

## PAUL'S COVENANTAL CONTRASTS IN 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1-11

Randall C. Gleason

Paul's remarks in 2 Corinthians 3:1-11 have captured the interest of biblical scholars in several ways. Beginning with Origen and continuing through the Middle Ages, many theologians justified going beyond the plain meaning of the "letter" of Scripture to its allegorical "spiritual" message by appealing to Paul's words, "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6).<sup>1</sup> Although in different fashion, some modern scholars persist in establishing their hermeneutical methodology on this key text. Richardson says that "the most fruitful line of enquiry for a biblical basis for hermeneutics" is in the letter/spirit contrast in 2 Corinthians 3 because of its "demand for interpretation at the instigation of the Spirit."<sup>2</sup> Steinmetz calls for a return to the medieval theory of levels of meaning because the text truly "contains both letter and spirit."<sup>3</sup> More recently Hays advocates a reader

Randall C. Gleason is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, International School of Theology—Asia, Quezon City, Philippines.

<sup>1</sup> For a thorough history of the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6 to support an allegorical hermeneutic by the Alexandrian school contrary to Antiochene understanding of it as a contrast between the Mosaic Law and the Holy Spirit, see Bernardin Schneider, "The Meaning of St. Paul's Antithesis 'The Letter and the Spirit,'" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 15 (1953): 166–68, 170, 182–83; and E. F. Sutcliffe, "Jerome," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 2:89–90. For a discussion of the use of this passage in late medieval exegesis, see Karlfried Froehlich, "'Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One's Soul': The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth Century," in *Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present*, ed. Earl Miner (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 20–48.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Richardson, "Spirit and Letter: A Foundation for Hermeneutics," *Evangelical Quarterly* 45 (1973): 208–9.

<sup>3</sup> David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 36 (April 1980): 37–38.

response hermeneutic based on 2 Corinthians 3.<sup>4</sup> Is a hermeneutical method the issue behind Paul's letter/spirit contrast?

Contrasts in 2 Corinthians 3 between the Old and New Covenants have also attracted attention regarding the role of the Mosaic Law in the life of the Christian. Ryrie emphasizes that 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 teaches the end of the Ten Commandments, since they "are a ministration of death" and, therefore are "in no uncertain terms . . . done away (v. 11)."<sup>5</sup> Theonomists reject this claim. Bahnsen argues,

The fact that the letter kills but the Spirit enlivens (2 Cor. 3:6) in no way discredits or stigmatizes the law.... The law exposes sin and demands death, but it was not designed to kill. The law came in glory (2 Cor. 3:7); not it, but our sin falls short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). The surpassing glory of the new covenant is that it brings with it the spiritual power to comply with the glorious law of God.<sup>6</sup>

What do Paul's distinctions between the Old and New Covenants in 2 Corinthians 3 reveal about the relevance of the Old Testament Law for Christians today?

Allusions in 2 Corinthians 3 to the Old Testament promise of a New Covenant (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:22–32) raise the question of how the Old and New Covenants differ in the way they enable believers to live in obedience to God. Provence states, "Paul implicitly contrasts not only the New Covenant with the Old but also the heart of stone, representing the hardened will of man in opposition to God, with the fleshly heart, representing the docile and obedient new heart of the New Covenant."<sup>7</sup> Do Paul's covenantal contrasts imply that New Testament believers have a sanctificational advantage over Old Testament believers?

These issues will be addressed through this brief exposition of the covenantal contrasts in 2 Corinthians 3:1–11 in view of the

<sup>4</sup> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scriptures in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 122–53. For a critique of Hays's exegesis, see Robert B. Sloan Jr., "2 Corinthians 2:14–4:6 and 'New Covenant Hermeneutics'—A Response to Richard Hays," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 129–54.

<sup>5</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124 (July–September 1967): 243–44.

<sup>6</sup> Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 171–72 (italics his). Bahnsen explains that Christian reconstructionists or theonomists advocate "the normativity of the law of God in Christian ethics today (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15–17), maintaining that the Old Testament standing commandments have not been abrogated (cf. Matt. 5:17–19) even in matters of crime and punishment (cf. 1 Tim, 1:8–10; Heb. 2:2)."

<sup>7</sup> Thomas E. Provence, " 'Who Is Sufficient for These Things?' An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians II,15–III,18," *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 61.

historical background and argument of the epistle. Attention will focus on the contrast between the letter and the spirit in verse 6.

#### THE BACKGROUND OF 2 CORINTHIANS

Paul's concern for his third visit to Corinth provided the occasion for the letter of 2 Corinthians. While in Macedonia he was greatly comforted by the arrival of Titus with the news that the Corinthians had responded to his "tearful letter" (2 Cor. 2:4) with godly sorrow (7:9–10) and had demonstrated their loyalty to Paul by disciplining an offending brother (7:12). However, there were criticisms about Paul's change of itinerary to visit Macedonia before he visited Corinth. These complaints led some to accuse him of being indecisive in a manner inappropriate for an apostle (1:17). Therefore, as Paul anticipated his third visit to Corinth (12:14; 13:1), he wanted to clear up these grievances by informing them why he changed his original plans (1:15-17, 23; 2:12-13). He explained that his delay was to give them time to prepare their offering (8:6; 9:4) and to resolve their own problems (12:20-21), so that when he came they all could be joyful (2:2-3) and avoid the severe discipline of his apostolic authority (13:1-2, 10).

Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians were attacking his personal character in order to discredit his ministry before the Corinthians. They said he lacked the proper credentials (3:1) of a genuine apostle (11:5; 12:11-12), charged him with walking "according to the flesh" (10:2), and accused him of inflated speech (10:10) and demeaning himself by working (11:7). Paul identified these individuals as "false apostles" and "deceitful workers" who were passing themselves off within the Corinthian church as true apostles (11:13). He denounced them for "peddling the word of God" (2:17) and promoting themselves with "letters of commendation" (3:1). Who were these "false apostles" who were determined to destroy Paul's reputation? Few questions in New Testament studies have been more vigorously disputed. They were not the same as those he encountered in 1 Corinthians, for there Paul directed his polemics against those who fostered dissension inside the church through their emphasis on worldly wisdom, liberty, and tongues. But in 2 Corinthians he confronted Jews (11:22) from outside the church who sought to discredit his apostolic authority.<sup>8</sup> Although 2 Corinthians has traces of the earlier "Christ" party (2 Cor. 10:7; 11:3-4), the four factions mentioned in 1 Corinthians (1:12) are no longer in focus in 2 Corinthians.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that they needed letters of commendation (3:1) and that Paul accused them of having invaded another man's territory (10:13-16) clearly indicates that they had come to Corinth.

Some have viewed Paul's opponents as Jewish Gnostics who were enthusiasts with ecstatic temperaments and libertine ethics.<sup>9</sup> However, in 2 Corinthians the issues between Paul and his adversaries are not wisdom, spiritual gifts, and libertinism as they were in 1 Corinthians but rather the nature of Paul's apostolic authority. This change makes it highly unlikely that they were Gnostic-pneumatics.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore this view fails to explain either their insistence on letters of recommendation or their concern for titles revered by the early Christian community (e.g., "apostle"). Both would seem unlikely for Gnostics who cared little about either tradition or authority.<sup>11</sup> Georgi proposes that Paul's rivals in 2 Corinthians were Hellenistic Jews who traveled as itinerant missionaries and claimed, as servants of Christ (i.e., "divine men"), to be spokesmen for God in the tradition of Moses.<sup>12</sup> He claims their chief characteristic as "divine men" was the working of miracles (13:3). However, 2 Corinthians fails to mention their miraculous works. And, as Harris points out, "letters of commendation would hardly be necessary for such wonder-workers whose deeds were their credentials?"

Paul's opponents have traditionally been viewed as Judaizers from Jerusalem who were promoting themselves as "apostles" (11:13) and true Jews (11:22) while asserting that Paul was neither.<sup>14</sup> As "servants of righteousness" (11:15) they were insisting on the Law, and as "servants of Christ" (11:23) they were claiming their teaching was nearer to that of Jesus Himself.<sup>15</sup> How-

<sup>9</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 146-47; and Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth*, trans. J. E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), 293-95.

<sup>10</sup> Murray J. Harris, "2 Corinthians," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10:313; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 173.

<sup>11</sup> Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 229. See also Gerhard Friedrich, "Die Gegner des Paulus im 2 Korintherbrief," in Abraham, unser Vater, ed. Otto Betz, Martin Hengel, and Peter Schmidt (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 181-215; and Colin Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 46-48.

<sup>13</sup> Harris, "2 Corinthians," 313.

<sup>14</sup> See C. K. Barrett, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 30; Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 172-74; D. A. Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: an Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10-13* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 16-26; Harris, "2 Corinthians," 312-13; and Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1915), xxxvi-xli.

<sup>15</sup> Among those who hold to this view, some like Plummer maintain that these Judaizers did not have the approval of the Twelve but rather were commended by

ever, this view has come under attack because of Paul's silence on circumcision, which the Judaizers in Galatia insisted on (Gal. 5:1-4). Furthermore it fails to explain how the legalism of the Judaizers could find support within the Corinthian church known for boasting of its freedom (cf. 1 Cor. 6:12; 8:9; 10:23). In spite of these objections the view that these opponents were Palestinian Jews who sought to bring the Corinthian believers under the Mosaic Law seems preferable. According to Harris their Palestinian roots "may be inferred from the term *Hebraioi* (2 Cor. 11:22; cf. Phil. 3:5), which refers to Jews of Palestinian descent, especially those whose linguistic and cultural heritage was Palestinian, and perhaps from a claim they may have made to have known Christ personally (cf. 5:16)."<sup>16</sup>

Also in favor of this view is their claim that they were descendants of Abraham (11:22), Paul's claim that their "gospel" differed from his (11:4; cf. Gal. 1:6-9), and Paul's emphasis on the New Covenant (3:6-9), which implies that they were wanting to bring the Corinthians under the "old" Mosaic Covenant. Though they may not have been the same as the Judaizers in Galatia who insisted on circumcision (Gal. 6:12-13). and those in Colossae who demanded the observance of holy days (Col. 2:16), any attempt "to impose Jewish practices upon Gentiles as conditions either for salvation or for the enjoyment of Christian fellowship," as Harris aptly concludes, means Paul's opposition can be "appropriately labeled Judaizing."<sup>17</sup> Their discovery on arrival in Corinth that many within the church were continuing in immoral practices (12:21) would have intensified their desire to oppose Paul because to them his teaching would seem to promote licentious behavior. This would have further confirmed their determination to promote the morality of the Law of Moses in order to curb the impurity in the Corinthian church.

