

The Theological Heart of 2 Corinthians
(Or The Heart of Paul)

2 Corinthians 2:14-3:18

It has been recognised that 2:14-3:18 is the theological heart of the epistle.¹ It provides the framework for understanding what was written in the second letter. As we have noted in the previous study, the mind of Paul is Christocentric and formed when he was engaged in ministry with a stubborn and stiff-necked people. Dealing with the Corinthian situation was extremely difficult and frustrating, yet he was aware of the victory in Christ. This victory is not a mere theological acknowledgment, but a real consciousness of the work of God in his ministry. This is the Christocentric mind of Paul, indeed the heart of Paul's ministry. And so, he begins this section in this way.

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? ¹⁷ For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.

Just as the lament of the psalmist was turned into praise, so as Paul reflected on his own situation before God, he saw the triumph of God and cannot help but break out in praise – 'thanks be to God'. His frustration with the Corinthians was no longer an issue. The mind of Paul no longer asked the question, 'What can I do to make it better?' Instead, his eyes were firmly fixed on Christ because it is in Christ that God 'always leads us in triumphal procession'. He was using the military analogy of the returning warrior leading his troops and the spoils of war in a procession through the city streets and marching right up to the central 'headquarters'.

Who is leading the triumphal procession? Answer: God. He does it in Christ. Perhaps we can liken this to the 'general' marching in front with his troops and prisoners returning in triumph.

Who is God leading in this procession? Answer: us. We may see ourselves as His troops, but we are really His conquered rebels. Paul does not make clear here. We were at enmity with God and it is Christ who conquers our hardened hearts and leads us, the conquered rebels, in His victory parade. That is why Paul often used the term, 'slave' of Christ.

Paul's Christocentric focus is evident here as always. This victory is 'in Christ'. It is not just 'through Christ' as if Christ is the agent and He did not matter after that. There is a clear sense of the ever presence of Christ in this victory, a point that is often missed.

Paul makes much of the term, 'aroma' or 'fragrance' in relating to the knowledge of God which is the goal of his ministry - 'the fragrance that comes from knowing him' (v. 14). Paul is here making use of an Old Testament analogy. The sacrifice made to the Lord is 'a pleasing odour' (Ex. 29:17-18)

This fragrance spreads or is made known 'through us' (v. 14). Paul has talked of the ministry of the gospel using Old Testament sacrificial terminology. (Phil. 2:17)

In using the term 'fragrance', Paul is referring to the suffering of Christ as the sacrifice to God for redemption. Paul also linked this suffering with us in using the phrase, 'through us'. It is his sense of identification with Christ on the cross. The suffering of Christ is his suffering. In his argument in the letter, 'the legitimacy of his ministry (is) based on his suffering as the vehicle through which the presence and power of the Spirit are mediated to God's people'.² His continued use of the term, 'we are the aroma of Christ to God' supports this understanding.

The phrase 'the fragrance that comes from knowing him' (v. 14) is better translated, 'the fragrance of the knowledge of God'. What is the subject of 'spread' or 'is making known'? Answer: God. It is God who makes Himself known. You cannot know me through a third channel. Your knowledge of me comes from

¹ S Hafemann, 'Paul's Use of the OT', 246.

² S Hafemann, 247.

the ‘I-thou’ relationship. So, it is God who spreads or makes known the knowledge of Himself. But a partnership is involved here. It is God working through us. It is not an ‘either – or’ situation but a togetherness or union.

This aroma of the knowledge of Christ is the aroma of Christ because it is the aroma of His sacrifice. We are that aroma as we are in Christ and therefore identified with His suffering and sacrifice. As we have noted above, we carry the reproaches of Christ in our ministry. We do not need to alter our message in any way when we approach ‘those who are being saved’ and ‘those who are perishing’. We are both an encouragement to those who are being saved as well as a judgement to those who refuse this grace. The message of the gospel does both. In other words, there is another factor or force at work when the message of the gospel is preached. It is the sin or rebellion of humanity. We do not need to alter the message of Christ to make it ‘acceptable’ or ‘understandable’ to those who do not want to hear. The rebellion of humanity has affected the hearing ability. (Mark 8:17-18)

Our message may well be ‘a fragrance from death to death’ as well as ‘a fragrance from life to life’ (v. 16). And so, Paul asked the rhetorical question, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ Answer: none of us. Paul did not give the answer, but this is implied in the context. He answered this in the next chapter – ‘our competence is from God’.

