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Pentecost: Paul the Pastor in 2 Corinthians

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I. INTRODUCTION

To read 2 Corinthians is to watch a pastor at work. Paul practices, describes, defends, and commends to his audience his pastoral ministry. Something quite rare presents itself in this letter: an extended argument for the ministry of the gospel offered by a practitioner in the heat of the moment. My task is to disclose that heat.

What does it mean to place pastoral practice at the center of the interpretation of Pauline epistles? Is this not anachronistic? There is indeed the danger of reading into the text what by habit has become pastoral practice in North America. Nevertheless, by calling Paul “pastor” I simply mean to underscore the happy mixture of rhetoric and theological conviction in his letters.¹ Not despising the art of persuasion, Paul adapts his speech to the needs and circumstances of his hearers in order to shape them into a community embodying God’s transformation of creation, which will be completed at Christ’s return. To be a pastor is to use human speech to lead the Christian community into the future promised to it by God.

2 Cor 1-7 is full of words about speech.² Even the earliest known commentary on the Pauline epistles (2 Cor 10:10) focused on the apostle’s speech as the key to proper interpretation: “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” Yet, even though his preoccupation with the topic of speech is clear, it is not obvious why this is so. To answer this, we must

¹For a recent example of this approach, see A. J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

²See 1:4, 12, 17-19; 2:6-7, 17; 3:12; 4:2-3, 13; 5:11, 18-20; 6:1, 7, 11; 7:4, 14.

turn to the occasion of 2 Cor and try to understand the situation of this letter in Paul’s career and the life of the Corinthian community.

Paul had charged his co-worker Timothy to carry 1 Cor to the church and resolve the factiousness and immorality in the community. Timothy’s visit, however, was a failure. This forced Paul to alter his travel plans and pay a hasty visit. Although (or maybe because) he took a conciliatory and mild approach to the conflict in the church, he was no more successful than his junior associate. To make matters worse, a certain individual (whom I will call Mr. X) injured or insulted Paul. Yet, instead of facing the conflict directly, Paul left Corinth for Asia and there wrote a forceful letter of moral rebuke which he later described in 2 Cor 2:4: “I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears.” More than any other factor, this

“letter of tears” shaped the occasion of 2 Cor.

The letter had three effects. First, it moved the church to follow Paul’s instructions and rebuke Mr. X in the company of the gathered church (2:6; 7:11). In a society in which the pursuit of honor and the avoidance of shame summarized human aspiration (at least among the social elite), public reproof caused great emotional pain. Instances of persons committing suicide in order to escape the shame induced by public censure illumine the situation of Mr. X.³ 2 Cor 2:7 indicates that his death from grief was indeed a possibility. Thus, the church faced a crisis in its practice of pastoral ministry. What was to be done with Mr. X? One of Paul’s aims in 2 Cor was to persuade the church to forgive, exhort, and confirm love for Mr. X. Paul expands this exhortation in 2 Cor 5:11-6:13, as we will see in the analysis of the first text in the Pentecost series.

The second effect of the letter of tears was the pain it caused the church itself. In the epistolary conventions of antiquity, to present the self as grieving had the effect of communicating forcefully a severe moral rebuke in order to cause pain. Paul admits as much in 7:8. Thus, although Paul moved the church to take seriously the wrong he had suffered, he won the victory at the price of vexing the church. Unfortunately, the pericope series for Pentecost does not include the texts which seek reconciliation with the church (1:23-2:4; 7:2-16). We must turn to the final effect of the letter of tears.

For Paul’s critics in Corinth, the forcefulness which he displayed through letters compared with his mildness in person was disturbing. They viewed Paul as a deceitful flatterer who disguised his true thoughts in the presence of the church through lack of boldness (10:9-10). This was a very serious charge. Philosophers, orators, and other leaders in antiquity were bound by duty to speak their thoughts openly and without reservation in any situation lest they be despised as deceptive flatterers. Paul could not ignore the charge that he lacked bold speech, for if the entire church in Corinth were to find it credible, his leadership would come quickly to an end. Thus, in 2 Cor Paul seeks to prove that he has bold speech. He does this chiefly in 2:14-4:6 where his claims to be straightforward and bold in speech abound (2:17; 3:4, 12; 4:2).⁴

³See Plutarch, *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 70F.

⁴English translations of 2 Cor 3:12 and 7:4 and nearly all commentators obscure Paul’s emphasis on bold speech. They incorrectly regard the Greek term *parrhesia* as boldness, a psychological state.

II. PAUL’S BOLD SPEECH

If the reader’s concern is to make sense of 2 Cor in terms of the occasion outlined above, she is best served by first noting that the pericope series literally drops her into the conclusion of an argument which began in 2:14. Some orientation is therefore required.

