

THE SUFFICIENCY OF PAUL, MINISTER OF THE NEW COVENANT

DAVID E. GARLAND
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, KY 40280

W. C. Van Unnik calls 2 Corinthians 3 one of the most "interesting portions" of Paul.¹ As interesting as it might be, many who try to grasp the nuances of Paul's argument may feel at times that they have a veil over their minds. It is a passage fraught with exegetical perplexities. A. T. Hanson goes so far as to say that this is "the Mount Everest of Pauline texts as far as difficulty is concerned--or should we rather call it the sphinx among texts, since its difficulty lies in its enigmatic quality rather than its complexity?"² In spite of its difficulties, this text gives us an entree into Paul's view of the ultimate significance of his ministry as a mediator of the New Covenant.

The issue that Paul is addressing in 2:14-4:6 is his sufficiency as a minister of the New Covenant.³ He raises the question in 2:16: "Who is sufficient for these things?" The answer he apparently got from the interlopers at Corinth was, "We are, and you are not." These rivals have made inroads in the church by vaunting their sterling credentials and their stirring spiritual prowess and have brought Paul's apostolic

¹ W. C. van Unnik "'With an Unveiled Face,' An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians iii 12-18," *NovT* 6 (1963) 152.

² A. T. Hanson, "The Midrash in II Corinthians 3: A Reconsideration," *JSNT* 9 (1980) 19.

³ See the tables demonstrating the number of similar constructions and the cyclic (ABA) pattern in 2:14-4:1-6 in J. Lambrecht, "Structure and Line of Thought in 2 Cor 2:14-4:6," *Bib* 64 (1983) 344-80, particularly 348-53. See also T. E. Provence, "'Who is Sufficient for These Things?' An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians ii 15-iii 18," *NovT* 24 (1982) 56-58; E. Richard, "Polemics, Old Testament, and Theology: A Study of I Cor., III, I-IV, 6," *RB* 88 (1981) 352-53; and M. Carrez, *La Deuxieme Epitre de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens* (CNT 8; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1986) 89.

legitimacy into question. They have eloquence, visions, and an authoritative bearing they consider to be worthy of so powerful a gospel. They also have letters of commendation (from whom, we can only guess) that authorize their activity (3:1). Paul will grant some of the criticism leveled against him--in person, he may appear to some as weak (10:10), ineloquent, and inelegant (1 Cor 4:11-13)--but he will not concede that he is insufficient for his apostolic ministry. Faced with the rival claims of these interlopers and the distressing deterioration of his relationship with the Corinthians, he vigorously defends himself as one who is sufficient (ἴκανος)⁴ through God for his ministry: "not that we are sufficient (ἴκανοι) from ourselves to claim anything; our sufficiency (ἰκανότης) comes from God who makes us sufficient" (ἰκάνωσεν, 3:5-6a).

The problem is that the Corinthians have misunderstood Paul (they have understood only "in part," 1:13-14), and he wants them to understand him fully (5:11-12) so that his relationship with them will not only be preserved but solidified. Paul must also contend against rival braggarts who have measured themselves by human standards (10:12), boasted quite beyond appropriate limits (10:13-18), and undermined his credibility. He therefore finds himself in the unpleasant position of having to praise himself to restore their confidence in him (12:11), and he must do this in a manner that is both inoffensive according to accepted social conventions of the times and congruent with the gospel of the crucified Christ. In the thematic statement in 1:12-14, he asserts that he has manifested godly sincerity in his ministry and that they have every reason to be proud of him (literally, "to have a boast"). In 5:12, he writes: "We are not commending ourselves again but giving you cause to be proud of us, so that you may be able to answer those who pride themselves on a man's position and not on his heart." This provides the context for understanding his comments in 2:14-4:6.⁶ In this section he is providing grounds for their pride in him. This is his boast in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17). In the process of defending himself, he lays out for us his view of the surpassing splendor of the ministry of the New Covenant in which we all share.

⁴ D. Georgi (*The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986] 233) contends that this was a catchword used by Paul's protagonists in Corinth to assert their worthiness and divine qualities.

⁵ See Plutarch's treatise, *On Praising Oneself Inoffensively*.

⁶ See J. T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence* (SBLDS 99; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 148-53.

Paul's Sufficiency (2:14-17)

Paul begins his defense in this section by thanking God for his ministry and by contrasting himself with those whom he castigates as “merchants of the gospel.” Like so many shady sophists, they peddle their religious wares for their own material gain (see 10:7, 12; 11:5, 21-23). They are no better than hucksters because they handle the gospel as if it were cheap merchandise to be hawked at a fair booth. Paul may be alluding to the peddler's tendency to adulterate the product to cheat the buyer (see Isa 1:22 LXX; Sir 26:29); because, in 4:2, he insists that he has “renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways.”⁷ Paul himself neither dilutes the gospel to increase profits nor modifies it to make it more palatable because he refuses to accept financial support for his ministry. Or, by referring to them as “peddlers,” he may be implying that they have simply reduced preaching the gospel to a trade. They were simply in “the business of preaching. . . without any ultimate concern.”⁸ The allusion to his rivals who did demand support from the church would not have been lost on his readers. Paul is not in the “apostle trade”; he has his ministry by the mercy of God (4:1), and it has ultimate significance both for himself and the world. He therefore commends himself as a man of sincerity, commissioned by God, and who, before God, speaks in Christ (2:17) with confidence (3:4) and boldness (3:12) and is displayed publicly for all to see (2:14).⁹

When Paul commends himself in an attempt to restore his relationship with the Corinthians,¹⁰ he leaves himself open to the charge of being “presumptuous and brazen in dealing with them”¹¹ (see 3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 10:12, 18). Paul responds to this by asserting that his “cboldness” is not attributable to self-interest, conceit, or personal

⁷ Provence, “Who is Sufficient?” 59, writes: “The ‘watered’ down gospel of the ‘many’ was neither offensive enough to lead to destruction nor powerful enough to lead to salvation (cf. I Cor. i 18). Paul’s gospel was such a word, however, since it was a pure gospel from God.”