Their reception by the Corinthian church can be understood as the "Christ" party, whom they as "servants of Christ" (10:7;

those Jewish Christians in Jerusalem who wished to make the Law as binding as the gospel (Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, xxxviii.). Others like Baur maintain that they were official delegates from the Jerusalem church under the authority of the Twelve, especially Peter, and that they advocated the precedence of Jewish tradition and the authority of the Jerusalem church. See Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Paul the Apostle*, trans. A. Menzies, 2d ed., 2 vols. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1875-76). Plummer's view is more likely due to the fact that Paul did not utter a single word against the Jerusalem leaders who supposedly stood behind his opponents.

<sup>16</sup> Harris, "2 Corinthians," 313.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

11:3–4, 23) fostered and perpetuated. Their depreciation of Paul's apostolic authority and insistence on the Mosaic Law would also have been welcomed by the "Cephas" party (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:22; 9:5), who extolled Peter as the foremost of the apostles and who like Peter may have been inclined to conform to the Jewish Law (Gal. 2:11–14). Also they would have been impressed by the commendation letters from Jerusalem, the center of Peter's ministry.<sup>18</sup>

In summary, Paul's contrast between the Old and New Covenants in 2 Corinthians 3:1–11 should be understood in view of Judaizers from Palestine who stressed the priority of the Mosaic dispensation to discredit Paul's message and ministry in the eyes of the Corinthian church.

### THE ARGUMENT OF 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1–11

A key to understanding 2 Corinthians 3:1–11 lies in its connection with 2:15–16. There Paul explained that the ultimate impact of the minister of the gospel includes both salvation for those who believe and death for those who reject his message. The mention of these weighty responsibilities caused the apostle to exclaim, "Who is adequate for these things?" (2:16b). In other words, "Who is sufficiently competent to preach the gospel which may prove fatal to those who hear it?"<sup>19</sup> Paul's contrast between "we" and "many" in 2:17 indicates that his question has two groups in view: himself and his coworkers, and his opponents in Corinth. Elsewhere in the epistle Paul indicated that these Judaizers opposing his ministry were asserting their competence for the ministry through "letters of commendation" (3:1) as "servants of Christ" (10:7; 11:23) and as "descendants of Abraham" (11:22).

<sup>18</sup> Their letters of commendation probably did not come from the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (i.e., James, Cephas, and John; Gal. 2:9), who would never endorse their Judaizing program. Rather they came from the Pharisaic wing within the church who wished to make the law as binding as the gospel (Acts 15:5, 24). Yet Paul's opponents probably still appealed to the authority of the Twelve without their authorization. Harris suggests this was because they "were unable to distinguish between the law-abiding conduct of the Twelve and legalistic teaching" (Harris, "2 Corinthians," 334). Since the apostles continued to observe the Law, the Judaizers mistakenly assumed that legalism was an essential part of the gospel.

<sup>19</sup> The word "adequate" (ἰκανός) and its cognates are used fifty-four times in the New Testament, nine of which are found in Paul's writings. Four of these occur in 2:14–3:18, which indicates the significance of this word in the immediate context. It is used of persons to mean "competent, qualified, able" in the sense of being "worthy" (Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], 374), and in business matters it expressed the thought of "sufficient in ability" (James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* [1930; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 302).

Contrary to the claims of his Judaizing opponents, Paul set out in chapter 3 to establish his ability and sufficiency to minister. He began his apostolic defense in verses 1–3 by claiming that his competence as a minister of the gospel is evidenced by nothing less than the Corinthians themselves. They were his "letter of commendation" (v. 2). Throughout the rest of the chapter (vv. 4–18) he argued for his "adequacy" based on a series of contrasts. These contrasts must be understood in light of the fact that the Corinthians were struggling between Paul's definition of adequacy and the Judaizers' adequacy. Paul concluded that the believer's adequacy should be only in God (v. 5). But the major focus of his argument was his contrast between the Old and New Covenants. This includes an extended exposition of what it means to be a servant of the New Covenant by contrasting his "New Covenant" ministry (v. 6) with the Judaizers' "Old Covenant" ministry (v. 14). Paul pointed to these contrasts to show the superior nature of his New Covenant ministry in its divine origin, its life-giving power, and its surpassing glory.

#### AN EXPOSITION OF THE CONTRASTS IN 2 CORINTHIANS 3:1–11

Paul was aware that his opponents might twist his affirmation of sincerity in 2:17 to be self-commendation. So he defended himself by referring to their use of letters of commendation to establish their own credibility among the Corinthians (3:1). He was not disapproving of such letters, for they were a customary means of providing credentials in the first century and he himself used letters to commend others (e.g., Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 16:10–11; Phil. 2:19–24). Rather he asserted he was in no need of official letters because the Corinthians themselves were letters read by everyone. "To bring another letter would amount to a personal insult to the Corinthians; it certainly would ignore the past and present work of Christ in their hearts. They themselves were Paul's testimonial, guaranteeing his apostolic status and authority."<sup>20</sup> In verse 2 Paul referred to the Corinthians as "our letter" (ἡ ἐπιστολὴ ἡμῶν), and he likened them to the letters of commendation carried by the false apostles. However, lest anyone think he produced the "letter," he referred in verse 3 to the Corinthians as a "letter of Christ," thereby indicating that Christ was the author.<sup>21</sup> Paul was

<sup>20</sup> Harris, "2 Corinthians," 334.

