

**Paul's Relational Pedagogy:
Transformed into Divine Glory through Relationships**
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ABSTRACT

Why does Paul think moral transformation is necessary? And how does Paul facilitate Christlike transformation amongst his communities? What are the actual mechanisms of change, the spiritual practices and habits involved? In what follows, I propose to answer these questions by reflecting upon 2 Corinthians, given that the letter is an extended ethos argument where Paul exhorts the Corinthians to cultivate the character of Jesus as this character is embodied in Paul's own life. I will argue four points. First, Paul establishes the goal of human existence as transformation into the glory of God through conformity to the person of Christ. Second, persons-in-Christ are transformed into Christ's image by beholding Christ's glory in the life, character, and ministry of Paul. Third, Paul offers a variety of spiritual practices, ultimately rooted in his embodiment of Christ's character, that work to facilitate transformation into divine glory. Fourth, and finally, I conclude by arguing that 2 Corinthians provides an enduring witness to the primacy of good leaders in effecting moral change and growth into the character of Christ.

That Paul is a teacher of Christlike character is uncontroversial enough.¹ One of Paul's primary assumptions is that his congregants are moral agents who have both the cognitive framework and moral capacity to think and act like Christ as they embody the character traits and practices of humility, hospitality, peacemaking, forgiveness, and generosity (e.g., Rom. 12:14-17; 15:7-8; 2 Cor. 8:9; Gal. 5:14; 6:2; Phil. 2:1-5; Col. 3:13). What I find to be more interesting and worthy of further careful reflection are: Why does Paul think moral transformation is necessary? His letters make it clear that he was passionately devoted to facilitating Christlike transformation, but to what end? And how does Paul facilitate Christlike transformation amongst his communities? What are the actual mechanisms of change, the spiritual practices and habits involved?

In what follows, I propose to work with 2 Corinthians, perhaps Paul's most challenging letter, given that the letter(s) is an extended ethos argument where Paul exhorts the Corinthians to cultivate the character of Jesus as this character is embodied in Paul's own life.² I will argue four points. First, Paul establishes the goal of human existence as transformation into the glory of God through conformity to the person of Christ. Second, persons-in-Christ are transformed into Christ's image by beholding Christ's glory in the life, character, and ministry of Paul. Third, Paul offers a variety of spiritual practices, ultimately rooted in his embodiment of Christ's character, that work to facilitate transformation into divine glory. Fourth, and finally, I conclude by arguing that 2 Corinthians provides an enduring witness to the primacy of good leaders in effecting moral change and growth into the character of Christ.

1. Transformed by Beholding Divine Glory on the Face of Christ

Before we can make progress into understanding the mechanisms and practices that facilitate growth in character and virtue, we need to be able to articulate to what final end this transformation of character is directed. Spiritual exercises and practical habits for transformation are coherent when they are aimed toward an ultimate good or end that is internal to the practice.³ If one is an Epicurean, one will memorize and meditate upon wise sayings such as "Death is nothing to us," "Live unknown," "Short if it's severe; light if it's long." The Epicurean practices of meditation and memorization are aimed toward the ultimate good of tranquility of mind (*ataraxia*).⁴ Or, if one is a Stoic, the practice of listening to the bold and frank speech of a wise mentor can enable one to root out inappropriate value attachments to external goods and thereby pursue the goal of becoming a rationally virtuous individual, capable of a heroic "disdain [of] hardships" that may come one's way.⁵

I propose that one of the best entry points into how Paul articulates humanity's supreme good is found in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18. In this text, Paul describes how God's glory transformed Moses's face such that God's glorious presence was still shining on the face of Moses (2 Cor. 3:7b;

¹ On Paul as a "moral teacher," see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Among the Gentiles: Greco-Roman Religion and Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 159-164.

² On 2 Corinthians as an extended ethos argument, see Thomas Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin of Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians* (AnBib 158; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005).

³ I am drawing here upon the definition of Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd ed. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187: "By 'practice' I am going to mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended."

⁴ See Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* as well as *Principal Doctrines*.