⁸ J. I. H. McDonald, “Paul and the Preaching Ministry: A Reconsideration of 2 Cor. 2:14-17 in its Context,” *JSNT* 17 (198:’3) 42.

⁹ The word *θριαμβεύειν* customarily was used in the context of the victory parade of the conquering general when prisoners of war were led about in utter humiliation prior to their execution. If this is the meaning that Paul intends, he portrays himself as “the very showpiece of God’s triumph”; but instead of being downcast and defeated, he gives thanks to God. He gives thanks because his submission to God has resulted not in his annihilation but his salvation. See Fitzgerald, *Cracks* 161-62; and S. Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit* (WUNT 2/19; Tübingen: Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1986) 18-39.

¹⁰ On the social aspects of self-commendation, see P. Marshall, *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul’s Relations with the Corinthians* (WUNT 2/23; Tübingen: MGhr [Paul Siebeck], 1987) 259-77.

¹¹ V. P. Furnish, *2 Corinthians* (AB32a; New York: Doubleday, 1984) 245.

achievements but "to the splendor of the ministry which he serves." He goes so far as to compare himself and his ministry to Moses and his ministry.¹² When he asks who is sufficient to be a servant of a ministry that has such a life-and-death impact on the lives of others, one should recall the qualms Moses expressed when God called him to lead Israel out of bondage. In the interpretive translation of the LXX, Moses says, "I am not worthy" (ἴκανος or "sufficient"; Exod 4:10). Paul says as much himself, because he is keenly aware of his own personal frailty given his awesome role as a sweet fragrance of life to some but as a putrid stench of death to others.¹³ He is not worthy,¹⁴ not because he fails to measure up to the superapostles (11:5; 12:11), but because he fails to measure up to Christ in whom he speaks. In the case of Moses, God assured him that the "one who gave a mouth to man" will "open your mouth" and will "teach you what you are to say" (Exod 4:11-12). In the case of Paul, God does much the same thing (see 12:9); but Paul goes on to say that God works through him in a far more glorious way than God ever did through Moses because the ministry of the Spirit is far more glorious.

Therefore, Paul's answer to his question in 2:16, "Who is sufficient for these things?" is that *he is*, but *only through the grace of God*. His confidence rests in God who gave him both his ministry in the New Covenant (see 1 Cor 15:9; Col 1:12) and his sufficiency, not in himself. The fitness of Paul is primarily related to the message that he has been sent out by God to preach. Consequently, fleshly heritage or accomplishments (Phil 3:4), religious powers (2 Cor 10:2), or the affirmation of humans--things his opponents paraded before others--mean nothing.

Paul's Letter of Recommendation (3:1-3)

Paul's rivals have apparently sought to manufacture their own sufficiency with commendatory letters from third parties to ensure

¹² I disagree with those who claim that his appeal to Moses is attributable to his rivals' identification with Moses as a divine man. See Georgi, *Opponents* 254-58; and M. Theobald, *Die uberstromende Gnade. Studien zu einem paulinischen Motivfeld* (FzB 22; Wurzburg, 1982) 202. This is an extreme case of mirror reading whereby one imaginatively constructs the views of Paul's opponents from his every argument in the letter.

¹³ This is a priestly image rather than one associated with the triumphal procession and reflects Paul's belief that he is in priestly service of God (see Rom 15:16). The one who persecuted the church has been transformed into a life-giving fragrance (see Sir 39:13-14; 24:15; 2 Bar 67:6). How people respond to his message will lead them either to life or death.

The rabbis viewed the law as an odor of life (b. *Ta'an.* 7a; *Yoma* 72b; *Sabb.* 88b; *'Erub.* 54a), but Paul argues that the law can only be associated with death.

¹⁴ The same word appears in 1 Cor 15:9, "I am not worthy to be an apostle" (see Matt 3:11; 8:8; Luke 7:6).

that they receive both a warm reception and material assistance.¹⁵ Paul did not depend on the recommendations of others. Since he did not receive his apostleship by the vote of man, or his gospel by the teaching of man (Gal 1:1, 11-12), he did not need the credentials, patronage, or golden opinions of man to carry out his commission. If God made him sufficient to serve as an apostle, he does not need a second opinion from humans. Paul would not have been more of an apostle with an apostle certificate or a note from a pillar apostle in his bag. In fact, letters of recommendation would only have been useful where Christians had already been established, and Paul's policy was to venture only into pioneer mission territory (Rom 15:20). He identifies this as his *κἀνών*, his jurisdiction, in 10:13, 16. As the first missionary to come to Corinth (10:14), letters vouching for him from notable Christians would have hardly done him any good since there were no Christians there to be impressed.¹⁶ In this situation, only the power of the word could be effective. Apparently, the rivals only poached on the work of others (see 10:15-16; 11:12) and never launched a church themselves. Therefore, they required the recommendations of others to gain a foothold in churches that were already established.