<sup>21</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 81.

the messenger by whom the letter was "delivered" (διακονηθεῖσα) or perhaps the amanuensis by whom it was "inscribed."<sup>22</sup> In either case the fact that the changes in the lives of the Corinthians were effected by the Holy Spirit indicated Paul's ministry was empowered by God, and it provided irrefutable evidence that Paul's "adequacy" was superior to that of his opponents.

WRITTEN NOT WITH INK, BUT WITH THE SPIRIT (v. 3)  
Paul's statement that the "letter of Christ" was "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God" has been interpreted several ways. Hughes and Plummer take this expression to mean that, as Christ's epistle, the Corinthians were not written with "perishable ink" but with the Spirit of God, "whose writing is dynamic and permanent."<sup>23</sup> This emphasizes the contrast between what is temporary and permanent. Reference to ink brings to mind the perishable materials, such as papyrus, on which ink was used. They would eventually decay. Harris, however, takes this phrase to indicate the letter was of divine rather than human origin.<sup>24</sup> Harris's view fits with verses 4-5, which stress that the believer's adequacy comes from God alone. Possibly both meanings were intended by Paul because the issues of the permanence of his ministry and the divine source of his adequacy appear throughout the rest of the passage. In any case the evidence for Paul's adequacy overshadowed the letters of his opponents.

NOT TABLETS OF STONE, BUT TABLETS OF FLESHLY HEARTS (v. 3)  
At the end of verse 3 Paul continued the thought of writing by comparing the Corinthians to the stone tablets carried by Moses down from Mount Sinai. He suggested that the Corinthians as a living letter were superior to the letters brought by the Judaizers and also to the tablets brought down from Sinai.<sup>25</sup> "Tablets of stone" refers to Exodus 31:18 where Moses spoke of two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were "written by the finger of God." Paul's reference to "tablets of fleshly hearts" combines the thoughts of two New Covenant passages in the Old Testament. From Jeremiah 31:31-33 he alluded to the promise that the Lord will write His Law "on their hearts," and from Ezekiel 36:26 (cf. 11:19) Paul

<sup>22</sup> Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 89; Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 81.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, "2 Corinthians," 334.

<sup>25</sup> Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, 82.

spoke of God's promise to "remove the heart of stone" and give Israel "a heart of flesh." Combining the "writing" of Jeremiah with the "stone" and "flesh" of Ezekiel, Paul formed an expression with both ideas—"tablets of fleshly hearts." This expression is therefore an undeniable allusion to the New Covenant. Paul had in mind the contrast between the giving of the Mosaic Covenant on Mount Sinai and the establishing of the New Covenant prophesied by Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

The meaning of Paul's expressions "tablets of stone" and the "tablets of fleshly hearts" is found in both Old Testament passages to which they point. In Jeremiah 31:31–33 the prophet explained that the New Covenant, in contrast to the written code of the Mosaic Covenant, would internalize the Law within their hearts. "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it" (Jer. 31:33). God promised to make His Law an instinctive part of the nature of His people.

The core of the new covenant is God's gift of a new heart (Ezek. 36:25–27). Herein lies the sufficient motivation for obeying God's law. Basic to obedience is inner knowledge of God's will coupled with an enablement to perform it. . . . Since the inward dynamic was absent in the old covenant, it would not be effective. There must be an inner force, a new power.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of spiritual enablement is confirmed by God's promise through Ezekiel to "put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (36:27). On the exchange of hearts in Ezekiel 36:26, Keil states, "The heart of stone has no susceptibility to the impressions of the word," whereas "the heart of flesh is a tender heart, susceptible to the drawing of the divine grace."<sup>27</sup>

The *heart* includes the mind as well as the emotions; it is in fact the seat of the personality, the inmost nature of man. The spirit is the impulse which drives the man and regulates his desires, his thoughts and his conduct. Both of these will be replaced and renewed; the heart that is stubborn, rebellious and insensitive (a heart of stone) by one that is soft, impressionable and responsive (a heart of flesh), and the spirit of disobedience by the Spirit of God. . . . The implanting of God's Spirit within them will transform their motives and empower them to live according to God's statutes and judgments.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 6 (1986):576.

<sup>27</sup> C. F. Kell and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 9:153.

<sup>28</sup> John B. Taylor, *Ezekiel: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1969), 232 (italics his).

This granting of "a heart of flesh" is nothing less than the moral transformation of a person's inner nature. The Old Covenant failed to produce obedience because it was external and was opposed by the internal, sinful nature within. God determined to correct this situation by internalizing His Law and making it a part of the inward nature of His people. Therefore this internal change of nature guaranteed through the New Covenant to provide Israel greater ability to do what they had failed to do in the past.

Paul's allusion to God's enabling power associated with the New Covenant further demonstrates the adequacy of his ministry over that of his opponents. Since they were relying on obedience to the Old Covenant, they based their adequacy on an external legal code and consequent lack of sufficient ability to serve and obey God. Paul indicated that his adequacy was superior because it was based on the internalization of the Law according to the New Covenant, which provided a change of the inner nature, including both the desire and the ability to obey God.

#### THE LETTER KILLS, BUT THE SPIRIT GIVES LIFE (v. 6)

Answering the question raised in 2:16, "Who is adequate for these things?" Paul said, "Our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (3:5-6).

Paul first described the adequacy of his ministry over that of his Judaizing opponents by stressing that his adequacy originated from God rather than himself. Then he highlighted the differences between ministries operating under the Old and New Covenants by adding, "For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Paul's antithesis between letter (γράμματος) and spirit (πνεῦμα) has been explained in various ways. The following paragraphs discuss the five most common views.

The literal and spiritual senses. This view is commonly associated with Origen and the Alexandrian school, who viewed the "letter" of 2 Corinthians 3:6 as the literal sense of Scripture and the "spirit" as the deeper, spiritual meaning of the sacred text.<sup>29</sup> Origen felt that the literal sense contained "stumbling blocks" (e.g., logical difficulties, impossibilities, fictitious historical events, and others). God placed these elements in Scripture to

<sup>29</sup> Illustrating from the writings of Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Cyril of Alexandria, Schneider carefully documents the consistent interpretation of this passage by the Alexandrian school ("The Meaning of St. Paul's Antithesis 'The Letter and Spirit,'" 166-68, 170, 182-83). This was also the view of Jerome (Sutcliffe, "Jerome," 2:89-90).

point the interpreter "to the need for a deeper understanding" which he could only "reach by giving careful attention to context, wording, and parallels."<sup>30</sup> So the literal sense was considered inferior and even misleading. Origen desired to unlock the meaning of the hidden spiritual sense of Scripture, which he regarded as more relevant to the spiritual life of the believer. This view was followed during the Middle Ages by a number of medieval interpreters, including the famed Scholastic theologian Peter Abelard.<sup>31</sup> However, most modern interpreters reject it for several reasons.<sup>32</sup> First, "spirit" ( $\piνεϋμα$ ) is never used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to the deeper meaning of the text.<sup>33</sup> Second, the context excludes the possibility of this interpretation because  $\piνεϋμα$  is used throughout chapter 3 to refer to the Holy Spirit as He carries out the promises of the New Covenant (3:3, 8, 17-18). Third, to interpret Paul's antithesis as proof for an allegorical method misses the argument of the passage as a defense of his ministry against Palestinian Judaizers seeking to reestablish the Mosaic Law.

The text as written and the Spirit as interpreter. This view is commonly known as the "hermeneutical" interpretation because it says the contrast between "letter" and "spirit" refers to the distinction between the written text and its interpretive key, the Holy Spirit. Advocating this view, Barth states, "For in 2 Cor. 3 everything depends on the fact that without this work of the Spirit Scripture is veiled, however great its glory may be and whatever its origin."<sup>34</sup> Richardson summarizes Paul's intention in 2 Corinthians 3 by claiming that "Paul is emphasizing almost solely the role of the Spirit as unveiler" and "in so doing he is willing to separate rather sharply—more sharply perhaps than most of us would be comfortable with—the gramma on which he bases his message from the pneuma who unveils it."<sup>35</sup> Richardson concludes that part of Paul's purpose in 2 Corinthians 3 "is to give a foundation for hermeneutics in the life of the Church at Corinth." Both Barth and Richardson support the "hermeneuti-

<sup>30</sup> Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 18.

<sup>31</sup> Schneider, "The Meaning of St. Paul's Antithesis 'The Letter and Spirit,'" 184.

<sup>32</sup> One modern scholar who affirmed the medieval interpretation is E. B. Allo, *Saint Paul: Second epître aux Corinthiens* (Paris: n.p., 1936), 107-11.

<sup>33</sup> Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 674-75.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1.2., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 515.

<sup>35</sup> Richardson, "Spirit and Letter," 214-15.

cal" view by appealing to Paul's account of Moses in Exodus 34 where he described the lifting of the veil when he turned "to the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:16). Since "the Lord is the Spirit" (v. 17), the implication is that the Spirit is needed to comprehend the meaning of Scripture.

However, Provence points out why this interpretation of Paul's letter/spirit antithesis is unlikely. First, "it fails to account for the radical antithesis between" letter and spirit by portraying them not as "opposites but related to one another positively as text and interpreter."<sup>36</sup> Second, though "Paul does claim that a veil lies upon the reading of the Old Covenant," it is "a veil of hard-heartedness which hides not the meaning of the Bible, but the glory of God."<sup>37</sup> It seems preferable to say that the veil does not hide the meaning of the text but rather obscures its effective application to one's life and the willingness to accept it (1 Cor. 2:14). This is confirmed by the fact that once the veil is lifted, personal transformation results from the believer beholding the glory of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18). Third, this interpretation fails to relate this passage to Paul's argument against the Judaizers.

*The legalistic misuse of the Law and the Holy Spirit.* Those who hold to this interpretation maintain that the "letter" signifies the legalistic misuse of the Law as a means of meriting salvation.<sup>38</sup> The Jewish distortion of the true intention of the Law is contrasted with the "spirit," which signifies the proper understanding and use of the Law by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Seeking to support this view that "letter" signifies the Law as distorted and misused, Provence appeals to Romans 2:27–29: "Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you who break the law through the letter [γράμματος] and circumcision. For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something external and in the flesh. Rather, he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart by the Spirit not by the letter [ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι]. His approval is not from men but from God" (Provence's translation). He asserts that when Paul accused the Jews (Rom. 2:27) of breaking "the law through the letter and circumcision," he was

<sup>36</sup> Provence, "Who Is Sufficient for These Things?" 63-64.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Barrett, *Second Corinthians*, 113; C. E. B. Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17 (March 1964): 57-60; Victor Paul Furnish, II *Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 200-201; Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 92-93; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 55; and Provence, "Who Is Sufficient for These Things?" 65.

distinguishing the "letter" as the Law misunderstood as a means to merit salvation from the "Law" as properly understood.<sup>39</sup> However, the context of Romans 2 does not support this distinction.