This can best be achieved by examining the proofs Paul offers in 3:7-18 concerning his bold speech. By comparing his ministry with the ministry of Moses, Paul demonstrates the two foundations of his bold speech. Whereas the ministry of the old covenant kills and condemns (3:6-7:8), the ministry of the new covenant makes alive and creates righteousness in the hearers (3:6, 8-9). On the basis of the hope in the benefits his ministry brings, Paul uses much bold speech (3:12). In 3:13-18, however, the focus shifts from the two ministries to the effects worked in the ministers themselves. At first, Paul is unlike Moses (3:13), who must cover his face (a common sign of shame in Paul’s world) in order that his onlookers not see the effect of the old

covenant. Yet, he is like Moses, whose veil (understand shame) was removed in the presence of God (3:16).⁵ To be without shame means freedom (3:17), and in this way Paul has reached the second foundation of his bold speech, for it was commonplace in antiquity that inner freedom issued forth in freedom of speech.⁶

1. Pentecost 2: 2 Cor 4:5-12

Now we can see the force of the argument in 4:5-12. Paul feverishly distinguishes his bold speech from arrogance. In 4:5 (“For what we preach is not ourselves . . .”), he contrasts himself to the well-known figure of the harsh Cynic philosopher, who customarily preached his own moral virtue as the foundation of his bold speech.⁷ Rather than its lord, Paul portrays himself as the church’s slave, a theme which he will develop in 4:10-12. Furthermore, according to 4:6, God (not Paul!) creates and illumines souls. Thus, Paul is bold but not tyrannical. This will prove to be an important distinction in 5:11-6:13, when he exhorts the church to imitate his ministry of reconciliation.

Admirably ambiguous imagery in 4:7 underscores Paul’s lack of arrogance and his love for the church: “we have this treasure in earthen vessels.” What is the treasure? Is it the gospel and its ministry? Or is it Paul’s own divinely illumined soul? Furthermore, what are earthen vessels? Are they the cheap and humble pots used for lowly and vulgar purposes?⁸ Or does Paul wish to evoke the body’s natural fragility? All these meanings are present, though not simultaneously. On the one hand, a fragile container holds his soul so that the power might be God’s and not his own, as his endurance of hardships in 4:8-9 illustrates.⁹ On the other hand, 4:10-12 emphasizes Paul’s social abasement for the sake of the church. He voluntarily carries about the decaying body of Jesus to the Corinthians.

Thus, even though he is bold with the church and speaks his mind, the rhetoric

⁵Clearly, Paul takes great liberties with the story of Moses’ veil in Exod 34:29-35.

⁶See, for example, Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 99.

⁷Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.8.26-29.

⁸Cf. Rom 9:21 and esp. 2 Tim 2:20.

⁹See J. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (SBLDS 99; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 167-169.

of 4:5-12 distinguishes Paul from harsh Cynic philosophers, whose freedom of speech cared little for the effects in the hearers and was simply proof of moral independence. If we keep in mind the church’s need for reconciliation with Mr. X, the direction Paul is taking his self-presentation becomes intelligible. Just as Paul is free by the power of the Holy Spirit, yet enslaves himself to all for their salvation, so also should the church not stand on its rights, but forgive and comfort the one whom it had rebuked. But this is to anticipate Paul’s appeal which begins in 5:11.

2. Pentecost 3: 2 Cor 4:13-18

On paper, freedom of speech is a right guaranteed to all citizens of the United States by the First Amendment. Many persons are in fact silenced by social position, and others who have the public’s ear have trivialized free speech by calling it “self-expression.” Nevertheless, part of the American consciousness is the understanding of free speech as a right protected by law. Thus,

the radical nature of Paul's statement in 4:13 ("we too believe, and so we speak") is lost on those of us for whom free speech is an inalienable right. In antiquity, slaves did not speak their minds in public. Neither did women. In fact, unless you were a free male, you had no voice. There were indeed philosophers who rejected the idea that rights were socially grounded and made them instead depend upon individual moral virtue. But, of course, they too were free males.

With only the psalmist as his partner (Ps 116:10), Paul grounds speech in belief rather than social position or moral virtue, and thus a new argument for the right to engage in public discourse emerges. Yet not any belief will do. The belief which engenders Paul's speech is knowledge of his own future transformation and that of his hearers. It is transformation that has already begun in the resurrection of Jesus: "knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus," Paul claims to speak *because* he knows what God is going to do. His authority to speak rests on the future in which a new community will give thanks to God with one voice (4:15).

Paul's lack of fear is not arrogance. In 4:16b-18 as in 4:7-9, Paul resorts to the philosophic theme of the wise man's endurance of hardships only to insinuate a radically different self-understanding. The distinction between the "outer" and "inner" person was a dogma of Greek philosophy like the dichotomy of body and soul. From the philosophic perspective, hardships trained the soul in moral virtue just as physical exercise strengthened the body. By making the distinction between the "inner" and "outer" person, Paul generated in the first-century reader the expectation that he would next speak about his *present* possession of moral power. He skillfully frustrates this expectation, however, since he speaks of the future and eternal weight of glory, which temporary affliction produces for him. Thus, Paul, somewhat playfully, presents his free speech in an eschatological perspective and ignores the power of human reason. His eyes are not on himself but on the future, which can only be believed (4:18; 5:7).

3. Pentecost 4: 2 Cor 5:1-10

Renewal of the "inner person" was the theme of 4:16-18, where we saw how Paul frustrated the expectation of philosophic self-reliance. Now he turns to the topic of the transformation of the "outer person"; here again he departs radically from the philosophers.

First, it should be noted that Paul speaks in the language of popular philosophy, from which the following images are drawn: death as a stripping away of the body (5:2-4); the body as a temporary dwelling (5:1, 4); and the body as a burden (5:4). Seneca taps the same tradition that Paul has at his disposal when he describes the Stoic's attitude toward death:

But this heart is never more divine than when it reflects upon its mortality, and understands that man was born for the purpose of fulfilling his life, and that the body is not a permanent dwelling, but a sort of inn (with a brief sojourn at that) which is to be left behind when one perceives that one is a burden to the host.¹⁰

Yet, in spite of the shared metaphors concerning the finitude and difficulty of bodily existence, Paul resists with all his might the notion that for the sake of the soul's liberation the

body is finally to be put away like clippings of hair and fingernails. Notice in 5:4 his abhorrence of the goal of Stoic eschatology, a soul stripped naked. Death, Paul argues, is not the separation of the soul from the body but the further “bodying” of the soul in an eternal house not made with hands.

What accounts for Paul’s insistence that human existence is, even in the transformation worked by the Spirit, always given in a body? Certainly, his Judaism is part of the answer. Yet notice also the role of the body in the eschatological judgment envisioned in 5:10: “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil.” Embodied existence provides the occasion for both Paul’s confidence and fear. Paul’s confidence (5:6, 8) derives from the transformation of the body by the Spirit (5:5); his fear comes from the prospect of Christ’s judgment over the acts he has done in the body. If we keep in mind that Paul’s rhetorical aim in 4:7-5:10 is to present himself as bold yet not arrogant and domineering, the significance of the fear is clear. It moves him to a ministry of persuasion and reconciliation. He says as much in 5:11: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we try to persuade others.”

4. Pentecost 5: 2 Cor 5:14-21

Here Paul seeks to persuade the Corinthian church to reconcile Mr. X to itself. Keep in mind the forces arrayed against this reconciliation. In 5:12, Paul alludes to his critics in Corinth, who accuse him of flattery because he employs mildness and flexibility in his dealings with the church. If the church forgives, comforts, and confirms love for Mr. X as Paul has exhorted them to do, the critics will cry out in ridicule, “You are as wishy-washy as your apostle!” Paul needs to ground the church’s ministry of reconciliation in something transcending his own personality. He therefore turns to Christ and to God. They are models of reconciliation.

Christ is the true friend. The topic of friendship was widely discussed in the philosophic writings of antiquity. Certain commonplace sayings sought to capture its essence.¹¹ It was often asserted that a true friend would die for another.¹² Just as in Rom 5:7, in 2 Cor 5:14-15 Paul reflects contemporary discussions of friendship

¹⁰Seneca, *Epistle* 120.14. Translation by R. M. Gummere in *Epistulae Morales* (LCL 77; Heinemann: Harvard University Press, 1925) 391.

¹¹For example, “A friend is another self.” For this and other sayings concerning friendship, see Cicero, *De Amicitia*.

¹²See, for example, Lucian, *Toxaris*.

and portrays Christ as the one who dies for others. Nevertheless, there is an important difference. Christ’s death actually brings about a new situation. Those for whom Christ died now live only for him. They are now devoted to him. Reconciliation has taken place, and a new creation has begun. Thus, not only is Christ the model reconciler whom the church is to imitate, he has also worked a reconciliation which is the basis of its pastoral care.

Paul makes a similar point with respect to God in 5:18-6:2. In 5:18, he argues that his ministry of reconciliation is not a personal quirk but the gift of God and that he copies the reconciliation first worked in him. 5:19 says the same thing, with two important qualifications. First, God reconciles through forgiveness, and, secondly, the world is the object of God’s

reconciling activity. In spite of these differences, however, notice the structure Paul has established. First God reconciles persons to God's self and then gives them a ministry of reconciliation. By exhorting the church to "be reconciled to God" in 5:20 and "not to accept the grace of God in vain" in 6:1, Paul hints that refusal to forgive Mr. X calls into question their own reconciliation with God. They are to imitate God, who does not stand on rights but makes others righteous, even at the price of making the one who had known no sin to be sin (5:21). They are to imitate the God who knows when to listen and how to speak to the needs of the moment (6:2). What his critics call flattery Paul calls grace.

5. Pentecost 7: 2 Cor 12:7-12

Although this passage is the last in the series drawn from 2 Cor, it makes good sense to discuss it in connection with the texts examined above. In 2 Cor 10-13, Paul faces a complex problem. The Corinthians have not yet come to terms with the original issues of sexual immorality and factionalism (2 Cor 12:19-21). Yet, if Paul "thunders" against them in these chapters (which he in fact does in 12:19-13:10), he will support his critics' accusation that he is bold at a distance through letters but lacks courage when present. Accordingly, he adopts a sophisticated rhetorical strategy. He attacks his critics and demonstrates his power to reduce their pride to rubble (10:1-6).¹³ He also hints that the same power could be turned on the community unless it repents.¹⁴

His method of "destroying" his critics is fascinating. He portrays them as haughty and domineering (11:19-20), while he himself boasts in weakness. In the catalogues of hardships, we discover that his weakness turns out to be his concern for the church (11:28-30). While his critics boast in the superiority of their authority, Paul boasts in his humiliating dedication to the church. Self-deprecation is a powerful weapon against conceit. In 12:7-12, Paul merely calls attention to this weapon. In 13:1-4, he threatens to use it against the church.

6. Pentecost 6: 2 Cor 8:1-9, 13-14

So far we have explored Paul's understanding of pastoral ministry as it dealt with discipline within the community. We turn, finally, in chapters 8-9 to the question of relations between local churches. Paul attempts to persuade the Corin-

¹³See A. J. Malherbe, "Antisthenes and Odysseus, and Paul at War," *Harvard Theological Review* 76 (1983) 143-173.

¹⁴For 2 Cor 10-13 as a "threatening letter," see J. Fitzgerald, "Paul, the Ancient Epistolary Theorists, and 2 Corinthians 10-13" in *Greeks, Romans and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. David L. Balch, Wayne A. Meeks, and Everett Ferguson (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) 190-200.

thians to give money to the church in Jerusalem. This appears to be neither complicated nor of great theological consequence. Paul merely takes up the "practical" matter of one church giving economic support to another.

Yet it was not so simple. We need to reckon with the symbolic character of gifts in Roman society. Altruism was not a motive for charity in antiquity. Rather, *gifts displayed and reinforced differences in social status*. No gift was given without the presupposition that the recipient occupied a lower social position than the giver. Furthermore, the recipient was

obligated publicly to honor the benefactor and to demonstrate loyalty.¹⁵ The patron-client relationship, which to a considerable degree defined Roman social relations, rested on the symbolic character of gifts. Thus, to give a gift was to assert power and to receive honor.

Was the Corinthian church to understand itself as the patron of a client congregation in Jerusalem? Notice how Paul's rhetoric solicits the gift but frustrates its symbolism. This can be seen most clearly in the concept of "equality" in 8:13-14. He appeals to the idea of fairness (not social recognition!) to motivate the gift. The Corinthians are to think of a time when they too might need monetary support. Thus, instead of condescension, they are to imagine themselves resorting to the principle of equality. The "communism" implied in these verses jams the mechanism of social control operating through patron-client relations.¹⁶

III. PAUL AS PASTOR

The assumption guiding my analysis of these texts has been that Paul was engaged in a practical enterprise: founding, forming, and nurturing a Christian community. Only at the cost of distortion will these texts yield pure, theoretical information. Conversely, they give me rules which can be directly applied to the present situation only if I trivialize the social context in which they were originally heard. So what does the reading of these texts yield aside from an interesting glimpse of Paul's practice of ministry?

These texts shape our imagination. Imagine pastoral ministry both confronting injustice *and* seeking reconciliation and restoration. Think of the confidence to be derived from the transformation of your body, but check yourself with the fear of Christ's judgment and therefore be merciful. Think of a community in which no one is shamed into silence, but where each one is frank and open in the expectation that honesty will build up the church. Meditate on the neediness of churches for one another and the destruction of hierarchical power through equality. An imagination filled with these thoughts understands that reading is the birth of acting.

¹⁵See A. R. Hands, *Charities and Social Aid in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1968) 26-61.

¹⁶Cf. Acts 2:44-46 and 4:32-37.