Since Paul believes that God alone can validate a ministry (10:18), he first points to the founding of the Corinthian church as evidence of his sufficiency for the apostolic task. He contends that he does have a letter of recommendation, so to speak, in the Corinthians (3:2); their very existence is a testimony to his sufficiency. The Corinthians are his "workmanship in the Lord" and "the seal of his apostleship in the Lord" (1 Cor 9:1-2). Mindful that they were created "in the Lord," he clarifies his statement that they are "our letter" (3:2) and says that they are "Christ's letter delivered (*διακονηθήϊσα*) by us" (3:3). He is the courier, and the letter is written by Christ on Paul's heart.¹⁷ This letter

¹⁵ Paul does not condemn the practice of using commendatory letters because he composed them for others to create friendship between the one recommended and the recipient (Rom 16:1-2), to establish those recommended in a position of authority (2 Cor 8:16-24; Phil 2:19-23; Col. 4:7-9), to appeal to his friendship with the recipient to forgive the one recommended (Phlm), and to declare his support for the one recommended (Phil 2:25-30). See also 1 Cor 16:3, 10; and Acts 9:2; 15:23-29; 18:27; 22:5. What troubles him about his rivals' letters of commendation is that they used them to oppose and exclude him. See Marshall, *Enmity* 128.

¹⁶ G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays in Corinth*, trans. by J. H. Schutz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 38-39; see also C. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 143. When he writes to Rome to lay the groundwork for a mission to Spain, he recognizes that he will be going to an established church outside of his sphere of influence. But he does not gather kudos from others; instead, he lays out the gospel that he preaches so that they can see for themselves his insight into the mysteries of God.

¹⁷ The verse contains a textual variant, "your hearts" or "our hearts." The manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports the reading "our." This would be similar to

is vastly superior to any that his opponents might possess because it is the work of the Spirit. If the rivals wish to compare letters, what is written by the Spirit far outclasses anything penned in ink. Their letters have a human author; Paul's, a divine author. Their letters are visible to only a few; his is visible to one and all.

In 3:3c, Paul changes tack slightly by asserting that this letter has been inscribed on human hearts and not on stone tablets. Papyrus or parchment would seem to be a more appropriate comparison at this point, since the letters of his rivals would hardly have been etched in stone. But Paul refers to stones because he wants to move on to a comparison between his ministry for Christ and Moses' ministry for the law. His real concern is to give the grounds for "the confidence we have through Christ before God" (3:4), and he wants to contrast the giving of the law that was engraved on stones (Exod 31:18; 32:16; 34:1; Deut 9:10) with the promise of the New Covenant that will be inscribed on hearts. Jeremiah prophesied: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they will be my people" (Jer 31 :3; see also Ezek 11:19; 36:26). God prefers living hearts to dead stones because they can better communicate what the purposes of the living God are for humanity and what the presence of the life-giving Spirit is able to do. In effect, Paul audaciously declares in 3:3 that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 has come to pass in the church at Corinth through his ministry.

Letter Versus Spirit (3:4-6)

Paul leads into his contrast between the ministry of the New Covenant and that of the Old in 3:7-18 by stating that "the letter kills and the Spirit gives life" (3:6b; see Rom 2:29; 7:6). This seems to be a negative evaluation of the law which Paul identifies as "spiritual" in Rom 7:14. Cranfield, in his comments on Rom 7:6, seeks to explain this apparent contradiction by arguing that "letter" refers to the misuse of the law: "'Letter' is rather what the legalist is left with as a result of his misunderstanding and misuse of the law. It is the letter of the law in separation from the Spirit."¹⁸ Similarly, Barrett argues that

his statement in 4:6: "For it is God who said, 'Let light shine out of the darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." See W. Baird, "Letters of Recommendation: A Study of II Cor 3:1-3," *JBL* 80 (1961) 166-72.

Notice that the verbs ("having been inscribed") are perfect participles and stand opposed to "ephemeral human recommendations," see E. Richard, "Polemics.." 346.

¹⁸C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 339-40.

Georgi, *Opponents* 251; claims that the opponents introduced the word *γράμμα* into the discussion by calling their ministry a ministry of *γράμμα*.

"letter" refers to the way Paul viewed his Jewish contemporaries' understanding and application of the law; it is man-made religion that does not penetrate to the heart.¹⁹ This interpretation assumes that humans turn God's law into a written code of behavior by which they mistakenly seek to attain their own righteousness. From Paul's perspective, this can lead only to death (Rom 7:5-7; 1 Cor 15:56). Therefore, the reason that the letter kills is that one is deceived into believing that life and righteousness can be found through obedience to legal prescriptions (Rom 7:11) when in fact they can be found only in Christ (see Phil 3:9).²⁰

While these statements are true, they do not explain this verse because misunderstanding or misapplication of the law is not mentioned at all in 3:6. This interpretation ignores the fact that Paul specifically contrasts God's inscribing the law on stones with God's inscribing it on human hearts through the Spirit (3:3).²¹ He contrasts an external code with an indwelling power. The "letter" refers to what is merely written. It is ineffectual because it cannot produce life, obedience, or righteousness but can only pronounce a death sentence on those who fail to obey it (see Gal 3:10, 21). With only the letter, the people shrivel into dry bones and desperately need the Spirit to revive them (see Ezek 37:4-6, 14) and empower them (see Rom 8:1-11). The Spirit therefore completes God's action in giving the law. The Spirit gives life and enables the old to become new (5:17; Eph 4:22, 24; Col 3:9-10).