Paul has denounced here the open failure to observe what the law by any reading demands; and the Jewish transgressor of the law *dia grammatos kai peritomes* [though the letter and circumcision] is contrasted, not with the man who *understands* the true nature of the law or circumcision, but with the Gentile who observes the righteous demands of the law though he possesses neither the books of the law (cf. v. 14) nor circumcision (vv. 26f.). Hence, in this verse at least, "letter" is an abbreviated way of referring, not to a perverted understanding of the commands of God, but simply to their possession in written form. . . . [The] negative ring to the words *dia grammatos kai peritomes* . . . is due to the fact that it is only the possession of the scrolls of the law, and only *physical* circumcision, which the Jew in question can claim in his favor, . . . while he lacks the righteous observance to which possession of the "letter" obligates. . . . [Thus] the fault lies in what he lacks, not in what he possesses.<sup>40</sup>

Cranfield, meanwhile, builds his argument for the "legalistic" meaning of letter by referring to Romans 7:6. He contends that Paul's contrast between the "newness of the Spirit" and the "oldness of the letter"

does not oppose the law itself to the Spirit; for only a few verses later (7:14) Paul says that the law is "spiritual." The contrast is rather between the old way of the legalistic misunderstanding and misuse of the law, in which one was left with the letter bereft of the Spirit, and the new way of the right understanding and use of the law by the power of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

According to the context of Romans 7, however, "letter" would be better understood as referring to the true demands of the Ten Commandments as indicated by mention of the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet" (Rom. 7:7). It is the "holy, righteous, and good" Mosaic Law (v. 12), not the legalistic misuse of it, which provides "sin" the opportunity to incite man to "covet" (v. 8). In this way the "letter" as the Old Testament Law resulted in placing people in bondage to sin and death (8:2). Westerholm aptly concludes that Romans 7:6

does not speak of the misunderstanding of the legalist, but of the sin which inevitably results when man "in the flesh" is confronted by the demands of God. Hence, serving God by the "letter" should

<sup>39</sup> Provence, "Who Is Sufficient for These Things?" 66.

<sup>40</sup> Stephen Westerholm, "Letter and Spirit: The Foundation of Pauline Ethics," *New Testament Studies* 30 (1984): 234-35 (italics his).

refer, not to the attempt to establish one's own righteousness, but to man's obligation under the old dispensation to carry out the concrete commands of the law of God—a situation which in fact led to obvious sin and death.<sup>42</sup>

In addition, this view cannot be supported from the context of 2 Corinthians 3. Rather than alluding to a perversion of the Law, Paul's reference to the ministry of death "engraved on stone" (3:7) would more naturally refer to the Ten Commandments inscribed on stone tablets. And the references to a "ministry" (διακονία) and a "covenant" (διαθήκη) of which Moses was the administrator (vv. 7, 14) would seem to rule out the possibility that Paul was speaking of the Law as misinterpreted and distorted. If he did have a perversion of the Law in mind, he would hardly have attributed to it a degree of "glory" (v. 9). Paul would never have spoken of the ministry of the "letter" in these terms if he meant it was a distortion of the true intent of the Law.<sup>43</sup>

*Outward conformity versus inward obedience to the Mosaic Law.* Advocating this view, Hughes states, "The distinction here, then, between the letter and the spirit indicates the difference between the law as externally written at Sinai on tablets of stone and the same law as written internally in the heart of the Christian believer."<sup>44</sup> One distinguishing characteristic of this view is that Paul's antithesis is not understood as suggesting the end of the Mosaic Law.<sup>45</sup> Thus the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant does not entail a change in the Law but rather a change in the believer's ability to obey the Law. The contrast is made between Old Testament saints who were able to obey the Law only outwardly and New Testament believers who are now enabled "to conform inwardly, in spirit, as well as outwardly, in letter, to the demands of the law."<sup>48</sup> Another feature of this view is that "spirit" is understood as a reference not to the Holy Spirit but

<sup>41</sup> Cranfield, "St. Paul and the Law," 56.

<sup>42</sup> Westerholm, "Letter and Spirit," 238.

<sup>42</sup> This is consistent with Paul's use of γράματα in 2 Timothy 3:15, where it clearly refers to the Old Testament Law properly understood.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 100 (italics his).

<sup>45</sup> In a similar way Kaiser argues that Paul's antithesis there is between "two ways of serving the Law of God," namely, outward versus inward obedience. He does this in order to maintain that the "weightier matters of the Law" continue for Christians, who can observe them "inwardly" (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Weightier and Lighter Matters of the Law: Moses, Jesus, and Paul," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 187-88).