Our concern as ministers of the word or message of Christ is to be true to the word. We are not wheelers and dealers with the message of the cross. Whether our hearers accept it or not is not the primary issue. The message needs to be true according to the word of God. I have often been labelled ‘technical’ or ‘philosophical’. I feel I need to argue the way I come to the point that I want to make. That is better than to be labelled a ‘peddler’ in the word of God. Of course, we need to modify our style or presentation according to the audience before us, but the content must be the same as ‘we are not peddlers (traders or adulterers) of God’s word’. Paul made this point in his first letter to the Corinthians. (1 Cor. 9:19-23)

We must not confuse the means (1 Cor. 9:22) with the message. We are the means God uses to bring the message of reconciliation. We do this with all the gifts that God has given to us – our makeup, cultural background, training, the world we came from and our understanding of the world around us, etc. While we may use these gifts to fashion the way we present the word, yet our manner of speaking must be characterised by the following. We speak (v. 17)

as persons of sincerity	not peddlers of God’s word
as persons commissioned by God	in Christ
standing in the sight of God	in Christ

Ministers of the New Covenant
(3:1-18)

We noted that Paul put the knowledge of Christ in the language of sacrifice – the aroma of the knowledge of Christ. In short, what he is saying is that we can only know Christ through the cross. The cross is central (see Forsyth, *The Centrality of the Cross*). That is the start of Paul’s theological heart.

Paul has written to the Corinthians previously (1 Cor 9:1-2) about his status as an apostle and he was aware that he might be bragging about himself again. He is saying this to pre-empt what is to follow, i.e. are documents of one’s status that necessary? Or is any document about another that necessary?

Letters of recommendation were in practice in the days of the early church (Acts 9:2, 22:5). Saul sought those letters to authenticate his persecution of the church. It is also the practice in our days as well, perhaps even more so with our increasing legality. However, Paul says that he does not need to continue that practice, whether it is from them or to them, because there is a personal relationship developed between him and the Corinthian church. He is saying this to differentiate the living and dynamic relationship in the Spirit from the legality of the world. He has come to know them in a personal and real way. From this he delivers the body

of his argument. The gist of his argument is this. It is not what was written in the past, but what is now in the personal engagement with one another that matters. The reason for this is that central to Paul's thinking is the fact that we are now in Christ, in the ever presence of His person, and everyone, as part of the new creation, is directed by and in the person of Christ and His Spirit.

A new and dynamic relationship is here. It is no longer what was written but what is living and ongoing in a very real personal relationship, a union of hearts in Christ. The heart is the place where the Spirit works. We may say that we have won the heart of our fair lady (or man) but that is in the realm of the *eros* and *philos*. Paul is talking here of the creation of a new heart – a work by 'the Spirit of the living God', an expression found only here. This new letter is prepared or composed by us but it is not written with ink and not written by us too. This new letter is prepared by us but is written by the Spirit of the living God. Paul is here making a comparison to the writing of the Ten Commandments by the finger of the God on two tablets of stone. (Ex. 31:18)

The finger of God is the finger of the Spirit of the living God, the Spirit being the Person doing the writing or engraving in the heart. Therefore, this letter is now engraved not on stone as with the old commandments or the ten words, but the knowledge of Christ is chiselled by the Spirit into the 'tablets of human hearts.' In using this reference from the Old Testament, Paul has changed the 'finger of God' to 'Spirit of the living God', and 'tablets of stone' to 'tablets of human hearts.' That is the real work in a person when one comes to God. It is the work of the Spirit and He does it through us. So, the contrast is between 'heart/Spirit' and 'stone/Mosaic law'. Therefore, the question, 'Who is sufficient for these things?'