The Ministry of Stone Versus the Ministry of the Spirit (3:7-18)

In 3:7-18, Paul examines the giving of the law recorded in Exodus 34 and what it reveals about the ministry of Moses. He is not concerned that the rivals "have overstressed the Old Testament and understressed the newness of Christ" as Best, for example, contends.²² At this point, he is not countering the false teaching of those stirring up the congregation against him but justifying his own boldness (3:12) and confidence (3:4) as a worthy apostle of the new covenant (3:6) by

¹⁹ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, (HNT; New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 113. He argues from 3:3 that the contrast is "between human opinion and performance, and the work of God by his Spirit" (112). Paul did not intend to suggest that the OT law was merely a human instrument; it was inspired by God (Rom 7:14)--"but it was easy to misuse it" to make oneself feel superior to others.

²⁰ Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, 201 notes that existence that is centered entirely on something human is cut off from the true source of life and can only die. Origen took this as a justification for his allegorical method and an argument against literal interpretation (for a fuller discussion, see Furnish, *2 Corinthians* 199-200), and some moderns have misused this as a proof text for arguing against moral constraints.¹

²¹ G. Schrenk, "γράφω," *TDNT* 1 (1964) 765-67.

²² E. Best, *2 Corinthians* (Int.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1987) 28, 30, 32, 33.

contrasting his ministry, a ministry of the Spirit, with that of Moses, a ministry of the letter. Nor should these verses be regarded as an independent "midrash" inserted parenthetically into the text, as some have proposed;²³ they are an integral part of Paul's defense of his sufficiency as an apostle of Christ.²⁴

Paul has already said that the letter kills, and now he expands on that statement with a most surprising exposition of Exod 34:28-35. He begins with what he considers to be an undeniable fact that the Old Covenant was accompanied with glory (δόξα), a key word that occurs thirteen times in 3:7-4:6 (the verb form occurs twice).²⁵ Paul's argument runs, if splendor attended a ministry which was only chiseled in stone, how much more must be the splendor of the ministry of the Spirit. The refrain, "put if . . . how much more," pulses through these verses as Paul contrasts "the ministry of death" with "the ministry of the Spirit" (3:7), "the splendor of the ministry of condemnation" with "the splendor" of "the ministry of righteousness" (3:9), and that which is "annulled" (or "fading") with that which is "permanent" (3:11). He then concludes with a somewhat enigmatic explanation of why Moses veiled himself before the sons of Israel whereby he contrasts his own boldness with Moses' cautious reserve. With this interpretation of Exodus 34, Paul demonstrates that the boldness (3:12), freedom (3:17), and glory (3:18) that he lays claim to have nothing to do with his personal characteristics but have everything to do with the intrinsic splendor of the ministry he serves. He knows himself to be a flawed vessel but one that contains a perfect treasure (4:7). The glory he claims is not the empty glory (κενοδοξία) that self-applause or the acclamation of others bestows; it is the glory that God bestows on all those who serve in the ministry of the Spirit. Because he knows himself to be a minister of the glorious New Covenant and an ambassador of Christ (5:20), Paul can respond to the question, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" (3:1) with the bold assertion, we can "commend ourselves to every person's conscience before God" (4:2). He can do this because of the glory of the ministry he serves.

²³ H. Windisch, *Die zweite Korintherbrief* (MeyerK 6; Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1924) 105, contended that 3:7-18 was a pre-existing midrash on Exodus 34. It is therefore only tangentially related to Paul's argument. This view has been accepted by S. Schulz, "Die Decke Moses. Untersuchungen zu einer vorpaulinischen Überlieferung in 2 Kor. 3:17-18," *ZNW* 49 (1958) 1-30; and D. Georgi, *Opponents*, 264-71. See arguments against this view in M. Hooker, "Beyond the Things That Are Written? St. Paul's Use of Scripture," *NTS* 27 (1982) 295-309.

²⁴ See n 3 above.

²⁵ "Glory" may refer to the power of God (see Rom 6:4), the outward manifestation of God, God's character, or the transforming power of God.

The Ministry of Death Versus the Ministry of the Spirit (Life) (3:7-8)

It is astounding that a Jew would ever have identified the Sinai experience as a ministry (δῆλον) of death (3:7). Jews proclaimed that it was just the opposite; the law gave life. A later Rabbi expressed it this way: "while Israel stood below engraving idols to provoke their Creator to anger. . . , God sat on high engraving tablets which would give them life" (*Exod. Rab.* 41:1).²⁶ As a Pharisee, Paul was no different from any other devout Jew who searched the law and the prophets because he believed he had life in them (see John 5:39). But after his encounter with the risen Lord (4:6), he came to realize that the law bore witness to Christ (compare John 5:47). He was convinced that the righteousness of God had been manifested in Jesus Christ apart from law (see Rom 3:22; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 5:21). He also must have reasoned that if salvation comes only through Christ, then salvation could not come through the written law. If the law does not lead to life, then it must lead to death (Rom 7:10; Gal 3:21; 1 Cor 15:56).

Because of his faith in Christ, Paul came to view the law-holy, righteous, and good as it was (Rom 7:12)--as a ministry of death. To say that it was engraved in letters on stones (3:7) is simply another way of saying that the letter kills (3:6). But this ministry of death came with evident splendor. When Moses came down from Sinai with the tablets of the law, his face radiated from the residual rays of the divine glory (3:7). Paul argues, if glory accompanied something that leads to death, how much more glory will accompany the ministry of the Spirit that leads to life (3:8)?