⁵ On Musonius Rufus's exhortations to think nothing of hardships and sufferings, see Joshua W. Jipp, *Pauline Theology as a Way of Life: A Christological Vision of Human Flourishing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023), 39-41.

see Exodus 34:29-35). Moses must, however, veil his face when communicating with the Israelites, lest the divine glory result in the death of those with untransformed hearts (2 Cor. 3:13-14). Thus, Paul repeatedly notes that God's glory is not producing transformation under the Mosaic covenant and is being rendered "ineffective" (καταργέω, 2 Cor. 3:7, 11, 13, 14). The first covenant, as Paul has already noted, is incapable of producing the transformation and life that it calls for; whereas the new covenant is inaugurated by "the Spirit of the living God" and is thereby capable of producing moral transformation and life (2 Cor. 3:1-3).⁶ It is of critical importance to note here that the veil which hides the divine glory from the Israelites is taken away "when anyone turns to the Lord" (3:16). The referent of "the Lord" here has already been marked as the Messiah – i.e., "in the Messiah [the veil] is taken away" (ὅτι ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται, 3:14).

This leads to the climax of Paul's argument where he declares that moral transformation takes place by means of a visual encounter with the glory of God shining on the face of Christ:

We all with an unveiled face by beholding the glory of the Lord as reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακεκαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτριζόμενοι⁷ τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος, 3:18).

Paul's language of unveiled faces and divine glory, along with the metaphor of beholding a mirror's reflection, depict divine transformation as the visual experience of seeing the glory of God.⁸ And this divine transformation of believers flows from "the Spirit of the Lord" (πνεῦμα κυρίου, 2 Cor. 3:17) – as noted before, where the Lord is Jesus Christ. Given Paul's explicit identification of Christ as "the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:6), along with the claim he made to them in an earlier letter ("...so we will bear *the image of the heavenly man*," 1 Cor. 15:49),⁹ I take it that Paul is saying the Spirit is transforming all believers into Christ's image who himself is the (embodied) image of God. This further clarifies the meaning of Paul's opaque phrase that believers are being transformed "from glory into glory" (ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν, 3:18b), namely, as a compact expression indicating the Spirit's transformation of believers "from" Christ's divine glory (i.e., the source) and the believers' transformation "into" divine glory (i.e., the goal).¹⁰ Christ is not simply a mediator of God's glory; Christ, as the very image of God, *is God's visible glory that believers are gazing upon*.¹¹ Julien Smith states this well: "The vision of the glorious Messiah effects the

⁶ Paul's argument is clearly drawing upon the prophetic anticipations of a new covenant (Jer. 31; Ezekiel 36).

⁷ There seems now to be a consensus that this participle should be understood as the middle voice and thereby retains the metaphor of beholding in a mirror. See Fredrick J. Long, *2 Corinthians: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 73-74.

⁸ This theme is articulated clearly and in more detail in Ben C. Blackwell, *Christosis: Pauline Soteriology in Light of Deification in Irenaeus and Cyril of Alexandria* (WUNT 2.314; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2011), 191-193. On the broader metaphor of transformation by vision, see Julien C. H. Smith, *Paul and the Good Life: Transformation and Citizenship in the Commonwealth of God* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020), 77-103. See also, Jane M.F. Heath, *Paul's Visual Piety: The Metamorphosis of the Beholder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁹ Paul uses similar language to identify Christ as "the image of God" (Rom. 8:29; Col. 1:15; 3:10) and "the form of God" (Phil. 2:6).

¹⁰ Similarly, see Long, *2 Corinthians*, 74.

¹¹ As noted by Stegman, *The Character of Jesus*, 236: "For Paul, it appears, Jesus Christ is the new human prototype, the new or second Adam, who fully reflects God's image and glory."

change that the glorious Moses could not. The former was veiled, both literally and metaphorically. That is, the divine glory reflected in Moses' face was incapable of effecting transformation."¹²

Paul continues his emphasis on the visual experience of seeing Christ's face as he further emphasizes how this reality produces moral and cognitive transformation in 2 Cor. 4:1-6. Paul compares God's creative act of calling forth light into darkness (Gen. 1:3-5) with God's activity of making "his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ (πρὸς φωτισμὸν τῆς γνώσεως τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ ἐν προσώπῳ Χριστοῦ)" (2 Cor. 4:6). The Spirit of Christ illuminates the minds and hearts of believers to see God in the image of Christ, and this visionary encounter transforms humans *even now* so that they are capable of sharing in the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:4-6). Paul's reference to Christ as "the image of God" and his strong allusions to the creation imagery in Genesis indicate that his understanding of humanity and its destiny is christologically determined. Even now believers have a proleptic experience of their future resurrection life and participation in God's glory as they look upon the glory of God in the face of Christ.

