



2 Corinthians - Chapter Ten

Summary of Chapter Ten

Although the tone of Paul's letter seems stern, he is appealing to the mainstream congregation to realise that his achievements in Corinth are his authority of apostleship and that everything he does, says and writes about is done with the sole intention of building up the church of Christ.

In vv.12-18 Paul cuts to the heart of the problem by showing the Corinthians what the opposition is really after. It is not, to be sure, the spiritual welfare of the Corinthians. Their real goal is, instead, to expand their sphere of influence by encroaching on the territory of others and going beyond the boundaries God himself had established.

III 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:10 - Paul's Appeal to the Rebellious Minority in Corinth

In the third major section of his letter, Paul directly appeals to those who are still rejecting his Gospel and apostolic authority. For in his third visit, Paul will be forced to judge those who have not repented. Refer to 10:6, 12:20-21 and 13:1-10.

It should also be noted that Paul's language concerning his opponents is much more pointed and strident (11:13-15 and 11:20), Paul's defence becomes much more impassioned (11:21), and his attitude toward the Corinthians even seems threatening (13:2 and 13:5). This change of style and emphasis is intriguing and the subject of much speculation. However, the proposition that Chapters 10-13 are actually Paul's severe letter seems unlikely, and there are stronger arguments that this letter forms a single document, something that was accepted by the early church fathers.

II.a 2 Corinthians 10:1-18 - Paul Defends His Ministry

Paul opens the chapter by addressing some of the criticisms he faced from his opponents with regard to the apparent differences between the contents of his letters, which some found to be direct and harsh, and the humility he displayed in person that some clearly saw as weakness or even fear.

Paul concludes the chapter by defending his apostolic authority. He makes a clear distinction between the boasts of his opponents, who take pride in their own achievements, and his own boasts which are what God has achieved through him.

II.a.i 2 Corinthians 10:1-11 - Paul's defence of his humility as an apostle

Paul directly responds to those who are criticising his humble appearance in Corinth (vv.1-6), and his refusal to employ the professional rhetoric of his day in order to impress others (vv.7-11), and: <<***When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God***>> (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

¹ I myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ — I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold towards you when I am away! — ² I ask that when I am present I need not show boldness by daring to oppose those who think we are acting according to human standards.

2 Corinthians 10:1-2

I myself, Paul, appeal to you is one of only six occasions where Paul refers to himself by name in the body of a letter. The others are Galatians 5:2, Ephesians 3:1, Colossians 1:23, 1 Thessalonians 2:18 and Philemon 9. On each occasion it inevitably carries special significance as can be seen in these opening verses.

Appeal is the Greek verb *parakaleo*, and is commonly used by someone who has the authority to command but chooses not to.

The meekness and gentleness of Christ is a reference to Christ's own humility: <<***Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls***>> (Matthew 11:29); as well as his slowness to anger and patience in order to allow time for repentance before he returns to judge: <<***But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed***>> (2 Peter 3:8-10), which Paul imitates in his dealings with the Corinthians. Refer to 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4 and 7:5-16.

I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold towards you when I am away! Paul is probably quoting some accusations made by his opponents (v.10). Paul is trying to avoid the kind of consistency his opponents call for, since it would mean judgment for the Corinthians (v.6 and v.11).

When I am present. Paul signals his intention to visit Corinth again. He clearly indicates that he is aware that his opponents have been claiming that he acts merely from a human and not spiritual perspective, that is, acting according to human standards, but is determined not to allow his visit to simply be a confrontational one with them, i.e. I need not show boldness by daring to oppose. Instead, he would rather spend his time fruitfully in restoring and building his relationship with the majority of the church, and their relationship with God.

³ Indeed, we live as human beings, but we do not wage war according to human standards; ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not merely human, but they have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments ⁵ and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to obey Christ. ⁶ We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete.

2 Corinthians 10:3-6

We live as human beings. Paul's sphere of activity is indeed 'the flesh', the everyday world of human existence with all its limitations, frustrations, trials and tribulations. But while Paul lives out his life in the ordinary, mundane sphere of human existence, this does not mean that he conducts his affairs according to the flesh; that is, as the world goes about things.

Paul is not waging a fleshly battle, i.e. according to human standards, but a spiritual one. The weapons of his warfare are not physical but spiritual, such as prayer, faith, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the Word of God: <<*Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*>> (Jeremiah 23:29), and: <<*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*>> (Hebrews 4:12); which ultimately is Christ: <<*He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God*>> (Revelation 19:13).

It is by the Spirit of God that Paul tears down the strongholds of wrong thinking and behaviour that are reflected in the lives of those who resist his authority.

We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle raised up against the knowledge of God. Paul's battle is for the hearts and minds of the people, and his principle weapons are the Gospel message and the Holy Spirit. His language bears hallmarks of his favourite prophet: <<*The haughty eyes of people shall be brought low, and the pride of everyone shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted on that day*>> (Isaiah 2:11). This battle must be fought on the truth of God that is made known through the death and resurrection of his Son: <<*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority*>> (Colossians 2:9-10), a truth that overcomes all possible contradictions.

We take every thought captive to obey Christ. The Greek verb to take captive is normally used in relation to prisoners of war. Paul pictures human thoughts as captured enemy soldiers. Once a city's defences had been breached and its fortified places destroyed, conquered soldiers were taken in tow as prisoners of

war. In the Roman *triumphus*, the prisoners were paraded through the streets of Rome. Paul's objective, however, is not to put human rationale and pretensions on public display but to take captive every thought for obedience to Christ.

This is not some form of brainwashing but ensuring people have the correct mindset in their service to God: <<Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect>> (Romans 12:2).

We are ready to punish every disobedience when your obedience is complete. Paul's determination is made quite clear. What the punishment will involve is left unstated. However, Paul will be able to carry it out once the Corinthians' obedience is complete. Only with the church as a whole behind him can Paul operate from a position of strength against his critics.

This is the reason for Paul's tough talk in his letters. By adopting a stern approach, he hopes to avoid acting as the disciplinarian in person; not because he is intimidated by the Corinthians but because he loves them.

⁷ Look at what is before your eyes. If you are confident that you belong to Christ, remind yourself of this, that just as you belong to Christ, so also do we.

2 Corinthians 10:7

Look at what is before your eyes. Paul chose not to fully exercise his authority at Corinth, yet he was criticised for it. Why was this? Paul attributes this to the Corinthians' fascination with outward appearances. The text literally reads, 'You are looking only on the surface of things'. That is, they were judging Paul and other itinerant missionaries by such externals as style, rhetoric, speaking ability and personal demeanour. God does not choose people because of their social standing or physical appearance, he chooses them because of their heart's motivation: <<*When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.'* But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart'>> (1 Samuel 16:6-7). Jesus too instructed his followers not to judge by human standards: <<*Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgement*>> (John 7:24).

If you are confident that you belong to Christ. Paul had no doubt that most of the church were genuine in their acceptance of Jesus as the Christ. He was equally in no doubt that there were some, especially among his opponents, who were not: <<*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realise that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!*>> (2 Corinthians 13:5).

Just as you belong to Christ, so also do we. This is a stark yet positive reminder to those who are genuine in their faith that they are then required to know that others are in the same position and should be equally accepted in the church. Paul was the founder of the church in Corinth, a task he was given by God to do. Paul was a part of that church and so they were a part of him. This is the way God
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intends his church to be: *<<I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me>>* (John 17:23).

⁸ Now, even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it.

2 Corinthians 10:8

If I boast a little too much of our authority. Paul was in a Catch 22 situation. If he downplayed his apostolic authority and acted with genuine humility, he was criticised and challenged. When he boasted of his achievements in the Lord, he was called arrogant.

Perhaps Paul did boast a little too much for the liking of some. However, he was commissioned by the Risen Lord in person and had grounds for such claims. Therefore, unlike his rivals, he cannot be charged with exaggeration. For his boasts can be substantiated from the results of his ministry, including the very existence of the church in Corinth.

Since Paul's ministry is a fulfilment of Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant: *<<Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life>>* (2 Corinthians 3:5-6), the primary purpose of Paul's authority is for building you up and not for tearing you down, whereas Jeremiah's primary purpose under the old covenant was to both tear down and build up, including: *<<See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant>>* (Jeremiah 1:10). God, however, was for building them up: *<<I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up>>* (Jeremiah 24:6), and: *<<If you will only remain in this land, then I will build you up and not pull you down; I will plant you, and not pluck you up; for I am sorry for the disaster that I have brought upon you>>* (Jeremiah 42:10).

Building up the church is a common Pauline description of new covenant ministry: *<<Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual edification>>* (Romans 14:19), *<<On the other hand, those who prophesy speak to other people for their building up and encouragement and consolation. Those who speak in a tongue build up themselves, but those who prophesy build up the church. Now I would like all of you to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy. One who prophesies is greater than one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be built up>>* (1 Corinthians 14:3-5), and: *<<Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing>>* (1 Thessalonians 5:11). The authority that he received from Christ was for constructive and not destructive purposes. Paul frames the last section of 2 Corinthians with this theme; with 2 Corinthians 10:8 and 13:10 as the literary bookends. Refer also to 12:19.

⁹ I do not want to seem as though I am trying to frighten you with my letters. ¹⁰ For they say, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.’ ¹¹ Let such people understand that what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

2 Corinthians 10:9-11

Frighten you with my letters. At times Paul’s tone is harsh but he was an advocate of speaking the truth and his intention with this letter is to prepare the ground for his visit. By addressing issues of concern in the letter he is giving the Corinthians an opportunity to get things in order before his arrival so that he will not need to be harsh with them in person, although he would be if it proved necessary, what we say by letter when absent, we will also do when present.

Absent, present. The criticisms of apparent differences in his demeanour in his letters and in person were discussed in the comments made on v.1.

His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible. A church leader in the province of Asia during the 2nd Century described Paul as ‘a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked, full of friendliness’. However, despite any shortcomings in his physical appearance or oratory skills, others had readily accepted Paul as an apostle: <<*You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus*>> (Galatians 4:13-14). Of greater importance to Paul was always the message and not the messenger!

Those who criticise Paul for writing one way and acting another way have not adequately considered the facts. Paul preferred to come to them in love and with a gentle spirit. However, if they pushed him to it, he would come with a rod: <<*What would you prefer? Am I to come to you with a stick, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?*>> (1 Corinthians 4:21).

II.a.ii 2 Corinthians 10:12-18 - Paul’s defence of his authority as an apostle

Paul levels three charges against his opponents:

1. They lack basic common sense. They use themselves as the standard by which they gauge their respective ministries, and then they take great satisfaction in finding that they always measure up. In so doing they give every evidence of not being very perceptive of the Spirit.
2. Breach of contract. Paul worked within clearly defined boundaries; his opponents did not. These boundaries were not of Paul’s own making. They were boundaries that he and the pillars of the Jerusalem church agreed on during his second post-conversion visit to Jerusalem. Paul was to preach to the Gentiles, and James, Peter and John were to go to the Jews – a division that accords with Paul’s own apostolic commissioning. However, Paul does not claim sole rights to evangelising the Gentiles but he does not try to claim credit for the work of others either.

3. Boasting of work done by others. It is difficult to know what exactly the Corinthian intruders were taking credit for. They certainly did not discredit the Corinthians' conversion and seek to rebuild the church from its foundation. It is more likely that they claimed spiritual jurisdiction over Corinth through their claim of superior pedigree. In addition, they challenged Paul's right to offer authoritative spiritual direction, given what they felt to be his questionable apostolic standing.

Paul now turns to re-establishing his authority in Corinth by:

1. Defining the proper criterion for apostolic authority.
2. Demonstrating that his ministry and not that of his opponents actually meets that criterion. Paul does so by comparing his opponents' practice of commending themselves (v.12), with the basis for his own boasting in the Lord (vv.13-18).

¹² We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another, and compare themselves with one another, they do not show good sense.

2 Corinthians 10:12

Paul is speaking ironically. Although his opponents say he is 'bold' and 'strong' in his letters (vv.1-2 and v.10), Paul does not dare to join them in their kind of self-recommendation; they do not show good sense or are without understanding because their criterion for boasting, i.e. one another, is wrong. The opponents recommend each other by comparing their own abilities, spiritual gifts and experiences, all of which are irrelevant for establishing apostolic authority in a church.

Those who commend themselves. What is at stake for Paul is something more than pride of place. Today, people often strive to get ahead in the workplace by raising doubts about the viability or integrity of the competition. Paul's opponents did this by saying that he possessed inferior credentials, thereby calling into question the authenticity of his ministry at Corinth. Their superior credentials, on the other hand, gave them the right to set the Corinthians straight about Paul and to claim credit for getting the church on the right track. There is evidence that the Corinthians were listening to them: <<*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*>> (2 Corinthians 11:19-20).

What the church failed to see, however, was that to raise doubts about Paul's ministry at Corinth was in effect to raise doubts about the viability of their own existence as a congregation. Simply put, if the validity of the teacher is called into question, then the content of the teaching also becomes suspect, and any congregation founded on that teaching is therefore questionable.

Paul's opponents are never named although their deeds are made clear in several parts of the letter. It appears from Chapter 11 that they were Jewish

Christians from the east, possibly even men appointed by the other apostles. However, unlike those who went to Galatia and insisted that Gentiles must first become Jews and be circumcised before they could become Christians, those in Corinth simply wanted to usurp Paul's authority and become accepted as the rightful leadership of the church, thereby claiming his work as their own.

¹³ We, however, will not boast beyond limits, but will keep within the field that God has assigned to us, to reach out even as far as you.

¹⁴ For we were not overstepping our limits when we reached you; we were the first to come all the way to you with the good news of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:13-14

In contrast to his opponents, Paul does not boast beyond limits, i.e. beyond the sphere of his apostolic authority, which God himself has established, because his apostolic authority in Corinth, the area of influence or field that God assigned to us, was based on the fact that God had sent Paul to establish the church in Corinth, that is, to reach even as far as you: <<*For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel*>> (1 Corinthians 4:15), and: <<*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts*>> (2 Corinthians 3:1-3).

On the Day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out there were at least 3,000 people converted to Christ, many of whom came from places where churches were later planted. It is likely that some of these converts would then have started to spread the Gospel at home and may even have planted early churches. The areas covered included some of the places that Paul would later visit: <<*Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judæa and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power*>> (Acts 2:9-11). The list does not include any from Macedonia or Greece and therefore Paul's claim to be the first to reach them with the Gospel is true.

We were not overstepping our limits, with the good news of Christ. Although Paul made it clear in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and later in Ephesians 4:11 that only some were called to be pastors and teachers, Paul was not really bothered about who it was who proclaimed the Gospel: <<*What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice*>> (Philippians 1:18). However, he was concerned that those who did so should ensure what they taught was the truth and that it was presented in a correct manner.

¹⁵ We do not boast beyond limits, that is, in the labours of others; but our hope is that, as your faith increases, our sphere of action among you may be greatly enlarged, ¹⁶ so that we may proclaim the good news in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in someone else's sphere of action.

2 Corinthians 10:15-16

Boast beyond limits, in the labours of others. Paul's opponents boast, but they are intruders who created problems in churches he planted. Paul tried to avoid working in areas where others had already established churches: <<*Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation*>> (Romans 15:20); although he felt a responsibility to teach wherever he was, including to the already established church in Rome: <<*He lived there for two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance*>> (Acts 28:30-31).

As your faith increases. Faith often builds gradually as people mature in their Christian walk and as they learn to depend on God all the more. The church in Thessalonica are an example of this: <<*We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing*>> (2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Lands beyond you. Paul's aim is to plant churches in areas where Christ has never been preached: <<*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!' But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed our message?' So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ*>> (Romans 10:14-17), but Paul's opponents in Corinth were trying to usurp authority for teaching the Gospel in places where it has already been established, that is, someone else's sphere of action.

¹⁷ 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.' ¹⁸ For it is not those who commend themselves that are approved, but those whom the Lord commends.

2 Corinthians 10:17-18

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. Paul supports his boast as an apostle (vv.12-16) with his citation of Jeremiah 9:23-24, which he also quoted in 1 Corinthians 1:31. Since all human abilities and attainments are gifts from God, the only true basis for boasting is to boast in the Lord, i.e. in what the Lord provides, not in one's own presumed accomplishments. The psalmists concur with Paul and Jeremiah: <<*My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear*

and be glad>> (Psalm 34:2), and: *<<In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name for ever>>* (Psalm 44:8). On boasting refer also to the comments made on 2 Corinthians 1:12.

The Lord commends his people by working in and through their lives: *<<Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God>>* (Romans 2:29). Paul writes of this on several occasions in this letter including 3:1, 4:2, 5:12, 6:4 and 12:11.

Paul will go on in Chapters 11-12 to boast about his pedigree, ministerial achievements and ecstatic experiences, but only because he feels pressured to do so. Even so, the ultimate credit goes to God, and it is God's approval and his alone that counts.