The Ministry of Condemnation Versus the Ministry of Righteousness (3:9)

In 3:9, Paul identifies Moses' covenant as the ministry of condemnation and contrasts it with the ministry of righteousness. When the people of Israel sinned, Moses could valiantly attempt to intercede on their behalf but was helpless to remove either their guilt (Exod 32:31-33) or his own. The law that he gave them only condemns, which is why Paul can characterize it as a ministry of death (Rom 3:19-20; Gal 3:10). The Spirit, on the other hand, acquits (Rom 5:16, 18; 8:1) because Christ not only intercedes for the condemned (Rom 8:26, 34), his death atones for their sins (Rom 3:21-26; 2 Cor 5:21). The law demands obedience; the Spirit gives it. The law would eliminate sinners by sentencing them to death; the Spirit would illuminate them

²⁶ See also Sir 11:11; Wis 6:18; Pss Sol 14:2; 2 Bar 38:2; and other texts cited in Str-B 3:129-32.

by revealing the glory of the Lord (3:18), the truth of God (4:2), and the promise of the resurrection (4:13-14). If a ministry that could lead only to condemnation possessed glory, how much more glory must the ministry that leads to righteousness possess?

Impermanent Glory Versus Permanent Glory (3:10-11) :

Paul's interpretation of Exodus 34 infers that the glory that accompanied the ministry of Moses was either a fading glory or a glory that was to be annulled. The verb *καταργεῖν* can mean "to fade" or "to disappear" and is translated that way in the RSV, NEB, TEV, and NIV. It can also mean "to nullify," "to annul," or "to pass away." The latter is the meaning it normally has in Paul²⁷ and is the translation employed by the KJV ("to be done away," 3:7; "to abolish," 3:11). In my opinion, Paul plays on the double meaning of this verb to make a further distinction between the ministry of Moses and the ministry of the Spirit. The glory on Moses' face faded (3:7), and for Paul this betokened the fact that the covenant of the law that he presented to Israel was to be annulled (3:11) with the coming of Christ. The covenant of the letter was only transitory (see Gal 3:19-25; Rom 10:4) and can now be identified as "old" (3:14; see Rom 7:6).

Once again, Paul argues *a fortiori* that if the Old Covenant that was to be annulled had glory, how much greater would be the glory of the new, abiding covenant (3:11). This has significant implications for the status of the Old Covenant and its glory. When the new comes, the old is transcended. The gospel with its forgiveness based on grace and direct access to God is God's ultimate word. Lambrecht writes: "When compared with the overwhelming new glory, the so-called glory of the Old Covenant is no glory at all."²⁸ And Plummer remarks: "When the sun is risen, lamps ceased to be of use."²⁹

A Veiled Minister Versus An Unveiled Minister (3:12-15)

Paul now reaches the main contention of his interpretation of Exodus 34. If the ministry of the Spirit has a greater splendor, so do its ministers. He expresses this in 3:12, "Therefore, having such a hope we exercise much boldness" (*παρρησία*).³⁰ This "boldness" is immediately evident as he now audaciously compares himself to Moses.

²⁷ So Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, 203.

²⁸ Lambrecht, "Structure," 356.

²⁹ A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 91.

³⁰ Boldness (*παρρησία*) was the upshot of the coming of the Spirit in Acts (Acts 2:29; 4:13, 29, 31; 28:31). Van Unnik, "'With Unveiled Face,'" 160, notes that boldness was not greatly treasured in the ancient world because it meant "speaking without

Moses ministered with a veil covering the glory reflected in his face; Paul is unveiled, beholding the glory of the Lord and being transformed from one degree of glory to another (3:17).

Paul develops the imagery of the veil from the account of how Moses' face shone with a divine radiance when he left the presence of God on Sinai (Exod 34:29-34). His luminous appearance so terrified the people that they fled from him, but he was able to coax them to return and presented them with the commandments of the Lord. After Moses finished speaking with them, he then placed a veil over his face. The texts does not tell us explicitly why Moses did this,³¹ but Paul's interpretation finds great significance in the inference that Moses habitually³² wore a veil when he met with the people. In 3:7, he notes that the ministry of death came with such splendor "so that the sons of Israel were not able to gaze intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face which was fading." In 3:13, he says that Moses placed a veil over his face, "so that the sons of Israel would not gaze intently on the end of that which was being annulled" (or "fading"). For Paul, this is further proof of the superiority of the New Covenant, but it raises a number of exegetical questions. What exactly is it that was being abolished (or fading)? And why did Moses veil his face?

One prominent view takes the participle in 3:13 (τοῦ καταργουμένου) to mean "to fade" and identifies what was fading as the glory on Moses' face. Moses veiled his face to prevent Israel from seeing that glory wane. Bruce, for example, argues that Moses veiled his face when he left the presence of God so that the Israelites should not see that his was only a fading glory that needed constant recharging.³³ Barrett concludes similarly that Moses veiled his face "that they might not see the glory come to an end and thus be led to disparage Moses as being of no more than temporary importance." He goes on to say: "Moses acted as he did not with a view to concealing the truth but in order to persuade the children of Israel to accept it; they would be more likely to do so if they did not see the end of the glory."³⁴

restraint about the most painful things," "not mincing words." It was, however, the characteristic of the true friend and not the flatterer (see 1 Thess 2:2; Phlm 8; Phil 1:20). As Paul uses the term, "It describes the courage with which he is emboldened, as an apostle, to exercise his ministry openly and without fear" (Furnish, *2 Corinthians*, 231). And Hanson ("Midrash," 15) observes that it required boldness to claim "that God has been uniquely revealed in the human form of Jesus Christ."

