4:3-4,6), but to proclamation that puts Christ at the center of God's redemptive purposes. No Christian sermon based upon an Old Testament text is worthy of the name without the Lord Jesus Christ being substantially present in his mediatorial offices of prophet, priest, and king.
 - c. In fact, in 3:16 it is likely that Paul speaks of "it" or "he" turning to the Lord. Though the word for "turning" is often used spiritually for repentance or conversion, here it perhaps alludes to Moses or the reading of Moses turning to Christ in the sense of coming to those parts of the Pentateuch in which God's grace in and through the coming Messiah was manifest with relative clarity. Remember, the New Testament tells us that Abraham had the Gospel preached to him in advance, Moses chose to suffer with Christ rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin, and the children of Israel drank from Christ the spiritual Rock that accompanied them. Promises, grace, and faith are woven into the Pentateuch – but not with clarity at Sinai, a scene of attractive glory to Paul's opponents but undeservedly so in light of the whole sweep of redemptive history.
 - d. Furthermore, when Paul marks his ministry by the presence of the Spirit and freedom, he is highlighting the distinctiveness of the New Covenant blessings found in Christ. We are liberated from the law (Galatians 5:1, 13) and recipients of the down payment and guarantee of future glory as God's love is shed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who enables us to cry "Abba, Father!"

IV. With all this build-up, in 2 Corinthians 3:18...

- A. “We all” refers to Paul, those with Paul, and those like Paul proclaiming the apostolic gospel, not all Christians in general. This is hotly contested, but in 2 Corinthians there is a constant and meaningful refrain of we and you. At times the plural first person is inclusive/universal, and of course what is true of the apostolic band in the first instance can often be applied to believers in general. But here it is vital to the flow of the argument to remember the contrast between ministries and ministers.
- B. Though Moses unveiled his face while in God’s presence, remember that Paul is setting up a contrast with Moses. The point is that the faces of the Apostles are unveiled at such time when Moses’ face once had been veiled. At the moment when Moses would veil his face before the people as he spoke for God, Gospel preachers unveil themselves by commending their message to the consciences of all, setting forth the permanent glory of God’s complete revelation of his mercy and grace in Jesus Christ which can now be fully proclaimed through open statements of the truth accompanied by earnest appeals and invitations for none to receive the grace of God in vain (see 4:2, 5:20, 6:1-2).
- C. Those envisaged by Paul are not “gazing upon” but rather “reflecting” the glory of the Lord Jesus (the middle voice emphasizes the subject’s participation in the action of the verb; certainly not “we all reflecting ourselves” but rather “we all ourselves reflecting”) through the ministry of glory given them (see 4:4-5). This understanding of the middle is perhaps disputable, but is considered warrantable. Moses talked with God face to face, friend to friend. Such communion and contemplation then, while precious beyond measure, is not a point of departure from Moses for Paul and the Gospel preacher. The difference is projecting the most glorious thing of all about God to a needy world dying apart from him – through Jesus, God reconciled the world to himself, not counting men’s sins against them but making him who knew no sin to be sin for us. Gospel preachers are in the truest sense ambassadors of reconciliation, God making his appeal through us.
- D. In the process of (minimally) or perhaps as a result of (maximally) this participation in making Christ known, Gospel preachers are personally and increasingly transformed into the same likeness or image with the one they are making known (4:4). It is the “same” image not in the sense of stressing absolute uniformity among all preachers, but the very same likeness to Jesus who is in his own person the visible manifestation of the invisible God. A remarkable application of this appears in 8:23, when various “sent ones” of the churches – even in their capacity of administering with integrity the collection for the saints in Judea – are the “glory of Christ” (“Whether *any do enquire* of Titus, *he is* my partner and fellowhelper concerning you: or our brethren *be enquired of*, *they are* the messengers of the churches, *and* the glory of Christ”--KJV). Notice that Paul isn’t content in saying that preachers merely reflect glory, but they experience a metamorphosis to possess that glory for themselves. In other words, we do not merely talk about the glorious grace of God but show it, experience it, live it, conform to it.
- E. Paul’s presupposition which he now insists upon and rigorously applies to the Corinthians is that everything associated with Christ should be consistent with Christ.

V. Application

- A. Paul promotes criteria for assessing ministry approach (such as humility, reliance on grace, open acknowledgment of weakness, no flattery or peddling of Gospel for money) as well as the character of the minister himself (such as integrity, sacrifice, other focused)
- B. Paul presses contrast with the super apostles, who boast about outward appearance and not what is in the heart (5:12), and who make much of forceful personality and speech (10:10).
- C. Paul provides challenge to Corinthian's commitment, boldly asking them to open their hearts to him even as he has an accommodating heart for them (6:11-13, 7:2-4). This is not only a personal appeal, though Paul had every reason to expect filial affection, respect and ultimately imitation from those whom he had fathered spiritually through the Gospel (1 Corinthians 4:15-16). But here's the key: if Paul is like Jesus but they don't respect Paul for the very ways he looks like Jesus then they really need to ask if they prize Jesus in the first place! Such rejection of Paul for reflecting Christ is at minimum ironic and potentially very tragic (13:5).
- D. So, what are the ways that preachers (and by extension, all believers) are to look like the Christ who is preached? Here are a few initial suggestions:
 - 1. Incarnational meekness (2 Corinthians 8:9), like our Savior being present alongside others tenderly and compassionately, and at personal cost
 - 2. Purity (2 Corinthians 6:15), like our Savior being separate from unrighteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21)
 - 3. Embracing suffering for the sake of others (2 Corinthians 4:11-12), like our Savior who died to reconcile us to God and to enable us to die to self (2 Corinthians 5:14-15)
 - 4. Showing every hope of future deliverance and resurrection glory (2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10), like our Savior who was raised from the dead in power (2 Corinthians 1:9, 13:4)
 - 5. Wielding authority to bless and encourage (2 Corinthians 13:4), like our Savior who reigns at God's right hand to provide for us



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