



2 Corinthians - Chapter Thirteen

III 2 Corinthians 10:1-13:10 - Paul's Appeal to the Rebellious Minority in Corinth (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Thirteen

Paul completes this letter with one final reminder that the church must overcome its sinful nature before Paul arrives otherwise he will have no option other than to implement the Lord's discipline on those who refuse to repent of their sins.

Paul concludes with a final call to unity in Christ and a rare, yet all encompassing Trinitarian benediction for the whole church.

III.e.ii 2 Corinthians 13:1-10 - Further Warning

In much of this letter Paul has defended himself against the charges of his opponents in Corinth. He now turns the tables and makes the Corinthians the accused, Paul as the plaintiff and his visits to Corinth as the primary witness.

Paul clearly intends to demonstrate that he does have apostolic authority from God and that he will use the power of God, not to perform signs and wonders but to apply God's discipline on the errant. However, his overriding hope is that the Corinthians will heed this letter so that when Paul does arrive there will be no need for him to use his authority.

¹ This is the third time I am coming to you. 'Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses.'

2 Corinthians 13:1

The third time. Paul had previously made two visits to Corinth: his founding visit in AD50-52 (Acts 18:1-18), and his so-called painful visit a few years later, at which time he had been humiliated (11:21), and his apostolic authority publicly challenged by someone in the Corinthian congregation (12:3). This third visit will constitute the decisive witness, going beyond the minimum witnesses required by Jewish law.

The evidence of two or three witnesses. According to Deuteronomy 19:15, this was the legal requirement for accepting evidence at a trial; Jesus also applied it to church discipline: *<<But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector>>* (Matthew 18:16-17), and Paul continued to follow this principle: *<<Never accept any accusation against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses>>* (1 Timothy 5:19).

² I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient — ^{3a} since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me.

2 Corinthians 13:2-3a

I warned those who sinned previously and all the others. For some infractions of Jewish and Roman law it was possible to merely give a warning. Paul's grace extends to giving the Corinthians not one, but two warnings. He had given the Corinthians a warning during his second visit, which he now repeats while absent.

Present on my second visit. Although there is little evidence of what occurred during Paul's difficult time in Corinth, this brief mention seems to indicate that Paul did try to advise the church of the consequences of their inappropriate actions against him and the authority he had from God as an apostle.

I will not be lenient. Paul did not specify what form the discipline would take, and perhaps he himself did not know exactly, but it certainly would not be pleasant for anyone. Examples of what can befall people who offer serious opposition to God's work can be found in Acts 5:1-11, Acts 13:8-11 and 1 Corinthians 5:4-5.

Since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. The Corinthians had apparently insisted that Paul give some convincing sign of his apostolic status. They may well have been looking for some display of miraculous power similar to that which his rivals laid claim to. Paul states that he will indeed provide proof, but it may not be the proof that they are expecting. Firstly, it will not be his power but Christ's: *<<for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you>>* (Matthew 10:20); and secondly, the power Paul speaks of will not be a supernatural display but a disciplinary rod used on members of the congregation who continue to sin in flagrant disobedience of Paul's authority. This would not be in terms of physical punishment but something ranging from a verbal warning to excommunication for the most serious breaches.

^{3b} He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. ⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.

2 Corinthians 13:3b-4

Christ is powerful in you. Through his Holy Spirit, Jesus is at work within each believer, equipping them for a new life before God: <<***Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life***>> (Romans 6:4).

He was crucified in weakness. There is considerable debate as to what Paul exactly meant. Many hold to the weakness Jesus displayed in allowing himself to be crucified, while others come from the perspective of the weakness of all humans for allowing it to happen and, indeed, for making it necessary.

By the world's standards Jesus' ministry was a failure. He claimed to be the Christ and asserted that he would usher in the Kingdom of God. But in the end he succumbed to weakness and died a criminal's death. The crucifixion was evidence of Jesus' mortality. When subjected to physical trauma he died just like any other human: <<***He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit***>> (1 Peter 3:18b). Thus his divine power came through his resurrection and he is now seated at the right hand of God the Father: <<***The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool'***>> (Psalm 110:1). Therefore, he lives by the power of God.

We will live with him by the power of God. Paul's opponents were right on one point. There is a very real power at the disposal of the Christian. Not only does Paul and all true disciples share in Christ's sufferings and become like him in his death, but at the same time they also share in the power of his resurrection.

Following the pattern of Christ's own weakness: <<***For just as the sufferings of Christ are abundant for us, so also our consolation is abundant through Christ***>> (2 Corinthians 1:5), <<***And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross***>> (Philippians 2:7d-8), Paul too has been weak for the sake of God's people, making God's Spirit and glory in Christ evident to them through his own sufferings. But also like Christ, Paul will manifest the power of God in judging the Corinthians' behaviour and beliefs: <<***For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are inside that you are to judge? God will judge those outside. 'Drive out the wicked person from among you'***>> (1 Corinthians 5:12-13), and: <<***When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels – to say nothing of ordinary matters?***>> (1 Corinthians 6:1-3).

⁵ 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

Examine yourselves was a call made by the prophet Jeremiah to God's people shortly after they were taken into exile by the Babylonians: <<***Let us test and***>> New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised
2Corinthian13-3

examine our ways, and return to the Lord>> (Lamentations 3:40). Paul makes the same call to the new people of God.

The test to see if Christ is in the Corinthians will be their response to Paul and his call to repentance since God's message and the messenger are one: <<*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, 'At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.' See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!*>> (2 Corinthians 5:18-6:2). Jesus tested Philip's faith that the five thousand could be fed from such a small amount of food: <<*When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do*>> (John 6:5-6).

⁶ I hope you will find out that we have not failed. ⁷ But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong – not that we may appear to have passed the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸ For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹ For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect.

2 Corinthians 13:6-9

I hope you will find out that we have not failed. It seems that their mindset had become so skewed that they had lost the ability to truly detect the Spirit of Christ in their community. Paul's challenge to them in v.5 for self-examination is intended to allow them to re-engage their spiritual perception, through which they will be able also to discern that Paul is truly their apostle through Christ.

We pray to God that you may not do anything wrong. Wrong is the Greek *kakos* and actually means 'to do what is evil'; that is, what is morally reprehensible in the eyes of others. Therefore, Paul makes this his prayer in order to avoid the dire consequences for the Corinthians.

That you may do what is right. Paul desires the Corinthians' restoration even at this late hour. Paul may seem to have failed again by announcing a plan, this time the threatened return in judgment that did not come to pass. Refer to 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4.

Paul has stated before that he would rather fail the test personally in order that others might pass it. In reference to unbelieving Jews he wrote: <<*For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh*>> (Romans 9:3). After all, it would not say much about his apostleship, if he turned out to be a genuine

Christian and all the people in a church he had founded turned out to be fakes. Yet this letter is never about Paul himself!

Even if Paul's work at Corinth should appear to be discredited, the fact of the matter is that he cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. The idea of fighting or striving for truth was a traditional theme in the wisdom literature of Paul's day. The truth here is undoubtedly the Gospel or the truths that the Gospel embodies. Just as Christ's sacrificial love compels Paul to preach the Gospel (5:14), so too his commissioning as Christ's apostle hems him in to doing only what advances the Gospel.

The use of the first person plural we here indicates that he sees this as a team effort to include both Paul and the church. This apparent failure, like the judgment itself, would once again establish the truth of the Gospel, whose primary purpose is not tearing down but building up the church (v.10).

We are weak and you are strong. These claims are made somewhat tongue in cheek. The Corinthians would certainly think of themselves as strong. They have been enriched in speech and knowledge (1 Corinthians 1:5); they do not lack any spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 1:7); they are already kings (1 Corinthians 4:8); and they already are so wise in Christ (1 Corinthians 4:10). But Paul means something different by the term strong; for the Corinthians to be strong means that they are <<*living in faith*>> (v.5), and of one heart and mind (v.11). And if their strength can only be achieved through Paul's weakness, then Paul will gladly bear the label timid: <<*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 Corinthians 10:1); for this means that he will not have to assert the strength of his apostolic authority against them when he returns.

This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect. Paul is not suggesting that true perfection can be attained during life on earth, but that a Godly life leads towards such perfection. In fact, the basic meaning of the noun *katartisis* is to 'make suitable or fitting' for a particular task, not to make perfect. It was part of Paul's calling to lead them towards this aim: <<*The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ*>> (Ephesians 4:11-13).

¹⁰ So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

2 Corinthians 13:10

I write these things while I am away is a reference to writing which signalled to the reader in Paul's day that the writer was drawing matters to a close. It also provided a final opportunity to state the purpose of writing. A key purpose of this letter was to give the church an opportunity to address their problems ahead of

Paul's visit in order to avoid any disciplinary action that would otherwise be necessary.

The authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. Paul again quotes from Jeremiah 24:6. It was part of the NT ministry to build up the church. Refer to the comments made on 2 Corinthians 10:8. This is the third time Paul has made this point in Chapters 10–13; 10:8 and 12:19 being the other two. No doubt he wants the Corinthians to be very clear that he is not out to take advantage of them or metaphorically slap them around, as his rivals are prone to do (11:20). Paul's own calling is reminiscent of that of Jeremiah, and his ambition for the church in Corinth is directly related to his perception of himself, his calling, and the prophetic roots of his work. However, there is also a veiled warning in his statement. Although he is not in the business of tearing down, sometimes demolition is a necessary prelude to rebuilding. Something even demonstrated in the death and resurrection of Jesus: <<**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit**>> (John 12:24).

IV 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 - Final Greetings and Benediction

As he did with the letter's opening, Paul expands the common conventions of ancient letter closings in order to highlight the important themes he has covered.

In most translations v.12a is the whole of v.12, v.12b becomes v.13 and v.13 becomes v.14. This translation compacts the final three verses into two.

¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

2 Corinthians 13:11

The series of five exhortations in this verse focuses on congregational unity and harmony – the very thing that the Corinthians were lacking.

Finally. Paul puts in one last heartfelt appeal to the whole church, as he did to the Macedonian church: <<**Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more**>> (1 Thessalonians 4:1), and: <<**Finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us, so that the word of the Lord may spread rapidly and be glorified everywhere, just as it is among you**>> (2 Thessalonians 3:1).

As believers, the men and women of the Corinthian church are members of God's family and thus brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul also speaks of the Corinthians as 'brothers', Greek *adelphoi*, in the first two sections of the letter, where he was primarily addressing those who were repentant (1:8 and 8:1); however, in Chapters 10-13, Paul does not address those who are rebellious as 'brothers'. Now, in closing the letter, Paul again uses this loving familial expression to address the entire church, which is an indication, no doubt, of his hope that they truly will be brothers and sisters in Christ as a result of their right response to his letter (vv.6-10). As in the case of one of his previous letters to them: <<**Keep alert, stand**

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firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love>> (1 Corinthians 16:13-14), Paul also summarises the central conclusions of this letter with five commands, with the first three focusing on the Corinthians' relationship with Paul as their apostle, the last two focusing on their life together as **brothers and sisters** in Christ, and as a family of believers reconciled to each other and to God their Father.

Put things in order. In v.9 Paul has already said he is praying that they will be able to set matters right at Corinth. Now he puts it in the form of a command, although he immediately frames it with a conciliatory call to **listen to my appeal**.

Agree with one another is literally 'think the same thing'. One suspects this would be a tall order for many in the Corinthian congregation and indeed many modern churches today!

Live in peace was a command from Jesus to all his followers: <<***Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another***>> (Mark 9:50).

The God of love and peace will be with you. Paul's benediction identifies two of God's key attributes: <<***For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life***>> (John 3:16), <<***So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them***>> (1 John 4:16), and: <<***The God of peace be with all of you. Amen***>> (Romans 15:33). The attributes **love and peace** are fruit of the Spirit; refer to Galatians 5:22.

¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. ¹³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

2 Corinthians 13:12-13

Greet one another, all the saints greet you. These two greetings stress the unity of the church, local and universal.

With a holy kiss. Such a kiss was usually reserved for special reunions among family members or formal greetings. Extending such a public kiss to an entire group was a practice unique to the early church that signified their mutual acceptance as a family: <<***Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you***>> (Romans 16:16), <<***Greet all the brothers and sisters with a holy kiss***>> (1 Thessalonians 5:26), and: <<***Greet one another with a kiss of love. Peace to all of you who are in Christ***>> (1 Peter 5:14). Refer also to the comments made on 1 Corinthians 16:20.

Verse 13 has become a common prayer or blessing in many Christian churches. It is often shared by a congregation as they end their time together and is referred to by many simply as 'The Grace'. It sums up so much of what being a Christian is all about; it draws the focus firmly on to the God known in and through Jesus and the Spirit; and it takes the rich practical and theological

meaning, joining them together into an elegant prayer. No wonder it has become so popular.

This is the only Trinitarian benediction in Paul's letters, stressing that grace, love, and communion or fellowship, Greek *koinonia*, with one another come from God in Christ through the Spirit. Paul's final reference to the Holy Spirit recalls that he is writing and praying as a minister of the new covenant. Jude offers a similar conclusion to his letter: <<*But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life*>> (Jude 20-21).

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why does Paul choose to link Christ and not God to grace? Jesus is the person that the generous and self-giving God became; therefore Jesus embodied the grace of God. In Jesus grace became human, because that is what grace needed to do to be fully itself - in order to give itself for the world. Grace is, of course, an outpouring of the love of God.

Communion or fellowship is not restricted to the Holy Spirit: <<*we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*>> (1 John 1:3).

All of you is a final stress on the unity of the reconciled church, brought about by God himself, the furthering of which was one of the main goals of Paul's letter.

Paul usually includes mention of an upcoming visit, either his own or that of a co-worker, in the closing section of the body of his letters. It is also typical for him to express confidence that his readers will do as they have been asked, such as: <<*Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say*>> (Philemon 21). Yet the omission of both elements at the close of 2 Corinthians is not surprising. Paul has informed the Corinthians twice in Chapters 10–13 that he is ready to visit them for the third time. Therefore, an expression of confidence would hardly be appropriate after the challenge Paul has put before them in earlier verses.

Perhaps the best way to end this or any letter is with 'The Grace' - The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.