³¹ According to Philo, *Vita Mos.* 2.14.70, their eyes could not "stand the dazzling brightness that flashed from him like the rays of the sun." See also Ps.-Philo 12:1.

³² ἐτίθει is imperfect, while the LXX has the aorist ἐπέθηκεν.

³³ F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 121; see also idem, *I & II Corinthians* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 192.

³⁴ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 120. So also W.C. van Unnik, "'With Unveiled Face'," 161.

This interpretation comes up against the fact that the noun "glory" (δόξα) is feminine and the participle (τοῦ καταργουμένου) is either neuter or masculine.³⁵ But aside from that, it attributes some measure of subterfuge on the part of Moses for putting the veil on before the people. If not guilty of outright deceit, he was at least hiding something from them; and it seems most unlikely that Paul would have construed Moses' actions so negatively.³⁶

It is my view that Paul uses the glory that faded from Moses' face as a figure for the Mosaic covenant that would eventually be annulled. The key for understanding how Paul interprets Moses' intentions is the verb ἀτενίζειν, "to gaze intently," which occurs only in vv 7 and 13 in Paul's letters. Unfortunately, it is usually translated "see" (RSV) or "look" (KJV). But if it is translated with its usual meaning, "to gaze intently," it can be interpreted to mean that Moses did not simply want to prevent them from seeing the glory that was radiating from his face dim, he wanted to keep them from fixing their attention on something that was only passing; namely, the covenant that Paul has described as written on tablets of stone (3:3,7), as something that kills (3:6), as a ministry of death and condemnation (3:7, 9), and as something that is being annulled (3:11). The people could easily mistake what was to be annulled as something permanent and as their ulti-

³⁵ C. J. A. Hickling ("The Sequence of Thought on II Corinthians, Chapter Three," *NTS* 21 [1974] 391) contends that the Israelites would not have been surprised that Moses' radiance began to fade the longer he was away from the source of the glory, which makes it unlikely that Moses would have tried to hide that fact. Later rabbis declared, however, that the brightness remained until his death (see Str-B 515).

³⁶ In this interpretation, Moses prevents Israel from seeing the truth by veiling his face, and the result is that their minds become hardened. In 4:4, Paul claims that Satan blinds minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ which would imply that Moses acted like Satan by causing the blindness of Israel. Even as bold as Paul is in his interpretation, this could hardly have been Paul's conclusion.

Furnish (2 *Corinthians*, 232) contends that Moses veiled his face "in order to keep the Israelites from seeing the extinction of the splendor that was being annulled." This, he claims, explains why Moses was so timid. It was not because he attempted to deceive the people but because he knew that his ministry was destined to pass away.

Many other views have been proposed to explain the significance of the veiling. One interpretation, worthy of serious consideration, contends that Moses hid his face for reverential reasons because he did not want to profane the glory of God that was too sacred for human gaze (Windisch, *Zweite Korintherbrief*, 119; Hickling, "Sequence," 391). The problem with this view is that Paul does not draw any special attention to its sacredness but to the fact that it was being annulled or fading. A. T. Hanson ("The Midrash in II Corinthians 3: A Reconsideration," *JSNT* 9 [1980] 3-28~ interprets the veiling to signify that Moses viewed the pre-existent Christ in the tabernacle; and the reason he put on the veil "was to prevent the messianic glory from being seen by the Israelites." This was because Moses knew it was part of the divine plan that Israel would be blinded and not believe in the Messiah so that it would give opportunity for the Gentiles to believe (13).

mate hope because of the glory that attended the giving of the law. Paul assumes in his interpretation that Moses recognized that his ministry of the letter would be annulled in spite of its great glory and attempted to prevent the people from focusing on what was only impermanent. Therefore, in Paul's view, Moses did not don the veil to con the people but to try to prevent them from riveting their attention only on what was destined to be transcended.³⁷ This best explains the "but" (ἀλλά) in 3:14: "but their minds were hardened" (compare Deut 29:4; Isa 6:10; 29:10). It indicates that Moses' attempt failed. The people misconceived things, and they remain deluded as evidenced by the fact that they still keep their gaze focused only on the letter.

Paul applies the veil figure to explain the unbelief of the majority of Jews in his day. The veil now becomes a blindfold.³⁸ When they read the old covenant, they do not recognize that it is old. They still look to Moses and not to Christ as the final say because they fail to see that the coming of Christ extinguishes whatever glory Moses had. They fail to recognize that Christ is the end of the law (Rom 10:4), that he has inaugurated a New Covenant, and that he embodies the true glory of God. They see Christ only from the perspective of flesh (κατὰ σάρκα, 5:16) and do not recognize that in him everything that is old passes away (5:17).