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 101.

to the internal conformity to the Mosaic Law. It is not surprising that this is the position adopted by some theologians who insist on the New Testament believers' ongoing obligation to the details of the Mosaic Law.<sup>47</sup>

Though 2 Corinthians 3 does emphasize the inward dynamic of the New Covenant, which internalizes God's Law by writing it on the heart, this view does not adequately account for the fact that the Law of the Mosaic Covenant, which "had glory" at one time, now "has no glory on account of the glory [of the New Covenant] that surpasses it" (3:10). Furthermore the words "new" (καινός) and "old" (παλαιός), which modify "covenant" in verses 6 and 14, contrast the completely new and better from the old and obsolete.<sup>48</sup> Although some of the stipulations for enjoying the blessings of both covenants may be similar (e.g., the Ten Commandments are repeated in the New Testament, with the exception of Sabbath-keeping), this does not imply that all the stipulations for one should be expected of the other (Mark 7:18-19). Since they are different covenants, it would be better to distinguish their covenantal stipulations in terms of the "law of Moses" and the "law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Also, to equate the "spirit" with internal conformity to the Mosaic Law contradicts the consistent usage of πνεῦμα throughout 2 Corinthians 3 as an obvious reference to the Holy Spirit (vv. 3, 8, 17-18).

*The Old Covenant and the New Covenant.* Those who advocate this view maintain that Paul's antithesis is a contrast between the basic characteristics of the Old and New Covenants.<sup>49</sup> They understand that Paul used "letter" to signify living by the Law under the Old Covenant and "spirit" to denote living by the Holy Spirit under the New Covenant. Many reject this interpretation because to say that the Law of the Old Covenant "kills" gives a radically negative assessment of the Sinai Covenant mediated

<sup>47</sup> See Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 171-73.

<sup>48</sup> This can be seen in Jesus' use of the words in His parables about the patching of the old and new garments and the old and new wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-37). In these parables Jesus taught that the old ways of the Old Testament were obsolete in light of the new program He introduced. Paul used the words in the same way to show the opposition between the old and new (Rom. 6:6; Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9). Paul's usage also seems to suggest that the old and the new are mutually exclusive. See Heinrich Seesemann, "παλαιός," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 5 (1967):719.

<sup>49</sup> Bruce, 1 and 2 Corinthians, 190-91; Harris, "2 Corinthians," 335; Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 218-19; R. V. G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 62-63; and Stephen Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 212-13.

by Moses. It is felt that this approach contradicts Paul's statements that the "law is holy . . . and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12) and the "law is spiritual" (v. 14). However, viewing Paul's antithesis as a covenantal contrast between life under the Law and life by the Spirit seems to satisfy the demands of the context for the following reasons.

First, the purpose of the entire paragraph (2 Cor. 3:1–11) is to contrast the New and the Old Covenants. On one side Paul presented the "Old Covenant" (v. 14) as "engraved" (v. 7) on "tablets of stone" (v. 3) and as "the ministry of death" (v. 7) and "condemnation" (v. 9) mediated through "Moses" (v. 7), whose glory "fades away" (v. 11). On the other side he presented the "New Covenant" (v. 6) as "written . . . on tablets of human hearts" (v. 3) and as "the ministry of the Spirit" (v. 8) and "righteousness" (v. 9) mediated "through Christ" (v. 4), whose glory "remains" (v. 11). Therefore to insert a new concept such as "legalism" or "the Spirit as interpreter" into the passage would be foreign to the argument and violate the context.

Second, the "letter" (γράμματος) cannot refer to "legalism" because Paul tied its meaning specifically to the Ten Commandments within the Mosaic Covenant. In verse 7 he identified the "letter" as "engraved on stones," which could refer only to the ten laws written on the stone tablets Moses carried down from Mount Sinai. This is confirmed by the parallel passage in Romans 7:6–8 where the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet," is given as an example of the "letter." Also only the Law of the Sinai Covenant was delivered by Moses (2 Cor. 3:7).<sup>50</sup> This corresponds to Paul's use of γράμματα in 2 Timothy 3:15, where the proper use of the Old Testament is in view.

Third, viewing the "letter" as a ministry of death (2 Cor. 3:7) and condemnation (v. 9) which "kills" corresponds well with what Paul wrote about the function of the Law in Romans 7:5–10. There he picked up his argument back in 5:20, "The Law came in that the transgression might increase." He explained how this principle works by saying that the "sinful passions" are brought out "by the Law" and eventually result in "death" within the "members of our body" (7:5). However, to prevent anyone from concluding that the Law is sinful (v. 7) Paul explained three valuable functions of the Law. First, the Law reveals sin; for apart from the Law a person would have no knowledge of sin (v.

<sup>50</sup> Later Paul used "Moses" as a metonymy for the "letter" that was read to the Israelites (3:15). This could only be a reference to the Mosaic Law of the Old Covenant.

7). Second, the Law provokes sin (v. 8). This further explains how the Law reveals sin. The sinful nature or sin principle is lifeless (dead) until the Law provokes it to commit acts of disobedience, thereby becoming "utterly sinful" (v. 13). Only then can sin clearly be recognized for what it is. This is confirmed elsewhere in 4:15, "Where there is no law, neither is there violation" (cf. 5:13). Third, the Law judges sin (7:8-40), resulting in death for the sinner because sin is deceitful (v. 11) and causes death (v. 13). In this way a ministry based on the Law of the Mosaic Covenant is described in 2 Corinthians 3 as "the letter" which "kills" by bringing "death" and "condemnation." It "kills" because it declares what God demands without giving sufficient power to fulfill it, and then pronounces the death sentence on all those who break it.

Fourth, the statement "the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6) is best understood as referring to the transformation of life by the Holy Spirit according to the New Covenant, as promised in Ezekiel 36:26-27. This is even more clearly seen in the Lord's promise, "And I will put My Spirit within you, and you will come to life" (Ezek. 37:14). This New Covenant promise concludes the vision of the dry bones (vv. 1-14). After providing a fitting description of the hopeless condition of the Jewish exiles in Babylon, this vision presents the physical renewal of the bones with flesh and skin through the preaching of Ezekiel. But when the bones receive breath (vv. 9-10), this clearly portrays the spiritual renewal of the people by the Spirit. It is this aspect of the New Covenant that Paul had in mind when he declared, "The Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6). This meaning is further confirmed by Paul's concluding statement, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (v. 18). Paul's point is that adequacy to minister is not determined by outward conformity to Jewish Law, as the Judaizers were claiming. To the contrary, the New Covenant provides a more adequate ministry by energizing the believer through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit to be inwardly conformed not to the Mosaic Law but to "the glory of the Lord." Paul mentioned this life-giving work of the Holy Spirit in other places in 2 Corinthians (e.g., 1:22; 4:10-12; 5:5, 15).

#### FADING GLORY VERSUS SURPASSING GLORY (vv. 7-11)

Paul's exposition of the New Covenant in contrast to the Old Covenant ends with a discussion of the degree and nature of the "glory" related to each covenant. In this section Paul acknowledged

the Old Covenant as glorious but fading away, and replaced by the more glorious ministry of the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:9–10). To stress its temporary nature, three times (vv. 7, 11, 13) Paul referred to the glory (δόξα) of the Old Covenant as fading (καταργούμενον).<sup>51</sup> The word καταργέω means "to render something inoperative";<sup>52</sup> therefore in this context the word indicates that the Old Covenant had only a temporary function. "In this whole context [καταργούμενον] signifies the passing glory of the Old Covenant in general, not the fading way of the shining on Moses' face."<sup>53</sup> Since Paul referred to the Old Covenant as being "engraved on stones" (v. 7), this would necessarily include the Ten Commandments as part of the Old Covenant (Exod. 34:28). Therefore, since the Old Covenant no longer has glory because the glory of the New Covenant has surpassed it (2 Cor. 3:10), the Ten Commandments have also "faded away" (v. 11) and no longer function as stipulations of blessing through the Old Covenant for believers today. The end of the Law as a way of life is also indicated by the fading glory expressed in verse 13. Paul was saying that his adequacy as an apostle and minister was based not on the temporary glory of the Mosaic Covenant, which had already faded away, but on the surpassing glory of the New Covenant, which had replaced the former covenant. By showing the end of the Law system, Paul dealt a devastating blow to the Judaizers who were basing the alleged superiority of their ministry on the Old Covenant.

### CONCLUSION

In 2 Corinthians Paul sought to defend his ministry from the accusation of the Judaizing "false apostles" who had infiltrated the Corinthian church. In 3:1–11 Paul set forth a series of contrasts between the Old Covenant on which the Judaizers based their ministry and the New Covenant on which he based his ministry. The thrust of these covenantal contrasts is that the New Covenant provides divine enablement and has replaced the Old Covenant. In this way Paul firmly established the superiority of his apostolic ministry over that of his Judaizing opponents.

Several theological implications may be gleaned from this study. First, the use of this passage to justify a particular herme-

<sup>51</sup> Homer A. Kent Jr., *A Heart Opened Wide: Studies in Second Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 60.

<sup>52</sup> J. I. Packer, "Abolish, Nullify, Reject," in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols., 1:73.

<sup>53</sup> Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 219, n. 28.

neutical perspective concerning either a deeper spiritual meaning of the text or to view the Holy Spirit as the divine interpreter cannot be supported by the text. (Of course the Holy Spirit is involved in the interpretation of Scripture,<sup>54</sup> but that is not the point Paul was making in 2 Corinthians 3:6). These interpretations ignore the argument of Paul's apostolic defense and fail to comprehend his covenantal contrasts as a polemic against the Judaizing "false apostles."

Second, the use of this passage to advocate the end of the Mosaic Law for Christians fits well with Paul's argument against the Judaizers. They were attempting to place the Corinthians under bondage to the covenantal stipulations of the Mosaic Covenant. Paul's discussion of the fading glory of the Old Covenant was designed to show that those stipulations were temporary and were replaced by the New Covenant. To ignore this fact as some do is to assume erroneously like the Judaizers that Gentiles need to observe part or all of the Law. Such an assumption violates the temporary function of the Mosaic Law within the framework of a covenant established between God and the nation Israel.

Third, this study highlights the distinction under the Old and New Covenants related to sanctification. The Old Covenant was a "ministry of death" because it declared the will of God without providing the power to fulfill it, and then pronounced the death sentence on all those who broke it. The New Covenant is identified as "the ministry of the Spirit" and "of righteousness" because it provides not only the enablement to become conformed to the image of Christ but also the willingness to obey His will. This places New Testament believers in a position far superior to Old Testament saints regarding sanctification. Paul exhorted his readers not to go back to life under an inferior covenant since what they have under the New Covenant is far better. Rather they should celebrate the glory of life in the Spirit under the New Covenant.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching with Spiritual Power* (1963; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 136-46.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary  
3909 Swiss Ave.  
Dallas, TX 75204  
www.dts.edu

z

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: [thildebrandt@gordon.edu](mailto:thildebrandt@gordon.edu)