2. Beholding Divine Glory in the Life of Paul

I have tried to establish that the supreme good for believers, as argued by Paul, is the transformative encounter of beholding the glory of God on the face of Christ, the one who is the very image of God in embodied human form. But if this is humanity's supreme good, how does one gaze upon God's glory in the face of Christ given that Christ is physically absent? Where do believers behold this divine glory?

Paul's answer to this question is both bold and paradoxical. And, I suggest, it will be crucial for understanding *how* Paul believes persons-in-Christ grow in character and virtue. Believers gaze upon divine glory shining from its source in the face of Christ by looking upon Paul's faithful embodiment of Christ and his character. In what follows, I will demonstrate this with a closer look at 2 Corinthians 4:7-15, with a few glances to the rest of the letter. Four observations will enable us to understand how it is that Paul expects believers to be transformed into divine glory through rightly seeing and interpreting Paul's life and ministry.

First, Paul expects that when the Corinthians look at Paul's endurance in suffering and weakness, they will see both "the death of Jesus" (τὴν νέκρωσιν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) and "the life of Jesus" (ἡ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ) in Paul's mortal body (4:10).¹³ Paul's claim to carry about "this treasure in clay pots" (4:7a) signifies the remarkably reality that the treasure of "the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Christ" (4:6b) is displayed in Paul's mortal body. Paul's life is marked by suffering and weakness *and* resurrection and power. Paul's catalogues of his sufferings are rightly interpreted when they are seen as the visible display of the death and life of Christ. Notice how Paul interprets his experiences according to Christ's death-resurrection pattern (4:7-10).

Death of Jesus

Afflicted
Perplexed
Persecuted
Stuck Down

Life of Jesus

Not Crushed
Not Despairing
Not Forsaken
Not Destroyed

¹² Smith, *Paul and the Good Life*, 100.

¹³ See Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Paul has already instructed the church of the way in which God's powerful deliverance of him out of situations of suffering, despair, and even death is a sign of God's resurrection power in the face of death (2 Cor. 1:8-11). Paul places an obvious emphasis throughout on it being the physical, mortal human bodies that are the containers for divine glory. This is again stated clearly in the words of the risen Lord to Paul: "'My grace is enough for you; for power is perfected in weakness.' Therefore, I will boast even more in my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may dwell in me" (12:9). Paul's mortal body is a visible container for the story and character of Christ, particularly the cross and resurrection. The very words of the risen Christ "authorize Paul's approach and render it normative."¹⁴

Second, the paradox of embodying divine glory in weak, mortal bodies accounts for Paul's insistence that the church undergo a cognitive transformation such that they are able to fix their eyes on what is eternal rather than transient. Paul repeats his hope that "the life of Jesus may be *made visible* in our mortal flesh (ἐν τῷ σώματι ἡμῶν φανερωθῇ)" (2 Cor. 4:10b, 11b). Paul uses the language of φανέρο- throughout the letter in order to call attention to a perception of reality that is truthful and in accordance with the character of Christ (e.g., 2 Cor. 3:3; 4:2; 5:10-11). Paul is calling for something more than physical eyesight here, for "what can be seen is temporary" (2 Cor. 4:18a). Rather, seeing the glory of God in the face of Christ requires a conversion of one's cognitive abilities whereby one fixes one's eyes on the "eternal" (4:18b), "walks by faith, not sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Paul's life as an embodiment of Christ's glory will only make sense if his churches learn how to think and perceive in a way that is congruent with the "new creation" brought into existence by Christ's death and resurrection.