Paul's conviction that salvation only comes through Christ governs his interpretation of Exodus 34. As a way of salvation, the ministry of the letter has been abrogated. As promise, it has been fulfilled. As something temporary, it has been replaced by that which is permanent. The new covenant that was prophesied in Jeremiah 31 has arrived and replaced the old covenant, and the veil "is abolished" in Christ (καταργεῖν, 3:14).³⁹ For Paul, the law be properly read and understood only in Christ because only in Christ can one see that the

³⁷ See J.-F. Collange, *Enigmes de la deuxième epître de Paul aux Corinthiens* (SNTSMS 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 96-97; and R. P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Waco, TX: Word, 1986) 68, who writes, "the fading glow on Moses' face betokened the temporary nature of nomistic religion. But the Jews, both in Moses' day and ἄχρι γὰρ τῆς σήμερον ('until the present day'), have shown their obtuseness by looking to Moses as the final embodiment of God's salvation."

³⁸ See Rom 11:7-8, 25, where Paul states that Israel has been given a spirit of stupor and that a hardening (πώρωσις) has come upon some of them. The veil image may be derived from the practice of veiling the Torah scrolls in their niche in the synagogue and/or from the veiling of the head in prayer.

³⁹ Even though the verb καταργεῖν is used elsewhere in the passage for the annulment of the Old Covenant (3:7, 11, 13) and a different verb for removing a veil (περιαιρεῖν) appears in 3:16, the "veil" and not "the Old Covenant" is the subject of the verb, because "the same veil" is the subject of the previous clause, and there is no indication that the subject has changed. The present tense implies that it is in process of being abolished. If it were referring to the Old Covenant, one would expect the aorist, since it has already been abolished with the coming of Christ.

New Covenant has indeed replaced the Old. But Paul has identified all of this as the ministry of the Spirit (3:8), and he now turns to the role of the Spirit in unveiling the truth and transforming darkness into light (see 4:6).

The Lord is the Spirit (3:15-18)

Paul affords a note of hope by asserting that the veil/blindfold can be removed by turning toward the Lord (3:16). This is his interpretation of Exod 34:34. As Moses took off the veil literally when he went in before the Lord, so this will happen figuratively to anyone who comes to the Lord. It is much debated among scholars as to whom Paul means by "the Lord,"⁴⁰ but I take the expression "turn to the Lord" as simply another way of referring to conversion, which entailed belief in Jesus as Lord (see 1 Cor 6:17; 12:3, where "the Lord" refers to Christ). In 3:14, Paul says that the veil is annulled in Christ; and it would seem logical to assume that in 3:16 he also has Christ in mind when he says, "whoever turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." Verse 17 continues: "Now the Lord is Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."⁴¹ By specifically referring to the Spirit at this point, Paul returns to the central theme of the passage, the ministry of the Spirit. When one believes, one enters into the

⁴⁰ "The Lord" has been taken to mean God, Christ, or the Spirit. Those who argue that "Lord" refers to God contend that 3:16 is a citation of Exod 34:34 which has Yahweh in view and point to a similar expression in 1 Thess 1:9 which clearly refers to God. See, for example, J. D. G. Dunn, "2 Corinthians III. 17- The Lord is the Spirit," *NTS* 21 (1970) 309-20. The problem with this view is that it implies that Paul believed that the Jews had not turned to God. As Paul saw things, this was not their failure. He affirms that Israel had a zeal for God but claims that it was unenlightened precisely because they had not believed in Christ (Rom 10:1-4).

Those who argue for the Spirit point to the emphasis on the Spirit in the context and the statement in 3:17 that the Lord is the Spirit. See, for example, E. Wong, "The Lord is the Spirit," *ETL* 61 (1985) 48-72. But the idea of turning to the Spirit never occurs elsewhere in Paul's writings.

One must be mindful when interpreting this passage that Paul is not concerned here, as Hooker, "Beyond," 301, points out, "with the niceties of trinitarian theology" (compare Rom 8:9-14).

⁴¹ Some take "the Lord" to be an explanation of who "the Lord" is in Exod 34:34, the passage that Paul is interpreting (compare Gal 4:25;- 1 Cor 10:4); and the NEB attempts to capture this by translating it: "Now the Lord of whom this passage speaks is the Spirit." But E. Schweizer, "*πνεῦμα*," *TDNT* 6.419, argues that the Lord refers to the exalted Christ, and Spirit refers to "the mode of existence" of the Lord. This best explains the expression, "Spirit of the Lord" in 3:18; it depicts "the power" in which the Lord encounters the community. Schweizer writes, "In so far as Christ is regarded in His significance for the community, in His powerful action upon it, He can be identified with the *pneuma*. In so far as He is also Lord over His power, He can be differentiated from it, just as the I can be distinguished from the power which goes out from it."

sphere of the Spirit (Gal 3:2); and when one reads the law with the aid of the Spirit, one is able to penetrate beyond the letter and perceive its true significance as pointing to Christ. The Spirit leads one to see the necessity of giving oneself over to the ministry of reconciliation, and this is precisely what happened to Paul himself after his encounter with Christ. When the light shone in his heart, his benighted vision cleared, and he saw the face of God in the Son of God (see 4:4). As is clear from these verses, he also began to read the law in a radically different way, and one can understand why on five different occasions the synagogue subjected him to the discipline of the lash (11:24).

Paul has stressed the Spirit's operation on hearts versus that of ink on stone tablets (3:3), the Spirit's giving of life versus the letter's meting out a death sentence (3:6), and now he emphasizes the Spirit's freedom. In the immediate context, the freedom he is talking about is freedom from the veil. In the age of the Spirit, there is no call for veils, which is what marks the contrast between Paul and Moses. Paul does not veil himself or his gospel but makes things evident and spreads the knowledge of God (2:14; 4:6) for all to see (3:2). The uncovered face of Paul that looks up to God also turns uncovered to others. Freedom therefore would be parallel to the boldness in 3:12.