The kind of relationship that Paul is talking about here is not the sociological, but the spiritual, i.e. of the spirit-kind, through the ministry of the word. The Corinthian Christians are 'a letter of Christ', a letter written by Christ. We participate in this by 'preparing' (composing) this letter. This is our ministry and is only the preparatory part of the greater ministry of God, just like John the Baptist. This preparation comes through the ministry of the proclamation of the cross in pointing humanity to the Father through the reconciliation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-19). It is easy to have a ministry where we draw people to ourselves, but it is a different kind of ministry when we are instrumental in having people drawn to the Father through Christ. Of course, we are not sufficient or adequate for the task.

You are the letter of Christ with the words engraved in the heart. Paul is making similarities and contrasts in this verse. The points to note are,

Ministry by us in partnership with the ministry by the Spirit of the living God.

Written not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God.

Engraved not on tablets of stone but in the tablets of human hearts.

Our confidence is in the work of the Triune God and not in any ability that we can claim as our own. Our competence is from God. He has made us competent to be 'ministers of a new covenant', i.e. the new creation. How did this process happen? It is 'through Christ in the presence of God'. Our union into the Triune Godhead is essential. This is the work of Christ and the Spirit. It is not 'we' and 'God', but participation in the Triune union. This is the framework for competency in ministry. Paul did not go into some kind of 'outcome' rhetoric but is solely focussed on the participation in the Triune union – a theocentric framework. It is the work of the Spirit who gives life. It is a living ministry. It is not static. It is a ministry in Christ and in the Spirit.

God has 'made us sufficient (competent) to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. The 'letter' that is referred to here is not clear, but is most likely the 'old covenant'. The basis of ministry is not on the Mosaic law, but the new work of Christ and the Spirit – the new covenant. The law judges. It does not have the power to transform us.

Our ministry is not static. It is not 'of letter', i.e. of the past. What is written is about what is past. We cannot write of the present or of the future. The present is happening before us and when it is written down, it is over.

The future is yet to happen. The Spirit is the author of history, the present and the future. ‘The letter kills’. Basing our ministry on the past will kill it. We will be only chasing our tails. The ministry of the Spirit is alive and takes us into the future. It is our gaze into the future promised by God that determines our present ministry. This is our ministry – or rather our participation in the Spirit’s ministry.

William Arthur writing over a hundred years ago also recognised the truth of what Paul is saying here.

This was what he had before placed in their view – the filling all the earth with the news of grace, news that repentance and pardon were opened to men by the power of his atonement. *We have no hint that he ever spake, during the forty days, of other kingdom, royalty or reign.* Not to rule over cities, not to speculate on the designs of the Father and the destinies of the Jew, but to go into the whole world, tell every creature the story of Christ, was to be their princely work. To found a kingdom not over men’s persons, but ‘within’ their souls; a kingdom not of provinces, but of ‘righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost’; a kingdom to be spread not by the arms of a second Joshua, but by the ‘witness’ of the human voice; a kingdom the power of which would not lie in force or policy, or signs observed in heaven, but in a spiritual power imparted by the Holy Ghost and operating in superhuman utterances of heavenly truth – this was their embassy. For this were they to be indued with power from on high.³

Moses and the Veil

(The Old Testament background)

In this passage (2 Cor. 3:7-18), Paul again was using the context of the Old Testament to continue his argument. Paul had already referred to the law written on tablets of stone. Here he went on to refer to the glory and the veil on Moses’ face to further his case. (Ex. 34:29-35)

We can understand the radiant face of Moses after he had spoken with the Lord. It was a reflected glory. But why were Aaron and the Israelites afraid to see this radiance and why did Moses put the veil on? The passage did not give an explanation. Perhaps it might have been the memory of the incident of the golden calf. Their disobedience prevented them from looking straight at the radiance. The shining skin of Moses is a transformation – ‘from one degree of glory to another’. Moses had been through a transformation. They had not.

There is another reason. The veil hides the identity and authority of the person. It is like a mask that one wears. To see the veil is to see the person beyond the veil – a sense of transcendence. Moses was ‘invaded’ by an outside power. He had an authority conferred on him by God. It was a transcendent power. The veil separates him from the social and the cultic.

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

The preceding section (3:1-6) together with this (3:7-11) form the core of Paul’s argument.

This argument is based on the account of the radiance from Moses’ face after having been given the Ten Commandments. The Israelites could not look at the radiant face of Moses, a reflection of the Lord’s glory. So, Moses put a veil on. It was not a matter that bothered Moses as he took the veil off when he went in before the Lord. The problem was the Israelites. They could not behold the reflected glory of the Lord.

These few verses are best read in tabular form because Paul uses a ‘if then ... how much more’ type of construction to make his point. He is making a comparison of the old covenant with the new. It will make it better understood when read in tabular form.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,	⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?
⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation,	the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.
¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. ¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory,	much more will what is permanent have glory.

³ William Arthur, *The Tongue of Fire*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001. First published (by Methodist Book Concern, 1894), 5-6.

When Paul places such great emphasis on the new work of the Spirit, he is aware that the work of God in a previous era is not to be discounted. It is not a ‘do-away-with-the-old’ mentality. The old was glorious in its time and setting, but the old had passed away and something more glorious and permanent has arrived. The creation is moving towards the fulfilment in Christ and each stage is preparatory for the next. My graduation from university was a great event and it will remain so in my memory, but it was preparatory for the next stage of my career. If I had continued to dwell on it and not move on, then it would have stultified my future.

Paul has also put out three sets of contrast to highlight the difference between the old and the new.

death – Spirit
 condemnation – righteousness
 what has been lost – the permanent

Paul is writing in these verses with reference to the law of Moses – ‘letters on stone tablets’. Paul does not downplay the law. The law is holy and good. (Rom. 7:12)

The problem is with the people of God and their indwelling sin. The reason why the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face was their sin. The natural eyes cannot behold the glory of God. The natural intellect cannot understand the things of God. It requires the illumination of the Spirit.

Paul’s argument could really conclude here. However, he sums it all up in the remaining verses.

The Veiling	The Unveiling
¹³ ... Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end.	
¹⁴ ... when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted,	¹⁴ ... because only through Christ is it taken away.
¹⁵ ... whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their hearts.	¹⁶ but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (Whenever there is a turning to the Lord, the veil is removed).
	¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, ... For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

In using the imagery from history, Paul likened the veiling as a ‘hardening of the mind’ (v. 14), a refusal to take off the veil and to look beyond. There are two issues here with the veil.

1. One is that people could not look upon the radiance on Moses’ face (v. 7).
2. The other is that it prevented the people from looking upon the fading glory (v. 13) and be discouraged. The veil was there to enable the Israelites to look away to something even greater. But they would not because of the hardening of the mind.

It is like coming home with the news of a successful exam or a successful stage of life. The tendency is to gaze at that as if that is it. No, the end of each stage is simply the trigger to catapult to the next. And that is the significance of the end of each successful stage of life. Otherwise, we will fail to see the purpose of God. The purpose of God is not just the end of each of the successful stages of life, but the ongoing journey as long as He gives us breath.

How does one understand v. 16, ‘but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed’? R. Martin suggests that this verse should be read as a general statement as it is difficult to define the subject of the ‘turning’. It should read like this, ‘Whenever there is a turning to the Lord, the veil is removed’. This reading takes away the doer of the verb ‘turn’ as if this is the primary action in removing the veil. It is Christ who sets the veil aside (v. 14) and the unveiled face is the work of the Spirit (v. 18). So, it is now through Christ and the Spirit that we have the veil removed to look at the surpassing glory and it is not something in the past. We are being transformed ‘from one degree of glory to another’.