This contrast of two ways of knowing is clearly set forth in 2 Cor. 5:16-17: "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view (οἶδαμεν κατὰ σάρκα); even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way (ἐγνώκαμεν κατὰ σάρκα Χριστόν, ἀλλὰ νῦν οὐκέτι γινώσκομεν). So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away, see, everything has become new!" Making sense of Paul's life and ministry, and, more importantly, the capacity to see the shining glory of Christ even in mortal human bodies, requires a transformed mind that takes its bearings from God's new creation brought about in the death and resurrection of Christ.¹⁵ Those who think and see "according to the flesh" boast in impressive letters of recommendation, rhetorical prowess, working miracles, and heavenly visions; but Paul's new creation way of seeing recognizes that God's power is revealed in weakness, gentleness, and humility. This divine "power in weakness" dynamic pervades Paul's thinking and is, of course, rooted in Christ's own death-and-resurrection dynamic: "For he was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God. And so even we are weak in him, but we will live with him by God's power for you" (2 Cor. 13:4). True knowledge – a fully Christian account of reality – conforms to the character of Christ and is not authenticated by worldly displays of power, charisma, and grandeur.

Third, Paul expects that what the Corinthians will see is his faithful endurance, hope, and confidence that God will – just as he has done with Christ – bestow resurrection life upon Paul. The God of comfort shares his resurrection power with those in Christ precisely so that they are enabled to grow faithful endurance in the midst of suffering and weakness (2 Cor. 1:6). Paul's

¹⁴ Dustin W. Ellington, "Not Applicable to Believers? The Aims and Basis of Paul's 'I' in 2 Corinthians 10 – 13," *JBL* 131 (2012): 325-340, here, 334.

¹⁵ On the epistemological ramifications of these verses, see J. Louis Martyn, "Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages," in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 89-110.

sharing “the spirit of faith” enables him to do what the Psalmist (and Christ) did in confidently declaring: “‘I believed, and so I spoke’ – we also believe, and therefore we also speak” (2 Cor. 4:13). Paul’s confident belief (flowing from Christ who is speaking the words of Psalm 115:1 LXX), even in the midst of suffering, is enacted through his trust that God will share Christ’s resurrection life with himself *and* with the Corinthians (4:14).¹⁶ Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul draws attention to his endurance in the midst of suffering with numerous catalogs of hardship (e.g., 2 Cor. 1:3-11; 2:14-17; 6:3-10; 11:22-33; 12:1-10).¹⁷ But instead of emphasizing a view of the heroic individual who has become invulnerable to adversities, the lists consistently speak of God’s resurrection power sustaining Paul in his suffering so that he is able to faithfully endure and trust in the God of life.

Finally, and briefly, Paul is emphatic that his life and ministry is triangulated between Christ and the Corinthians. In other words, Paul’s life is entirely devoted to embodying Christ’s character for the sake of the Corinthian church – “For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’s sake (ἐαυτοὺς δὲ δούλους ὑμῶν διὰ Ἰησοῦν)” (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul and his team intentionally embrace suffering and weakness, carrying about the death of Christ in their bodies, so that the Corinthians might share in life (4:12). Paul caps his argument here with the bold claim that “indeed, everything is for your sake...” (4:15a). Even in Paul’s frank and bold speech to the Corinthians, Paul is only concerned with defending his apostleship so that the Corinthians will understand the true character of Christ – “Everything, beloved, is for your building up!” (12:19; see also 10:8). The point here is simple enough, but it bears repeating that Paul’s apostleship is not grounded in any worldly display of power or charisma, is absolutely not self-serving, and is entirely grounded in his willingness and capacity to reflect the character of Christ so that the Corinthians will have a visible and embodied picture of Christ.

3. Practicing the Character of Christ

So far, and by way of focused attention to one letter, I have tried to establish something of the theological and theoretical foundations for Paul’s understanding of why and how persons-in-Christ grow in character and virtue. Paul establishes the goal of human existence as seeing and sharing in the glory of God as seen in Jesus Christ, and this comes by way of beholding divine glory in Paul, and other admirable examples, as he embodies Christ’s character. But what are the actual mechanics or practices that Paul sets forth to facilitate this transformation. I want to briefly reflect here on three spiritual practices and exercises Paul offers to the Corinthians to help facilitate their ability to see the transforming glory of Christ.

A. Contemplation

Identification of humanity’s supreme good often has as its corollary the practice of contemplation of that which is supremely valuable and good.¹⁸ By contemplation I refer to the focused, loving

¹⁶ On 2 Cor. 4:13, see especially Douglas A. Campbell, “2 Corinthians 4:13: Evidence in Paul that Christ Believes,” *JBL* 128 (2009): 337-356; Thomas D. Stegman, “Ἐπιστεύσα, διὸ ἐλάλησα (2 Corinthians 4:13): Paul’s Christological Reading of Psalm 115:1a LXX,” *CBQ* 69 (2007): 725-745.

¹⁷ On Paul’s lists of hardships, see John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

¹⁸ Aristotle famously identifies the contemplative life, that is, theoretical wisdom and inquiry, as the truly good and happy life. See John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus*

and attentive savoring of that which is truly good and beautiful. Paul's exhortations to "set your minds on" (Col. 3:1-2); to "consider these things" (Phil. 4:8-9); his prayers that his churches would know the love of Christ (Eph. 3:14-19); his personal example of wanting nothing else than to know Christ (Phil. 3:7-11) – all of these claims provide evidence for the Pauline practice of contemplation and meditation. Early Christianity has a venerable tradition of calling for persons-in-Christ to grow in Christian virtue and character by contemplating the glory of God in the person of Christ. Irenaeus, for example, puts it like this:

For as those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy, so those who see God are in God, and receive of his splendor. But his splendor vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God do receive life.... It is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God; but fellowship with God is to know God, and to enjoy his goodness. Human creatures therefore shall see God, that they may live, being made immortal by that sight, and attaining even unto God.... For the glory of God is a living human being; and the life of the human person consists in beholding God (*Against Heresies* 4.20.5-7).¹⁹

Irenaeus is likely influenced by Paul, and specifically 2 Cor 3 – 5, in his description of salvation as sharing in the fullness of divine life by means of seeing God's glory. The practice of contemplation involves an attentive "personal-relational" fixation of the "whole person before the face of God."²⁰ Contemplation consists in "gazing and enjoying God, and it culminates in transformation, the experience of love, and spiritual rest and in communion with Christ."²¹

Paul's claim that believers are "beholding the glory of the Lord as reflected in a mirror (κατοπτρίζω)" (2 Cor. 3:18), uses the metaphor of a mirror, popularized in ancient philosophical discourse, to describe an ideal model for imitation.²² While the standard use of a mirror in antiquity was, and still is today, for the sake of looking upon one's own image and likeness, the mirror was also spoken of as a tool for contemplation and moral transformation. But what persons-in-Christ gaze upon in the mirror is, as we have seen, is "the glory of God" on the face of Christ.²³ And this contemplative and loving gaze upon Christ provides a proleptic foretaste of humanity's ultimate *telos*, namely, eschatological sharing in divine life.²⁴

In no other letter does Paul so frequently and vividly remind his churches of how the story and character of Christ is embodied in the story and character of Paul. Paul's character is a visible display of Christ's character. The Corinthians can see and contemplate God's glory as they reflect and meditate upon Christ's character as displayed in Paul.²⁵

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 137-143. Seneca emphasizes the important role of "doctrines" and "precepts" in contemplating the basic teachings, rules, and theories of Stoicism (*Epistles* 94 and 95).

¹⁹ I have used the translation offered by Brian Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 76.

²⁰ Kyle C. Strobel, "Contemplation by Son and Spirit: Reforming the Ascent of the Soul to God," in *Embracing Contemplation: Reclaiming a Christian Spiritual Practice*, eds. John H. Coe and Kyle C. Strobel (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 166-184, here, 168.

²¹ Ryan A. Brandt, "Gospel-Centered Contemplation? A Proposal," in *Embracing Contemplation*, 185-202, here, 200.

²² See especially Luke Timothy Johnson, "The Mirror of Remembrance (James 1:22-25)," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 632-645.

²³ See Frederick David Carr, *Being and Becoming: Human Transformation in the Letters of Paul* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2022), 206-207.

²⁴ On which, see Hans Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

²⁵ Again, Stegman, *The Character of Jesus*, 304.

B. Heeding Frank Speech

One of Paul's most important practices he sets forth for encouraging his churches to grow in character is his multifaceted use of frank speech. Ancient philosophers, most notably Socrates, used irony, humor, and even biting remarks in order to call into question the values and behavior of their fellow conversation partners. Ancient philosophical discourse is, as such, often referred to as medicine or therapy for the soul.²⁶ Frank speech was necessary for exposing the false beliefs and inappropriate attachments that prevented people from growing in virtue. Paul too is like a doctor who offers different remedies, some gentle and some harsh – such as warnings, emotional appeals to shame and grief, and calls to repentance – in order to lead persons-in-Christ to make moral progress. Paul tenderly pleads with the church to forgive and reconcile with each other.

We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections but only in yours. In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also (2 Cor. 6:11-13).

Paul both declares that he and his team “have wronged no one; we have corrupted no one; we have taken advantage of no one” and begs the church to “make room in your hearts for us” (2 Cor. 7:2). Paul repeatedly speaks of the mutual joy and friendship that he and the Corinthians share with one another (7:5-16).

But Paul uses frank speech in an especially forceful manner in 2 Cor. 10 – 13 where he draws upon the rhetorical tools of irony, parody, boasting, and playing the role of a fool in order to exhort the church to interpret his weakness, sufferings, and clemency toward them as an embodiment of the loving humility of Christ. Paul will use these rhetorical tools as Christ's military general in order to “destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor. 10:4b-5a).²⁷ Paul is a messianic warrior who fights against Satan's attempts to stunt the growth and knowledge of the gospel of Christ (see 4:4 and 11:3). What Paul hopes to destroy with his frank speech are the false evaluations of his life and ministry as failing to embody the character of Christ. Some within the church are making false claims that Paul does not demonstrate the power and authority of a true apostle. Paul's positive goal, however, is not to shame or grieve them as an end in itself but, rather, to re-evaluate Paul and thereby be “built up” in their making genuine progress toward knowing Christ (10:8; 12:19; 13:10).

Indulge me in a little of my foolishness, since you are already putting up with it. (11:1)

Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's news to you free of charge? (11:7)

I repeat, let no one think that I am a fool, but if you do, then accept me as a fool, so that I, too, may boast a little. (11:16)

²⁶ On which, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

²⁷ On Paul's use of military images and metaphors to depict his attack on false knowledge, see especially Lisa M. Bowens, *An Apostle in Battle: Paul and Spiritual Warfare in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10* (WUNT 2.433; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2017), 50-84.

For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves! For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you or preys upon you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or gives you a slap in the face. To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that! (11:19-21).

I have been a fool! You forced me to it. Indeed, you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. (12:11)

If the Corinthians reject Paul and instead embrace the triumphalist, hierarchical vision of the super-apostles, they are on the road to apostasy given that Paul's character is a true reflection of Christ's character. The goal of Paul's bold speech is to lead the Corinthians to embrace a true understanding of Christ's character predicated upon mercy and love (10:1; 11:11), humility (11:7; 12:15, 21), power in weakness, and patient suffering amidst adversity (11:29-30; 12:5-10; 13:3-4).

C. Self-Examination

But what does Paul expect the church to do as they listen to his frank speech? As briefly noted above, the goal of frank speech is not to berate or shame one's listener for its own sake but, rather, to deliver medicine or therapy for the diseased soul and thereby call the listener to change their way of life. Again, Socrates is foundational for the spiritual exercise of self-examination. The god's calling of him, he claims, is "to live the life of a philosopher, that is, to examine myself and others" (Plato, *Apology* 28E). Socrates describes his method as calling into question peoples' inappropriate value attachments to wealth, reputation, and honor. And, if someone disagrees with him, Socrates states: "I shall not let him go at once or leave him, but I shall question him, examine him, and test him..." (Plato, *Apology* 29E).²⁸ Socrates engages in serious dialogic examination with his friends so that they will pay close attention to their own conscience and practice self-examination of their way of life.²⁹

Coming at the climax of his argument in 2 Cor. 10 – 13, Paul offers a Socratic-like spiritual exercise as he exhorts the church to scrutinize themselves and engage in self-examination to see whether they do, in fact, embody the character of Christ as visibly displayed in the life of Paul. Paul is about to visit the church and will engage in a careful evaluation and judgment of the church when he arrives (13:1-2). In preparation for his visit, he offers this exhortation.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith (Ἐαυτοὺς πειράζετε εἰ ἐστὲ ἐν τῇ πίστει). Test yourselves (ἐαυτοὺς δοκιμάζετε). Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed, you fail to meet the test (εἰ μήτι ἀδόκιμοί ἐστε). I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test (ἀδόκιμοι) (2 Cor. 13:5-6).

The flurry of δοκιμ- language here at the climax of the letter functions as a call for the Corinthians to test whether their lives are grounded in the story and character of Jesus. Rather than paying attention to their souls or value attachments as ancient philosophers would have it, Paul wants to

²⁸ In Plato's *Symposium*, Alcibiades says this of Socrates: "He makes me admit that while I'm spending my time on politics, I am neglecting all the things that are crying for attention in myself" (*Symp.* 216A).

²⁹ Excellent here is Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (ed. Arnold I Davidson. Trans. Michael Chase. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 89-93.

know if their self-examination will reveal that “Jesus Christ is *in you*.” Is it the case, Paul asks, that the crucified and resurrected Jesus is powerfully present among their community?³⁰ If so, then the Corinthians will repent of their desire for charismatic and triumphalist displays of leadership and will embrace Paul as a faithful minister of God whose character is a visible display of Christ’s character. Notice that this exhortation follows closely on the heels of Paul’s claim that he does indeed pass the test of “Christ speaking in me” given that his life embodies the weakness of the cross as well as the power of God as he ministers to the Corinthians (see 13:3-4). Furthermore, the call to examine whether they “are in the faith” (13:5) is not a general call for the church to believe the right propositions about the Christian faith but, rather, given the emphasis on Jesus’s as the supremely faithful one (see 4:13), Paul is calling the church to examine whether they are living in the faithfulness of Jesus, that is, a life marked by obedience, love, and sacrifice.³¹ Paul’s plea that the Corinthians will recognize that he and his team “have not failed the test” (13:6) asks them to examine and scrutinize his ministry, confident that they will come to see that it is a faithful representation and embodiment of Christ’s character.³²

Paul’s practices of contemplation, frank speech, and call for self-examination demonstrates the wise conviction that growth in character requires an openness to learn things about ourselves that require dialogue and conversation with wise leaders and practitioners of the faith who embody Christian virtue.

4. Paul’s Relational Pedagogy

One of the enduring legacies of 2 Corinthians as it pertains to Christian virtue and character is the focused posing of the question: What type of leaders do we admire and aspire to be? What is it specifically that we admire and respect? More directly, do we admire the person’s character – their wisdom, humility, and service, perhaps – or is it their reputation for getting results, having irresistible charisma and charm, their drawing of numbers, and worldly influence? Paul reminds us of the fact that we become like those we respect and admire.

If the goal of human existence is relational, namely, seeing, knowing, and sharing in the glory of God as seen in the person of Christ, then it makes sense that Paul’s visible embodiment of this reality in his own life is the primary means whereby he teaches his churches. Douglas Campbell helpfully summarizes this by saying that “a relational ontology entails a relational pedagogy.”³³ Stated as simply as I can, Paul understands that people change by, and even become like, those they relate to and spend time with. And this is particularly true with respect to those we love, admire, and willingly place in positions of leadership. Paul’s call to his churches to imitate him requires the deepest conviction, on the part of both Paul and his churches, that Paul does indeed embody Christ’s character in a remarkably convincing manner (e.g., 1 Cor. 4:17; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6). Alternatively, Paul is deeply concerned that the Corinthians may fall under the influence of leaders who embody character traits that are deeply un-Christian. The Corinthians may be impressed by the charisma, cleverness, reputation, and rhetorical showmanship of the other teachers, but these qualities are not reflections of the glory of God as seen in the person of Christ.

³⁰ Ellington, “Not Applicable to Believers?” 338, rightly emphasizes that the primary concern here for Paul is not a defense of his apostleship but, rather, “the Corinthians’ status and progress” in embodying Christ’s character.

³¹ See here Stegman, *The Character of Jesus*, 359-360.

³² Ralph P. Martin says it well: “Paul’s hope is that the Corinthians will realize that he is a true minister of God. If they do so, they will heed his warnings and respect his authority, which, in turn, will lead to repentance.” Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word Biblical Commentary 40; 2nd edition; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 678.

³³ Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God’s Love* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 224.

In fact, Paul claims that their leadership style is tyrannical, abusive, and exploitative. Paul not only derides the leaders as tyrants, Paul also blames the Corinthians for tolerating them as this demonstrates an incredible failure to understand the gospel and the character of Christ – “for you put up with it if someone dominates you, if someone devours you, if someone takes from you, if someone exalts himself over you, and if someone strikes you on the face” (11:20). Paul’s leadership style embodies moderation and leniency. In his words, he makes his appeal to the Corinthians through “the gentleness and clemency of the Messiah” (10:1). But some of the Corinthians are interpreting this as being ineffective, servile, and incompetent (10:2). Paul does have the authority and power to respond to the Corinthians with severity but he chooses instead to display Christ’s character through gentleness and leniency (see esp. 12:14-18).³⁴ The Corinthians’ confusion over their leaders demonstrates their failure to understand the truth of the gospel as expressed in the character of Christ.

Paul’s authority over the Corinthians derives not from his fulfilling a particular office, not from a derivative relationship with the Jerusalem apostles, not from having impressive letters of recommendation, not from his charisma, and not even from proof of the legitimacy of his apostolic call.³⁵ Rather, Paul’s apostolic authority is grounded in the power and authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ.³⁶ Given the fact that Paul’s authority is derivative of the gospel’s authority, Paul’s dispute with the so-called “super-apostles” is not a petty squabble between two rival groups vying for a bigger platform and ministry but is rather, from Paul’s vantage point, a dispute over the very truth of the gospel.³⁷ Paul’s ironic accusation that the Corinthians willingly tolerate the preaching of “another Jesus,” “another Spirit,” and “another gospel” is a strong criticism of the church’s willingness to submit to Christian leaders who are more about charisma than cross, impressive displays of rhetorical skill than sincerity and integrity, and self-boasting and commendation rather than boasting in the Lord (2 Cor. 11:4).

Paul’s authority, again, is sourced in no greater authority than his being “in-Christ” – a powerful reality that Paul shares with all other believers. Schütz puts it this way: “If we ask about Paul’s authority there emerges a picture of an apostle whose very existence is like that of every other man in Christ and is somehow dependent upon his capacity to educe from others that awareness of shared power.”³⁸ Those persons-in-Christ who rightly recognize the character of Christ in Paul are also capable of sharing in the power and character of Christ, thereby becoming authoritative examples of worthy of imitation. This is why Paul can exhort the Corinthians to recognize Stephanas’s household as exemplary leaders: “...you know that members of the household of Stephanas were the first fruits in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to put yourselves at the service of such people, and of everyone who works and toils with them” (1 Cor. 16:15-16). This is also why Paul calls his churches not only to imitate him but also to copy the manner of life and character of Paul’s co-workers (e.g.,

³⁴ On Paul’s clemency in 2 Cor. 10 – 13, see Donald Dale Walker, *Paul’s Offer of Leniency (2 Cor 10:1): Populist Ideology and Rhetoric in a Pauline Letter Fragment* (WUNT 2.152; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2002).

³⁵ Frances M. Young and David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 223, put it this way: “Perhaps the most common divergence from Paul’s practice has been to formalize authority, disconnecting it from quality of discipleship and from the need for constant adaptation.”

³⁶ Essential reading here is John Howard Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority* (2nd edition; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); see also Young and Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians*, 231.

³⁷ Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*, 178: “The apostle illustrates the gospel he seeks to uphold, confirm and defend against assaults and attempted perversions. He can do so because the authority of the gospel is the authority of the apostle.”

³⁸ Schütz, *Paul and the Anatomy of Apostolic Authority*, 204.

Timothy, 1 Cor. 4:20-21; Phil. 2:19-24; Titus, 2 Cor. 7:6-14; 8:6-17; Epaphroditus, Phil. 2:25-30). These leaders embody selfless devotion to the gospel, financial integrity and sincerity, and a commitment to the interests of others over their own. Their authority stems not from their filling a specific office but, rather, from their excellent embodiment of the character of Christ. If a fully Christian account of reality takes Christ crucified as its starting point for wisdom and power, then this will require a posture of humility, dependence, and self-giving for persons-in-Christ (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:2). An ability to grow in these virtues requires both the transformative work of the Spirit and leaders and exemplars of Christian character who visibly display this way of life.