But freedom also entails the freedom of access to God for all who turn to the Lord. In 3:18, Paul certifies that "we all," with unveiled face, are able to behold in a glass⁴² the glory of the Lord (contrast Exod 40:35; 1 Kgs 8:11). The "we all" contrasts with the one Moses. In the age of the Spirit, no one has to wait outside the tent while another enters into the presence of God only to get a glimpse of a veiled reflection of God's glory that is destined to fade away. In contrast to the one who reads God's revelation in the Old Covenant with a veiled mind, the Christian sees firsthand the self-revelation of God in the person of Christ (see 4:4,6). What is more, believers are changed into the likeness they see.⁴³ As Moses radiated the glory of God, so do all

⁴² For a summary of the lexical evidence for *κατοπτριζόμενοι*, see J. Dupont, "Le Chretien, miroir de la grace divine, d'apres 2 Cor. 3, 18," *RB* 46 (1949) 393-411. In the usage of the period, the word meant "behold"; but Dupont argues in spite of this that Paul uses the word idiosyncratically to mean "to reflect" as a mirror does. This would mean that Christians reflect the glory of God just as the unveiled Moses did. But the contrast is not between Christians and Moses but between Christians who behold the glory of God and Jews who cannot because their hearts are veiled. Paul uses the word "to behold as in a glass" because in this world what we see is only the reflected image of God. The direct vision of God will come only at the end when we will see "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). See J. Lambrecht, "Transformation in 2 Cor 3,18," *Bib* 64 (1983) 243-49.

⁴³ See Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:21; Mark 13:43. J. A. Fitzmyer ("Glory Reflected on the Face of Christ [2 Cor 3:7-4:6] and a Palestinian Jewish Motif," *TS* 42

who turn toward the Lord. But Paul notes that this transformation is the work of the Spirit (literally "from the Lord of the Spirit," 3:18), and this means that there are significant differences from what happened to Moses and what happens to Christians. First, the changed condition of Christians need not and should not be concealed because the glory they reflect is a permanent one and should be a permanent testimony to the world. Second, the glory does not fade, as it did with Moses, but only increases from one degree of glory to another. One must be careful, however, not to think of this glorious transformation in terms of a human appraisal of what glory is. This was his bone of contention with his rivals. We are transformed into the likeness of Christ, but Christ was crucified! Paul asserts that Christ's glory can be seen in him, but it can be seen precisely in his afflictions, persecutions, and the wasting away of his outer nature (4:7-18). For Paul, the glory of the Lord is paradoxically manifested in his own life by the fact that he always carries in his body the death of Jesus (4:10).

Paul's Ministry (4:1-6)

In 4:1-6, Paul sums up his defense: "Having such a ministry we do not lose heart, . . . but in open manifestation of the truth commend ourselves to the conscience of every person before God" (4:1-2). In the preceding verses he has contrasted his own ministry with that of Moses. Moses did not act boldly but was timid, as is clear from his use of a veil. Paul is bold and faces all openly. Moses' ministry was to be annulled; Paul has God's ultimate word which is permanent. The glory of Moses was reserved for him alone; the glory of the Lord is bestowed on all who turn to the Lord. Moses' transfiguration was only temporary; the transfiguration of Christians will only increase from one degree of glory to another.⁴⁴ Now, Paul briefly contrasts himself

[1981] 630-44) shows that "transfiguration by vision" need not be derived from a Greco-Roman religious motif (compare Apuleius *Metamorphoses* XI) but was at home in a Palestinian environment, namely, Qumran.

⁴⁴L. Gaston, "Paul and the Torah in 2 Corinthians 3," *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) 151-68, is an example of many who are less than comfortable with this apparent dismissal of Judaism by Paul. This uncompromising insistence on Christ as the absolute truth does not sit well with a pluralistic age. Paul was not interested in fostering better relations with his fellow Jews but converting them, and he was not averse to disturbing their religious sensitivities. The fact is that he gave his life for his kindred in the flesh, suffering the synagogue discipline of the 39 lashes, and venturing to Jerusalem, against the advice of all who loved him, in hopes that he might save some of them (Rom 11:14). The fears of his friends proved to be well-founded, and Paul was eventually martyred for the faith and because of his concern for his brethren (Rom 9:1-5). He did this because of his conviction that they were dead wrong about God and about Christ. Christ was not an

with those who employ disgraceful (literally, "the secrets of shame"), guileful, and underhanded means and who adulterate the word of God to gain followers (4:2; see 11:3-4, 13-15). He commends himself as one who does not preach himself but Jesus Christ as Lord (4:5) and who has humbled himself as the Corinthians' slave for the sake of Christ (4:5). But he will not be servile when it comes to the glory of his ministry. In this he will boast--a boast that rests in the Lord. He does not do this to inflate himself but to reestablish the mutual confidence he formerly shared with the Corinthians. He hopes that they will now understand him better and recognize his sufficiency in the ministry of the Spirit.

alternative plan for Gentiles, but the only way for all humankind. Some today might label this as dogmatic intolerance, but it is not anti-semitism nor anti-Judaism. Paul fervently believes that the true hopes of Judaism have been fulfilled by Christ. To hold fast to the old would be like insisting on trying to cross the Atlantic Ocean on a decayed Santa Maria when free tickets are available for a flight on the Concorde.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College
4010 Gaston Ave.
Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu