

A MODEL
OF
CHRISTIAN
MATURITY

An Exposition of
2 Corinthians 10–13

D. A. CARSON



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To Pete and Gail Golz

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Preface

LOVE THE APOSTLE PAUL. Some people cannot understand my love. They find Paul angular, merely intellectual, intimidating, even arrogant. My response, firmly stated, is that they do not know him.

Despite my love for Paul, I have written very little about him. For one reason or another, my attention during the past dozen years has largely been devoted to Matthew and John, or to broader New Testament themes. Nevertheless I have taught the Pauline corpus to successive generations of seminary students and preached through several of his epistles to various congregations. Preparing for such assignments has gradually exposed me to substantial parts of the vast literature that has grown up around the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of Paul. I do not claim to have mastered all of that literature, but I have come to know Paul a little better. And truly to know him is to love him.

Arguably, the most intense chapters in all of his writings are those studied here, viz., 2 Corinthians 10–13. Certainly they reveal more about Paul himself—his sufferings, values, motives, wrestlings, and self-perceptions—than any other four chapters of comparable length; yet far from promoting egocentricity, they point unerringly

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to Jesus Christ and to what it means to be a Christian. Moreover, this short part of Scripture speaks volumes to the modern church, especially in the West; so I resolved with God's help to devote the next volume in this series to these chapters.

Most of the material in this book has been the stuff of sermons in churches and conferences in Canada, America, and England. It has been worked over afresh for the printed page; but I have retained the movement from exegesis to application that serves as one of the markers distinguishing sermon from lecture. My hope is that this will encourage Christians, not only to read the Bible in its own historical and theological context, but to apply it with sensitivity and discernment to their own lives and to the modern church. I hope as well that some readers will come to love Paul as I do. There is little danger that such love would ever prove idolatrous; for to know Paul is to learn he puts "no stumbling block in anyone's path" (2 Cor. 6:3) and to discover that imitating him points us away from him to imitating the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). If that is what we begin to learn, Paul himself would be overjoyed.

I am very grateful to Marty Irwin for her customary skill and courtesy in transforming my manuscript into the millions of electrical blips the computer understands, and thus preparing the work for publication.

Soli Deo gloria.

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This is not a technical commentary, and so I have avoided the detailed references of that genre. When the two earlier volumes in the series were published, however, several readers suggested I might provide a list of English commentaries. I have adopted that suggestion, and have occasionally quoted choice passages from them, identifying the work by the author's name only. By and large I have avoided explicit reference to foreign-language works, journal

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articles, and the like, even though I have frequently interacted with their substance. There were two foreign-language commentaries I could not bring myself to eliminate from the following list of cited sources.

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Orientation to 2 Corinthians 10–13

WE INCREASINGLY INHABIT A TIME AND PLACE in Western history when humility is perceived to be a sign of weakness; when meekness is taken for a vice, not a virtue; when puff is more important than substance; when leadership, even in the church, frequently has more to do with politics, pizzazz, and showmanship, or with structure and hierarchy, than with spiritual maturity and conformity to Jesus Christ; when the budget is thought to be a more important indicator of ecclesiastical success than prayerfulness and when loose talk of spiritual experience wins an instant following, even when that talk is mingled with a scarcely concealed haughtiness that has learned neither humility nor tears. To Christians hungry to understand and repent of these evils, 2 Corinthians 10–13 speaks with rare power and passion.

These chapters are among the most emotionally intense of all that the apostle Paul wrote. Partly for that reason, they are also among the most difficult. His language is frequently passionate, his rhetorical questions emotive, his sequence of thought compressed,

his syntax broken (as a glance at the various translations of, say, 2 Cor. 13:2 readily suggests!). Wisdom therefore dictates that we scout the text ahead of us; and that is the purpose of this chapter. Some readers may prefer to skip immediately to chapter 2, but a reading of the exposition without adequate knowledge of the background may prove unnecessarily frustrating.

We raise two questions:

A. Why Focus on 2 Corinthians 10–13?

1. *Because these chapters most clearly reveal the heart and mind of the apostle Paul.* More generally, of course, we could say it is important to study these chapters just because they constitute part of the Word of God; and it is difficult to imagine that someone who has taken the first steps toward loving God with heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:30) would not want to absorb as much of God's Word as possible. In addition, of course, these chapters contain several well-known passages that have provided comfort and encouragement to countless generations of Christians. The "thorn in the flesh" passage (2 Cor. 12:1–10) springs to mind most insistently, with its startling promise, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9)—a promise heralded in many a hymn and chorus. But there are of course many other parts of Scripture to learn, and each has its own collection of gems. What makes this passage unique is the clarity with which it reveals the heart and mind of the apostle Paul.

This is no small gain, and our joy in finding it cannot be ridiculed as the historian's delight in antiquarian detail. Whether one acknowledges it or not, a great deal of what we learn comes by imitating someone else. For that reason Paul does not hesitate to tell his converts to imitate him, inasmuch as he imitates Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:6; cf. Eph. 5:1; 1 Thess. 2:14; Heb. 6:12). Close to the heart of the business of discipling another

in the Christian faith is the self-discipline of serving as a model to the apprentice. Actions do not necessarily speak more loudly than words; but they usually do. In 2 Corinthians 10–13 we can see at a distance of nearly two thousand years, not only what Paul taught, but also how he lived; and his example still helps thoughtful Christians to live in greater conformity to the supreme pattern, the Lord Jesus himself.

At a superficial level, we learn from these chapters far more about Paul's sufferings than we do from the book of Acts. Luke tells us of one shipwreck; Paul informs us (2 Cor. 11:25) of three others that took place before the one mentioned in Acts. Luke never mentions the Jewish floggings Paul received; Paul enumerates five such beatings (v. 24). Luke rather dryly narrates Paul's escape from Damascus (Acts 9:23–25), apparently seeing in the event something of God's gracious providence; Paul looks back on the same experience with a profound sense of shame (2 Cor. 11:30–33). Yet these and other bits of information are not superficial after all, for they enable us to appreciate a side of apostleship we are prone to overlook: its immense capacity to suffer for Jesus's sake.

That prompts us to consider the second feature of Paul's life brought to sharp focus here—his style of leadership, the manner in which he exercised his apostolic authority. Here is a Paul who can threaten (2 Cor. 13:2), explain (12:10), love (11:11), rebuke (12:11), and even use sarcasm (v. 16). But when? And why? Are such apostolic tools reflections of a lordly authority, or of a servant of Christ who is reluctant to use the full power with which God has equipped him? In what sense does Paul stand as a normative example for Christian leadership today?

Certainly another area worthy of the most scrupulous emulation is Paul's handling of boasting. This is so central a theme here that we shall return to it repeatedly. For now it is sufficient to say that Paul is normally very reticent to speak about the wonderful things God performs through him or reveals to him. His axiom is,

“Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord” (2 Cor. 10:17). Nevertheless, in these chapters we find Paul boasting, even though he is intensely embarrassed to be forced into such talk (e.g., 11:16–18). What prompts him to take these steps? In what ways does modern Christian self-promotion emulate Paul in this matter, and in what ways do we diverge from him?

Finally, Paul warns the Corinthian church about the dangers of false leadership. If the Corinthians could be deceived by people whom Paul characterizes as “false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (2 Cor. 11:13), may we not be similarly deceived? What perspectives will preserve us from this danger? How should we apply to ourselves (as Paul applied to the Corinthians) his frightening demand, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves” (13:5)?

Knitting together all these concerns, yet going beyond them, is the apostolic example as a man under fire. Perhaps one of the most difficult charges a mature Christian leader may face is the double-barreled barb that he lacks credentials and effectiveness while exercising too much authority. The charge, of course, may in some cases be valid; but if not, it is notoriously difficult to answer. If a leader replies to the first part of the criticism by listing his credentials and service, his critics may respond by leaning on the second: “Ah, see, didn’t we tell you? He is so arrogant he keeps talking about himself.” If, on the other hand, the leader downplays his significance in order to disprove the charge of arrogance, his critics may always reply, “There’s the problem; he has no real leadership potential.” With just such a combination Paul is charged, only in his case the array of accusations is even more complex. His letters, his opponents say, are weighty, although in person he amounts to little (2 Cor. 10:10). How then shall Paul respond by letter? If he says little, he will not be able to tackle the nest of problems; if he says much, his strong letter will be readily dismissed as typical. He is charged with being an inferior apostle (11:5); but if he lists

his credentials, he will find himself boasting on the grounds of unhealthy comparisons between himself and others—a practice he condemns (10:12). He is accused of not being willing to receive support from the Corinthian church (11:7–8)—and is also charged with surreptitiously diverting funds gathered for Christians in Jerusalem to line his own pockets (see comments on 12:16).

Probably Paul would not even have bothered to answer these and other charges had not the gospel itself been at stake. The interlopers who were leading the Corinthian church astray were not only personally ambitious, they were preaching what Paul discerned to be a false gospel, another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4). That left Paul no alternative but to enter the fray; and the way he does this, with wisdom, wit, humor, irony, winsomeness, yet also anguish, hurt, and stunning emotional intensity, constitutes a marvelous case study in Christian leadership and the maintenance of Christian values and priorities.

These chapters merit close scrutiny not only because they clearly reveal the heart and mind of the apostle Paul, but also:

2. *Because they constitute a unit of thought* (such as the Sermon on the Mount [Matt. 5–7], e.g., or the Olivet discourse [Matt. 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21]).

Perhaps the easiest way to see this is to set 2 Corinthians 10–13 against the background of Paul's dealings and correspondence with the Corinthian church. According to Acts 18, Paul first preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey. He began by supporting himself with his trade while living at the home of Aquila and Priscilla, who had recently moved to Corinth from Rome (vv. 1–3). As usual, Paul opened his ministry by attempting to win over to Jesus Messiah all those who, Jews and Gentiles, frequented the synagogue (v. 4). Paul's ministry multiplied when Silas and Timothy, who had been discharging various responsibilities in Macedonia, rejoined him; for either they took over the task

of earning enough money for the team to pay its way, or, more likely, they brought with them enough money donated by the recently planted churches in Macedonia to enable Paul to devote himself exclusively to preaching (v. 5). Multiplied ministry was accompanied by multiplied opposition; and so once again Paul was forced to abandon his synagogue ministry and focus his attention on the Gentiles. Paul moved his base of operations next door to the house of Titius Justus (v. 7); and his ministry was so successful that not only did many pagan Corinthians believe the gospel and seek baptism, but Crispus himself, the synagogue ruler, along with his entire household, believed in the Lord Jesus (v. 8).

Battered by repeated attacks, only recently delivered from bruising punishment in Philippi (Acts 16), and having just barely escaped the tender mercies of a mob in Berea (17:13–15), Paul succumbed to fear and discouragement. The exalted Christ spoke to Paul in a vision one night, and offered words of encouragement and an incentive to persevere: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (18:9–10). Of course, the many people Christ already “had” were not yet Christians; but the Lord’s gracious election here serves as a marvelous incentive to evangelism and to a persevering proclamation of the gospel. At any rate, Paul stayed a year and a half, saw the church well established, and taught them the word of God (v. 11). In the spring of (probably) A.D. 52, Paul left Corinth by ship: he crossed the Aegean Sea with Priscilla and Aquila and arrived at Ephesus. On this occasion, Paul did not stay long. He left Priscilla and Aquila there, and headed for Jerusalem at a fast pace, hoping to arrive for the feast (Passover or Pentecost). After a short stay in Jerusalem, Paul traveled north to Antioch in Syria, his “home church,” resuming fellowship and friendship with many friends, and then returned to Ephesus. Thus began the two-and-a-half year ministry of enormous fruitfulness at Ephesus (probably fall

of A.D. 52 to spring of A.D. 55), and it was during this period that the Corinthian correspondence was composed.

At some point (we do not know exactly when) Paul sent his Corinthian converts a letter, now lost, which we may designate Corinthians A. Paul refers to that early letter in 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, where the context makes it clear Paul is distinguishing between Corinthians A and our 1 Corinthians (which thus becomes Corinthians B, in order of sequence). In the former, he warned his converts against fornication and other vices, telling them to dissociate themselves from those who practice such things; but now in 1 Corinthians, he further explains that he did not mean by this prohibition to enforce a total separation between Christians and “the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.” Rather, he explains, he was telling them in the first letter that they “must not associate with anyone *who calls himself a brother* but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man,” Paul adds, “do not even eat.” In other words, Paul was demanding church discipline, even excommunication if necessary, not the complete withdrawal of a severe hermitage.

There were broader reasons why, sometime during his Ephesian ministry, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. Paul had received verbal reports from “some from Chloe’s household” (1 Cor. 1:11) of factionalism within the Corinthian church; and this ugly divisiveness was allied with arrogance (which is always a threat to the power of the gospel). Mutual resentments ended up in personal lawsuits, and even toleration for gross sexual promiscuity. On top of all that, three men, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17), were sent as official delegates of the Corinthian church; and along with gifts, they (apparently) brought a letter (cf. 7:1) from the church asking a series of questions about marriage, sex, eating meat that had been offered to idols, the necessary characteristics of an apostle,

the Lord's Supper, tongues, the nature of our bodies at the resurrection, and much more. Paul's extended answer to oral reports and written questions alike is our 1 Corinthians.

When Paul sent this letter off, he fully expected to follow it up with a personal visit. He intended to stay at Ephesus until the Feast of Pentecost (probably A.D. 54 or 55; cf. 1 Cor. 16:8), then cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia to visit the churches he had planted there, and continue his journey south to Corinth, where, he promised, he would remain "awhile, or even spend the winter" (vv. 5–6). In the meantime, he sent Timothy and insisted the Corinthians should receive him warmly and "send him on his way in peace" (vv. 10–11; cf. Acts 19:22), so that he could return to Paul, presumably bearing a report. Shortly after sending off 1 Corinthians, however, Paul changed his plan a little: he proposed to visit the Corinthians twice, once on his way to Macedonia, and a second time on his way back; and from there he intended to sail for Judea (2 Cor. 1:15–16), along with considerable money and several delegates of churches contributing these funds to the relief of the Jerusalem church, still suffering from famine and persecution.

Unfortunately, these happy plans had to be modified again. They were all predicated on reasonable delay: there was no urgency for Paul to leave Ephesus immediately, and the "great door for effective work" (1 Cor. 16:9) was still open to him there. But when Timothy arrived in Corinth, he found the situation beyond his control; and even 1 Corinthians, the apostle's direct missive, failed to make the impact Paul had expected. Whether Timothy returned with this grim report, or Paul found out some other way, the apostle abandoned all plans for delay, and paid an urgent visit instead. This direct confrontation turned out to be a bitter experience, a "painful visit" to use Paul's language (2 Cor. 2:1). It may be that some of the abuses treated by Paul in 1 Corinthians had been cleared up; but opposition to him was still very strong, and apparently surfaced in one or two leaders whom the Corinthians

either tacitly supported or at least refused to rebuke. Moreover, the church had been infiltrated by Judaizers from Judea, men who were adamantly opposed to the gospel Paul preached and who ridiculed his apostleship. Paul was openly and deeply insulted (2 Cor. 2:5–8, 10; 7:12); worse, the work of the gospel itself was in jeopardy at Corinth.

Why Paul left at this point and returned in due course to Ephesus is uncertain. Perhaps he hoped time would heal some of the rift; perhaps he had other pressing engagements. Whatever the reason, he made up his mind not to make another painful visit and therefore called off the double stop he had earlier planned to make at Corinth on his way to and from Macedonia. Ironically, this opened him up to the charge of being fickle and lacking resolution in his plans (2 Cor. 1:16–2:4).

But although he refused at this time to return to Corinth in person, he sent another letter, this time by the hands of Titus (who may well have been a more forceful person than Timothy). This third letter we may call Corinthians C; it is sometimes referred to as the severe letter or the tearful letter, for Paul speaks of it along these lines. Like Corinthians A, it has not come down to us, and (along with a lot of other correspondence) was never providentially spared to become part of the New Testament canon. But Paul refers to this lost missive when he writes, “I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2 Cor. 2:4); or again, “The reason I wrote you was to see if you would stand the test and be obedient in everything” (2:9). In this severe letter, Paul had (among other things) demanded the punishment of the ringleader who had opposed him so maliciously (vv. 3–4, 6, 9; 7:8–12). The context of these passages argues strongly against the view that the severe letter or painful letter was 1 Corinthians, and that the man in question was the church member who was sleeping with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1–10). The passages in

2 Corinthians that refer to Paul's demand in the severe letter for church discipline give no hint of sexual sin: on the contrary, the offense was against Paul, and the crucial question was whether or not the church would rally around its apostolic founder (e.g., 7:12).

Not only did Paul entrust the painful letter to Titus, he further charged his emissary with the responsibility to organize the collection for the Christians in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:6). Apparently this plan, introduced earlier, had fallen on hard times, owing in part to the animus some Corinthians nurtured against Paul, but even more to the fact that the interlopers from Judea were demanding financial support (11:7, 12–20; 12:14) and were thereby siphoning off funds that should have gone to Jerusalem. Yet the very fact that Paul expected Titus to continue the collection in Corinth proves that, however disastrous the painful visit had been, the apostle did not regard the church as fundamentally renegade and apostate, but as vacillating, uncertain in its allegiances, too self-assured by half, and much too prone to division and to the toleration, not only of open sinners, but of self-proclaimed leaders who opposed both Paul and his gospel. That is why Paul can still boast of this church's generosity to Titus (7:14) and even to the Macedonians (9:2), even though in certain other respects the church was in a spiritually dangerous situation. (It must be remembered, though, that it was Paul's practice to be grateful and to issue generous encouragement wherever possible among his churches, even when the overall picture was not too bright: witness 1 Cor. 1:4–7!) But however qualified, the situation called forth from Paul the severe and painful letter just described.

Meanwhile, Paul continued his ministry in Asia Minor, doubtless focusing his attention on Ephesus. As if the emotional drain caused by the Corinthian church were not enough, during this period he faced some of the worst opposition and most frightening dangers he had ever confronted. He later wrote, "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the

province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril” (2 Cor. 1:8–10). We do not know any details of these dangers; but we do know that shortly after the Demetrius riot (Acts 19:23–20:1) Paul left Ephesus for Troas (2 Cor. 2:12–13; the expression might refer either to the port city or to the Troas region in which it lay. Cf. Acts 20:6) where he hoped simultaneously to meet Titus returning with news of Corinth, and to preach the gospel. The latter hope was realized: he found “the Lord had opened a door” (2 Cor. 2:12) for him. His other hope remained unfulfilled; and Paul was forced to write, “I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there” (v. 13).

Apparently Paul and Titus had made contingency plans to meet in Macedonia (perhaps at Philippi) should the meeting in Troas not take place; for that is where Paul headed next, probably as soon as weather permitted navigation, still in hope of meeting Titus and learning something of the Corinthians’ response to his severe and painful letter. In Macedonia, Paul took up his pastoral ministry of instruction and encouragement (Acts 20:1–2) while organizing the collection for the Jerusalem believers (2 Cor. 8:1–4; 9:2). The work was dangerous and arduous, not least because the Macedonian churches were themselves facing “the most severe trial” and “extreme poverty” (8:2). But worse still, Titus was not to be found. Paul later wrote, “[When] we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within” (7:5).

Mercifully, Titus soon arrived; and his news was so good that Paul’s mood changed to near euphoria. “But God,” he wrote, “who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given

him. He told us about your longing for me, your deep sorrow, your ardent concern for me, so that my joy was greater than ever” (2 Cor. 7:6–7). Indeed, after sending off the severe letter, he had immediately regretted it, fearing it would hurt the Corinthians unduly; but now upon learning how effective his letter was, regret is replaced by joy. After all, if his letter hurt them, it was “only for a little while” (v. 8); and in any case, he observes, “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (v. 10). Paul’s entire response to Titus’s report (vv. 5–16) presupposes that the desperate problems in Corinth have been substantially cleared up.

It is at this point that we become less certain of the precise sequence of events. Because this question affects the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 10–13, a brief account must be given of the three principal explanations offered by commentators.

First: Many argue that Paul, overjoyed by Titus’s report, immediately wrote 2 Corinthians 1–9 (which thus in effect becomes “Corinthians D”), but that 2 Corinthians 10–13 originally formed no part of this document. Rather, this section is to be identified as Corinthians C, the severe and painful letter.

There is an immediate advantage to this theory. Even a cursory reading of 2 Corinthians shows how different chapters 1–9 are from chapters 10–13. The former are positive, enthusiastic, encouraging, transparently reflecting the good news Titus has brought. If here and there Paul must still provide some account of his movements (1:15–2:13), explain again the nature of apostolic ministry (3:1–18), warn against idolatry (6:14–7:1), and continue his exhortation to organize the collection (chaps. 8–9), all this is written in a tone of joy, of confidence in the church’s growing maturity and obedience. The tone is sometimes cautious, but never harsh; and it is frequently euphoric. By contrast, chapters 10–13 presuppose that the situation in Corinth is desperate. The language is intensely emotional, oscillating from angry to broken to ironic. Joy cannot

be found, and confidence in the Corinthian church is all but dissipated. No longer does Paul write, “I am glad I can have complete confidence in you” (7:16); now he must say, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?” (13:5–6).

Much more can be said in favor of this theory; but it stumbles badly over at least three obstacles. (1) No Greek manuscript of 2 Corinthians suggests the letter originally terminated at the end of chapter 9, or suggests that chapters 10–13 once had an opening salutation typical of the letters Paul writes to churches where he was known. This is not conclusive in itself, of course; one could argue that the appropriate ending and introduction were lost when someone put the two letters together. But in that case, the puzzle is *why* an early reader would want to do such a thing, and why there is *no* trace of it in a very full manuscript tradition. (2) Moreover, 12:18 clearly presupposes that Titus had paid at least one visit to Corinth to assist in the collection—i.e., it presupposes either 8:6a or 8:16–19. Either way, it becomes very difficult to believe that chapters 10–13, the section in which 12:18 is embedded, were penned *before* chapters 1–9. (3) More important, chapters 10–13 do not sound like what we actually know of Corinthians C. One certain feature in that letter is Paul’s demand that a certain offender be punished (cf. 2:5–6; 7:12); but there is no trace of this in 2 Corinthians 10–13. Moreover, these chapters promise an imminent visit (12:14; 13:1); yet Corinthians C, the severe letter, was sent *instead* of a second painful visit (1:23; 2:1). How could Paul boast to Titus (7:14) and the Macedonians (9:2) about the Corinthians’ generosity if relations between Paul and the Corinthian church had deteriorated to the point that he was charged with using the collection funds himself (12:16)? And does the tone of 2 Corinthians 10–13—the sustained irony and biting invective—sound as if this passage was composed in the mood portrayed in 2:4—“out

of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears”? Finally, if 2 Corinthians 10–13 were composed before 2 Corinthians 1–9, why do the latter chapters make no mention of the group of interlopers who are so central to the former? Even if the problem had cleared up by the time chapters 1–9 were written, why is that fact not recorded, when the resolution of other and presumably less significant problems is duly recorded? We must reject the view that 2 Corinthians 10–13 is to be identified with Corinthians C.

Second: Many others argue for the essential unity of 2 Corinthians. This obviously squares with the textual evidence; but it must seek some solid reason for the demonstrable change in tone between chapters 1–9 and 10–13. Proposed solutions have varied enormously. Perhaps Paul had a sleepless night, suggests Lietzmann; perhaps Paul finally reveals his deepest and hitherto repressed emotions on these matters (Menzie, Robertson); perhaps this change reflects nothing more than the ups and downs of Paul’s temperament (Goudge); or perhaps the differences between chapters 1–9 and chapters 10–13 are greatly exaggerated, and there is really no problem to solve (Hughes—who draws comparisons between 1:13 and 10:11; 1:17 and 10:2; 2:1 and 12:14, 21 and 13:1–2; 2:17 and 12:19; 3:2 and 12:11; 6:13 and 11:2 and 12:14; 8:6, 8, 22 and 12:17–18).

Similar lists of comparisons, however, could be drawn between 2 Corinthians 10–13 and 1 Corinthians (and some of these connections will be drawn out in this exposition); but no one argues that such parallels prove 2 Corinthians 10–13 is really a part of 1 Corinthians. The change of tone between chapters 1–9 and chapters 10–13 is too noticeable to pass over; and the explanations commonly given are not very satisfying. Was Paul so emotionally immature that he could not contain himself? Was his temperament as mercurial as some suggest? After all, the change in tone extends to his *pastoral stance* toward the Corinthians; chapters 1–9 find Paul essentially building up the Corinthians, building bridges

toward them, and even the rebukes are part of that design; whereas chapters 10–13 find Paul tearing down the Corinthians with irony, rebuking them sharply, and even the brief words of encouragement constitute part of that pattern. At the very least, it seems necessary to suppose that there was a change in the pastoral problem Paul was confronting.

Such a possibility brings us to some form of the next explanation:

Third: Many commentators have suggested that 2 Corinthians 10–13 was written somewhat later than chapters 1–9. According to this view Titus met Paul in Macedonia (as described above), and Paul was so encouraged he immediately wrote off to the Corinthian church. What he wrote, however, was not all of 2 Corinthians, but only 2 Corinthians 1–9 (Corinthians D). Later on, he learned that the report brought by Titus was either premature or obsolete: the fickle Corinthians were succumbing to pressures introduced by interlopers from Judea and reverting to their carping criticism of the apostle, their earlier lack of discipline, and their pagan arrogance. Paul therefore responds with a stinging letter, our 2 Corinthians 10–13 (which thus becomes Corinthians E—so Barrett, Bruce).

There is much to commend this explanation. It avoids identifying 2 Corinthians 10–13 with Corinthians C, the severe letter; and it adequately explains why chapters 10–13 are so different in tone from 1–9. But in its most common form, it suffers from one or two of the weaknesses of the first solution, already discussed: it must suppose, without any manuscript evidence, that both the ending of chapters 1–9 and the beginning of chapters 10–13 were somehow lost, and that the two sections were put together. At least in this theory they are put together in the right sequence! Those who argue for the thorough unity of this epistle (the second explanation, discussed above) might also ask how come the Corinthians fell away so quickly, and why there is no explicit reference in chapters 10–13 to the more recent news Paul allegedly received informing him the situation was much bleaker than he thought.

Indeed, Harris suggests that Paul did not write any part of 2 Corinthians right after hearing Titus's good report. Rather, Harris argues, Paul continued his pastoral work in Macedonia, and quite possibly pursued a ministry of pioneer evangelism along the Egnatian Way and right around to Illyricum (cf. Rom. 15:19–21); and he did not write 2 Corinthians until he returned to Macedonia once more and heard of fresh problems in Corinth.

Harris's reconstruction is certainly possible; but it must minimize the change of tone between the two sections. It loses the strength of the suggestion that what prompts the change is the arrival of more information, the receipt of bad news, since on Harris's view the bad news arrives before Paul writes any part of 2 Corinthians. On this interpretation one might have expected Paul to have maintained something of the same stance toward his readers throughout his epistle.

But perhaps we may put together the strengths of the second and the third explanations. If Paul was as eager to hear from Titus as he seems to have been, it is hard to believe that he could set off on further pastoral and evangelistic rounds without preparing any response to the Corinthians at all. Grateful that his severe letter had not done the damage he feared, delighted that repentance and obedience had been reestablished in the Corinthian church, and encouraged to think that healthy relationships were being restored, he immediately began to write (or dictate). But 2 Corinthians is a fairly long letter: few could manage to write it at a lengthy single sitting. And Paul was at the time (it will be remembered) extraordinarily pressed by his ministry in Macedonia; lengthy sessions in which to compose one's thoughts would not be easy to come by. Perhaps the completion of the letter was repeatedly delayed, for weeks or even longer. Most of us, after all, have occasionally put off finishing a letter, doubtless a letter a good deal shorter than 2 Corinthians. In this case, however, Paul may well have received additional news, bad news about the Corinthian church, before he had finished the

letter; and if so, this would account for the abrupt change of tone at the beginning of chapter 10. In short, after finishing the first nine chapters, but before actually terminating the letter and sending it off, Paul receives additional bad news, and therefore adds four more chapters of rebuke. Second Corinthians is thus a formally unified letter, but does reflect a substantial change of perspective in the last four chapters.

Four principal objections frequently raised against this reconstruction merit brief consideration.

(1) Barrett, adhering to the third interpretation, argues that if chapters 1–9 had not already been sent off when the bad news arrived, prompting Paul to write chapters 10–13, the apostle would have torn up those earlier chapters as already out of date, and would simply have replaced them with the sharper accents of 2 Corinthians 10–13. There is some force to this argument; but it overlooks how much in 2 Corinthians is valuable in its own right, and still applicable to the Corinthians even when their situation is deteriorating. This useful material includes, among other things, the glory of the ministry (chap. 3), warnings against idolatry (6:14–7:1), and instructions regarding the collection (chaps. 8–9). Even the haunting words about Paul’s joy when he hears the Corinthians are repentant, obedient, and zealous might serve as an added rebuke when they are that way *no longer*.

(2) Some argue that the movements of Titus and an unnamed brother, spoken of in 2 Corinthians 12:18 as having already taken place, are to be identified with Titus’s *future* movements in 8:17–18. If so, then 2 Corinthians 1–9 *must* have been sent *before* 2 Corinthians 10–13 was written. I shall say more about this when we get to 12:18; but for now it is worth mentioning that this verse *may* look back, not on 8:16–17 but on 8:6a—a trip Titus had already taken, probably in connection with the severe letter, and certainly before *any part* of 2 Corinthians was penned. If so, there is no need to postulate a break after chapter 9.

(3) Others express surprise that the Corinthian church could relapse so quickly, and fall into a condition no better and perhaps considerably worse than that which called forth the earlier severe and painful letter. But surely the speed with which the Corinthians fell is not all that remarkable. After all, 1 Corinthians does not encourage us to think Paul was dealing with a mature and stable church, but with one filled with assorted forms of arrogance and a remarkable penchant for blind and exclusivistic attachment to one leader or another (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:10–17). Certainly 2 Corinthians 10–13 testifies to the new credibility and power of the interlopers, self-proclaimed leaders who captured a substantial portion of Corinthian opinion and turned many of the believers against Paul and his gospel. Quite possibly fresh strength had come to these self-promoted leaders by the arrival of new forces from Jerusalem. In any case, their multiplying influence was the new situation introduced into this immature church; and the dismal record of the Corinthians in practical discernment practically guaranteed they would be dupes, dangerous dupes, once again.

(4) The only really serious difficulty with this interpretation is that 2 Corinthians 10–13 nowhere explicitly states that Paul actually did receive new information, information that caused him to change his tone from gentleness to the sting of a whip (cf. 1 Cor. 4:21). Even so, this single difficulty is in my judgment less awkward than those attached to the alternative explanations. Intelligent speculation as to *why* Paul fails to mention the arrival of such new information is not hard to come by. For instance, if the new information about the Corinthian church came in a report (known to many members of the church) that accused Paul, among other things, of acting with too much “meekness and gentleness” instead of with the forcefulness demanded of a true apostle, then Paul’s opening words in 2 Corinthians 10:1 would be sufficient to draw attention to that report: “By the meekness and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you. . . .” This same argument could be strengthened

many times if the report of bad news included, e.g., insinuations that Paul did not fare well when compared with the interlopers (cf. 10:12–18), that he could not be much of a teacher since he refused to charge for his services (cf. 11:7–12; 12:13), or that his apostolic status was inferior because he seldom seemed to talk of the glorious supernatural visions of which others could fondly speak (cf. 12:1–10). If Paul were responding to some such attack as this, which seems likely, his very response was sufficient indication that the new report had reached him. To draw any further attention to it would have been a redundant exercise.

On the whole, therefore, it seems best to conclude that 2 Corinthians 10–13 is formally part of 2 Corinthians (= Corinthians D), even though its emphases and tone set it somewhat apart from the rest of the book. At several steps in the argument, the evidence suffers from enough ambiguity to restrain us from being too dogmatic on the fine points; but it is sufficient to enable us to treat 2 Corinthians 10–13 as a conceptual unit worthy of close study. That is all I need to establish here: these four chapters stand slightly apart, and constitute an impressive display of the apostle Paul's response under withering fire.

Thus we come to the second question:

B. What Is the Precise Nature of the Opposition Paul Faces?

Most of the details of the opposition Paul confronts will be fleshed in by the exposition; but it may be useful to reconnoiter a little and outline both the essence of the attack and the identity of the opponents.

1. *The essence of the attack.* Paul faces intruders whose fundamental aim is to call his authority into question, while magnifying their own (2 Cor. 10:7–18). If they succeed in their efforts, they will woo the Corinthians' allegiance to themselves. Paul, they said,

is personally unimpressive and his oratory substandard (v. 10). He could command respect only at a distance (vv. 1–2, 9–11; 11:6; 13:3–4, 9): his letters might be forceful, but they outstrip the credibility of his person and are therefore of little consequence. Paul could thus be charged with acting inconsistently, even capriciously (vv. 2–4; cf. 1:17–18). His problem, they say, is that he lacks proper credentials: he does not even bother to present the appropriate letters of introduction and commendation, presumably from the Twelve (10:13–14; cf. 3:1). He has to rely on self-commendation (10:12–18; 12:11; cf. 5:12; 6:4–10).

Thus Paul finds himself between the proverbial rock and a hard place: he is not forceful enough when present, yet if he writes a forceful response, his letter will be easily dismissed as further evidence of the fact that only by long distance mail can he sound like a leader; and even then his words might be dismissed as self-commendation. If instead he shows up in person, he himself is forced to admit that he does not meet the prevalent standards of rhetoric (2 Cor. 11:6), so he may appear hopelessly outclassed by the intruders. Worse, he may be handicapped by his memory of the “painful visit” (2:1), and therefore pull his punches—which would only serve to confirm the judgment of his attackers: “His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (10:10). But if he does nothing, he will certainly lose the Corinthians to the influence of the intruders.

There are other and equally vicious pairs of charges leveled against Paul, pairs of charges that make rebuttal extremely difficult—like a lone infantryman answering a machine-gun cross fire. On the one hand, Paul is charged with the “sin” of refusing to receive financial help from the Corinthians, who felt slighted because of this policy and questioned Paul’s credentials as a result (e.g., 11:5, 7–11; 12:11–15; 13:3a, 6). Surely, the Corinthians reasoned, a great apostle, a truly significant teacher, would charge in

proportion to his worth; so if Paul not only refuses to levy a charge but turns down every offer of a gift, it must be because he is counterfeit. Yet at the same time, at least some Corinthians had become convinced that the collection Paul was urging them to set aside on a regular basis for the impoverished Jerusalem Christians (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9) was in reality a fraudulent way of lining his own pockets (12:16-18). So once again Paul is squeezed between two antithetical demands: if he continues to refuse all financial help, he will be dismissed as an inferior apostle, a second-class teacher, while if he reverses policy, his action will be condemned as confirmation of his suspected avarice.

At the root of these multifaceted attacks lies the problem of *boasting* (a word repeated many times in these four chapters). Paul's opponents were apparently swayed by sophists who were prominent throughout Greece, and perhaps nowhere more so than in Corinth. The self-proclaimed "apostles" who attacked Paul, not only adopted the Hellenistic standards of rhetoric best exemplified in the sophists, but went further: they also took over the sophists' penchant for self-commendation and their insistence on payment. Sophists delighted to parade their accomplishments and display their oratory. They aimed to collect a growing number of disciples who hung on their words and paid large sums for the privilege of learning at their feet. The more accomplished the sophist, the more he could boast, and the greater the charge he could levy. Sophisticated haughtiness became a virtue, self-admiration a strength. The sophist Polemon "used to talk to cities as a superior, to kings as not inferior, and to gods as an equal" (*Vit. Soph.* 1.25.4). Philostratus testifies that "a sophist is put out in an extempore speech by a serious-looking audience and tardy praise and no clapping" (2.26.3). This attitude prevailed in circles beyond the sophists: the Roman historian Tacitus explains, "In the scorn of fame was implied the scorn of virtue" (*Ann.* 4.38). Great leaders not infrequently wrote memoirs of their exploits that were nothing more than self-eulogies,

detailing the triumphs gained, the battles won, the great speeches delivered, the wisdom displayed, the captives subdued.*

The same professional stance, adopted unquestioningly by the interlopers and adapted to their own religious environment, was part of what motivated them to belittle Paul for his less than acceptable rhetoric, his refusal to receive payment for his services, his serious lack of personal impressiveness. When had Paul ever provided a suitable list of his accomplishments (cf. 2 Cor. 11:16–29)? And if he were such a great apostle, why had he not received spectacular visions from God and enhanced his credibility by relating them (12:1–10)?

Quite clearly the Corinthians were culturally conditioned to be led astray in these directions. Even in his first canonical letter to them, Paul found it necessary to explain very carefully that he had not preached the gospel with the “eloquence” of the approved rhetoric, that he had not adopted the “superior wisdom” characterized by self-promotion (1 Cor. 2:1). Far from it: he had already resolved to avoid such approaches and focus instead on Jesus Christ and his crucifixion—a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles (1:23). Arrogance was at this point of his ministry a stranger to Paul: he arrived in Corinth “in weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (2:3), so much so that, as we have seen, God graciously gave him special encouragement (Acts 18:9–10). None of this was accidental: it was shaped by God toward one crucial end. “My message and my preaching,” Paul explains, “were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the

*On this background, see J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (London: SCM, 1959), 158; S. H. Travis, “Paul’s Boasting in 2 Corinthians 10–12,” *Studia Evangelica* VI (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1973): 527–32, and the literature there cited; and esp. three articles by E. A. Judge, “The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community: Part II,” *Journal of Religious History* I (1960–61): 125–37; “The Conflict of Aims in NT Thought,” *Journal of Christian Education* 9 (1966): 32–45; “Paul’s Boasting in Relation to Contemporary Professional Practice,” *Australian Biblical Review* 16 (1968): 37–50.

Spirit's power, *so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power*" (1 Cor. 2:4, emphasis added).

Sadly, the Corinthian Christians did not learn this lesson very quickly. Their minds were shaped rather more by their pagan culture than by the gospel of Jesus Christ; and therefore many of them were swayed by the interlopers, seduced into another form of the same error that Paul by his example and his epistolary instruction had already condemned. Perhaps what made the Corinthians blind to the danger was the fact that these intruders did not align themselves with the pagan sophists but with Christians: indeed, they had the highest Christian credentials. It is always much more difficult for Christians to detect a fundamentally sinful attitude in other Christians than in pagans—especially if that attitude is endemic to contemporary society, thereby reducing or eliminating the “shock” force of that sin. Certainly the men who led the Corinthians astray were less interested in weighing Paul's claims and responses in an evenhanded way than were the Corinthians themselves: as far as we can discern it, their attitude toward Paul was shaped by the raw triumphalism of the sophists. Far from being evenhanded, they were consistently demeaning and condescending.

If the entire situation had been nothing more than a personality conflict in which Paul came out worst, it is very doubtful that he would have responded as forcefully as he does in these four chapters. Paul was painfully aware that the lot of the apostle was to “become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world” (1 Cor. 4:13). More excruciating, but still expected, was the constant “danger from false brothers” (2 Cor. 11:26). But this situation was going beyond even that. Not only were the attitudes and values being inculcated by the intruders so deeply pagan, so intrinsically self-centered, that the Corinthians were being warped and twisted away from deep, experiential knowledge of the love and strength of the God whose “power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9), but these self-promoted leaders were actually preaching another

Jesus than the one Paul had preached—a different spirit and a different gospel (11:4). Paul was not reacting merely out of hurt feelings (though doubtless his feelings were hurt), but out of the passionate perception that the gospel itself was at stake—and with it the eternal well-being of the Corinthians. That is why he can go so far as to say, “Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.” Where the essence of the gospel is the issue, Paul habitually draws very sharp lines of distinction (e.g., Gal. 1:8–9); so it is not surprising that in this case he exposes the intruders as “false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ” (11:13).

2. *The identity of the opponents.* Enough has already been said about them that they have begun to take shape; but three further observations will bring their picture into sharper focus.

First, the terms “intruders” and “interlopers” were not inadvertent slips. Paul’s chief opponents in 2 Corinthians 10–13 were not native to the Corinthian church, but people who entered it as latecomers and quickly gained positions of leadership and voices of authority. This is made clear not only by strong hints in several passages (e.g., 10:13–15; 11:4; 12:11), but also by the theme of commendation; the intruders apparently delighted in parading letters of introduction and commendation. They insinuated that Paul’s credentials were questionable because he did not follow the same practice. To present themselves in this way, the opponents must have been outsiders.

This means that they were not to be identified with any of the problematic factions reflected in 1 Corinthians, where the warring groups were all within the church and native to it (even if each faction adopted the name of some leader whose origins were elsewhere). There may, of course, be a link between the intruders in 2 Corinthians 10–13 and one or more of the parties described in 1 Corinthians 1:11 (Allo suggests the “Christ party,” Barrett the “Peter party”); but such connections are speculative.

Second, although, as we have seen, the intruders were mightily influenced by what we might call a sophist mentality, nevertheless it is no less certain that they were Jews: nothing could be clearer from 2 Corinthians 11:22. Some scholars have therefore suggested that they were Hellenistic-Jewish preachers who professed to be Christians but were in reality trying to take over the Christian community with their own doctrine, claiming to be “divine men.” But there are problems with the “divine man” category;* and even if the category were well established, the normal profile of such self-proclaimed leaders would not encourage us to suspect they would flourish letters of commendation. Far from it: they would claim independence from men and parade their miraculous stunts as the sole credentials that might be needed.

The best guess is that the interlopers were some brand of Judaizers. This is not difficult to accept, if we remember four things:

(1) As the early church reached more and more Gentiles with the good news of Jesus Christ, many devout Jews who were prepared to accept Jesus as Messiah but who were not prepared to see him as the fulfillment of the Mosaic law began to insist with increasing stridency that any Gentile who wanted to follow Jesus Messiah had to obey the law of Moses. Those who held this position came in time to be called Judaizers. The precise nature of their demands varied: in Galatia, e.g., they insisted that Gentiles be circumcised and thus bind themselves to obey the entire law of Moses (cf. Gal. 5:2–6; 6:12–15), even the special Jewish festivals (Gal. 4:10). The book of Acts makes it clear that at certain stages in Paul’s missionary career Jews dogged Paul’s steps and attempted to undermine his message of grace.

*It is often argued that the *theios aner* (“divine man”) was a common and understood category of self-proclaimed religious hero and itinerant preacher in the Hellenistic world; but the evidence is scanty, and the designation inconsistent in its referent: cf. esp. Carl H. Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic Judaism: A Critique of the Use of This Category in New Testament Christology* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977).

(2) We must beware of thinking that there was only one kind of Jewish party that stood over against Christianity. There were as many different opinions among Jews then as there are now, and they could merge and blend in surprising combinations. No one familiar with the first century would be surprised to find a Hellenistic-Jewish chief priest by the name of Sceva deeply involved in exorcism practices of dubious credentials (Acts 19:13–16). In Colosse, opposition to Paul’s doctrines surfaced among Jews who, though they had been influenced by pagan notions, nevertheless insisted on observing the Jewish feasts. In short, what was characteristic of Judaizing was not a coherent system of thought, but a common attempt to impose Jewish practices and all or part of the Mosaic law upon Gentiles as conditions for salvation or at least for Christian maturity. Thus it is not difficult to imagine Hellenistic Jews who, precisely because they were thoroughly Hellenistic, took over many of the attitudes of their surrounding society (best exemplified in this instance by the sophists); yet precisely because they were thoroughly Jews, they felt tied to the same stance toward Jesus (and what it means for a Gentile to become a Christian) that other Judaizers adopted.

Alternatively, one could easily imagine a group of Palestinian Jews (see 4 below) who had made Christian professions of faith and who had lived under Greek influence for enough years to be strongly influenced by the sophists, yet who retained their allegiance to Judaizing principles.

(3) Certainly wherever Paul detected Judaizing, he treated it as a heresy. Judaizing, of course, is not the same as Judaism; those who followed the traditional religion of the Jews (i.e., Judaism) Paul regarded as unconverted, in need of repentance and faith in Jesus. Toward such people Paul could be extraordinarily flexible (1 Cor. 9:19–23), going so far as to join in Jewish purification rites (Acts 21:20–26), and circumcising Timothy to avoid offending Jewish sensibilities. Nor is Judaizing an apt term to describe the worship

and attitude of countless thousands of Jews who truly trusted Jesus the Messiah but who did not give up the traditional observances of Judaism: most Jerusalem Christians fell into this category, and even in Antioch Paul does not object to the presence of a “circumcision group” that eats separately from other Christians. Judaizing refers to the pressure exerted by putative Jewish Christians on Gentile Christians to compel the latter to conform to the whole or to some part of the Mosaic law, as a necessary condition for salvation or Christian maturity. Judaizers therefore operated *within* the Christian camp and were commonly accepted as Christians; but Paul perceived that as soon as they insisted that something *in addition to* Christ was necessary for salvation or Christian growth, they were destroying the fundamental structure of Christianity as he understood it. Grace would no longer be grace; merit theology would insert its nose into the tent, like the proverbial camel. That is why Paul pronounces his repeated “anathema” on the Judaizers in Galatia (Gal. 1:8–9).

(4) The two crucial verses in 2 Corinthians 10–13 that bear on this question are 11:4 and 11:22. In the former, Paul insists that the intruders were preaching another Jesus than the one Paul preached, a different spirit and a different gospel from those the Corinthians had received. The language is reminiscent of Galatians 1:8–9, and is typical of Paul’s known attitude toward Judaizers. In 2 Corinthians 11:22, Paul rhetorically asks, “Are they Hebrews?” And he answers, “So am I.” But the word “Hebrews” is normally restricted to those Jews whose linguistic heritage was Hebrew/Aramaic—i.e., those from Palestine. On this basis some commentators argue that the intruders were born and reared in Palestine, and were probably such latecomers to Corinth that it is not easy to believe they could have fallen under strong influence from the sophists. But this interpretation overlooks Paul’s “So am I”; for Paul was *not* born in Palestine but in the Hellenistic city of Tarsus. Paul may have been reared in Palestine, but certainly he gained enough Greek education to be

able to cite minor poets such as Epimenides (Acts 17:28; cf. Titus 1:12). His point in 2 Corinthians 11:22, however, is that he was brought up to speak Hebrew/Aramaic and so to share in the full theological heritage that such linguistic competence would make possible. By the same token, the intruders may or may not have been born in Palestine, even though they were born and reared in more Hellenistic surroundings. What seems reasonably clear is that they were Judaizers with Palestinian training and at least some sophist attitudes. How that precise combination came about we can only guess.

These intruders may be like those people from Judea who had earlier invoked the authority of the Twelve without in fact gaining their approval (Acts 15:24). After all, one faction at Corinth had already used the name of Peter (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12). To the Corinthians, such authority would bear great weight. If Paul's gospel was to be overthrown, Paul's authority would have to be called into question. How better to achieve this end, from the Jewish side, than by appealing to all the Jerusalem associations that would resonate with authority in the ears of all early Christians, and from the Greek side by advancing a phalanx of objections against Paul that would instantly appear plausible because of the built-in cultural bias?

The *third* observation is that the number of groups Paul refers to is disputed. Several recent commentators have argued for three groups. First and foremost, of course, are the Corinthians themselves. Paul is sometimes angry with them, and constantly grieves over them; but because he recognizes that they are the dupes of the intruders, he never handles them quite as harshly as he does his prime opponents. Those opponents are the second group—the “false apostles” (2 Cor. 11:13) who have introduced “a different gospel” (11:4). They have seduced the Corinthians and managed to nurture seeds of suspicion in their minds as to the status and integrity of Paul. But third, there are what Barrett calls “apostles

of recognized eminence”—i.e., the Twelve themselves. Barrett, followed by Bruce and Harris, argue that the “super-apostles” in 11:5 and 12:11 are not the *false* apostles but the Twelve whom the intruders invoke in order to gain respectability and authority. When Paul discusses the false apostles, he dismisses them as Satan’s minions, and ominously concludes, “Their end will be what their actions deserve” (11:13–15). But when Paul mentions the “super-apostles” (11:5; 12:11), he goes no further than to say he is not in the least inferior to them.

This interpretation is quite plausible; and if correct, it helps to explain Paul’s embarrassed position. For if the intruders were pushing not only themselves but also the Jerusalem apostles, seeking to raise their own stature by claiming (however falsely) to represent the Twelve, Paul is in a cleft stick: he must expose the sham of the intruders without diminishing the authority of the Twelve who (apparently) recommended them.

Yet I remain unpersuaded that we should interpret 2 Corinthians 11:5 and 12:11 in this way. Rather, the “super-apostle” designation is better taken as a further ironic reference to the false apostles. There are four reasons to support his judgment:

(1) The central section of 2 Corinthians 10–12 is made up of Paul’s boasting (11:16–12:10), a passage steeped in irony. When in this passage he asks questions such as “Are they Hebrews?” or “Are they servants of Christ?” (11:22–23), the “they” in view are the false apostles of the immediately preceding verses (11:13–15). But immediately after this long section on boasting, written to stifle the false apostles, Paul concludes, “I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the ‘super-apostles,’ even though I am nothing” (12:11). Because the boasting section *begins* with a reference to the false apostles, the most natural way of understanding 12:11ff is that it *concludes* the boasting section with a reference to the same people under the ironic designation

“super-apostle.” If so, the same designation in 11:4 should probably be interpreted the same way.

(2) There is more irony in 2 Corinthians 10–13 than in all the rest of Paul’s extant writings combined. Therefore there is ample contextual reason for thinking that “super-apostle” should be handled ironically as well.

(3) When elsewhere Paul is forced to draw some sort of comparison between himself and the Twelve (or the Jerusalem “pillars” more generally), he normally makes explicit reference to the people to whom he is referring (e.g., Gal. 2:6–10; 1 Cor. 15:5, 9). There is nothing so explicit here. Indeed, because Paul has had to compare himself with the intruders, the false apostles (e.g., 2 Cor. 10:12–18; 11:16–12:10), in order to secure the allegiance of the Corinthians to the gospel, we must imagine his rebuke to the Corinthians, “I ought to have been commended by you” (12:11), means something like “I ought to have been commended by you before the interlopers, so their personal pretensions would have been for naught.” But that crucial clause in 12:11 must be interpreted by Barrett, Bruce, and Harris to mean something like “I ought to have been commended by you before the interlopers, so that their claims that I am inferior to the Twelve would be exposed as untrue.” The latter interpretation would make sense only if Paul had already presented lengthy comparisons between himself and the Twelve; but that is precisely what he has not done.

(4) There is no reason to think that the claims of these Judaizers to represent some authority in Jerusalem were valid. Along similar lines, it is very doubtful if Peter or Apollos were personally behind the factions mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:12; rather, misguided people invoked their names and authority and did considerable damage. Certainly Paul’s earliest run-ins with Judaizers who claimed the authority of the Jerusalem leaders would have taught him that the Jerusalem leaders preferred to disavow such connections. They themselves declared, “we have heard that some went out from us

without our authorization and disturbed you” (Acts 15:24). Therefore it is unlikely Paul would have believed the credentials of the intruders in Corinth; and for that reason he would not have felt too pressured to stroke the feathers of the great names connected with Jerusalem. In other words, Paul would have been in a more difficult position if he believed the credentials were valid but the messengers had gone bad; but based on his earlier experiences, it is unlikely Paul would have believed the credentials to be authentic. In that case, there would be very little reason to drag the Jerusalem leaders into the discussion at all.

This sketch of the background of 2 Corinthians 10–13 has gone on long enough: I must draw it to a close and get on with the exposition. Yet this introduction should lead us to anticipate from these chapters of Scripture some light on several crucial topics:

(1) We shall learn something of apostleship, and derivatively, of the nature of Christian leadership. Little is more important in our age, in which promoting self under the guise of promoting Christ has become not only commonplace but a defended practice in books and seminars on Christian leadership. Paul’s authoritative grasp of the topic is profoundly humbling.

(2) We shall discover the evil intrinsic to much boasting, and the way it is deeply related to the self-centeredness that lies at the heart of *all* sin. Modern “Christian” success formulas, too frequently developed by hucksters of glamour marketed by Madison Avenue techniques, pandering to personal comfort and aggrandizement, and formulated to mesh smoothly with our pagan society’s idea of the heroic, reveal more about triumphalism than the way of the cross. One recent book sports the nearly blasphemous title, *How to Write Your Own Ticket with God*. Another presents what it calls the “law of reciprocity” to encourage the believer that the more you give the more you get. There is just enough truth in the idea to make the presentation believable to the gullible; but Luke 6:36–38 is made to sound as if the fundamental *reason* for giving is

getting (which neither this passage nor any other teaches), or that the “law” of reciprocity is so universal a precept, so independent from other teaching in Scripture, that it admits no qualification or balance. We are told that kindness shown to our enemies *inevitably* (after all, this is a law!) results in kindness returned. Why, then, did Jesus go to the cross? Was it perhaps that he himself failed to show enough kindness? Why does he say that his followers must *expect* to be abused, persecuted, hated by all men (e.g., Matt. 5:10–12; 10:16–39; 24:9–14; John 15:18–16:4; cf. 2 Tim. 3:12–13)? The authors go on to encourage us to believe that the more money we give away, the more we’ll have. But perhaps the “repayment” of which Jesus speaks is not always in exact kind; perhaps an eschatological orientation in Jesus’s teaching encourages us to think that reward in many cases comes in the new heaven and the new earth—not least when it is presaged by martyrdom! Will struggling Third World Christians who give sacrificially and lovingly to the work of the Lord, even of their substance, be greatly impressed by distorted triumphalist interpretations that promise boundless material wealth? Will Christians under totalitarian regimes, brothers and sisters in Christ who have lost goods, opportunities for education and employment, and sometimes life itself, swallow so fundamentally unbiblical and shallow a notion of reciprocity? Of course, God is no man’s debtor; but frequently his “reward” is the grace that endures opposition and hardship, and grows in character, depth, godliness, and understanding—not the glib promise of temporal power, health, and wealth. To such issues, 2 Corinthians 10–13 speaks trenchantly, and offers a way of looking at triumphalism that is disturbingly Christian, profoundly moving, and utterly demanding.

(3) Related to this last point is the model of Christian maturity Paul provides. Here is a man who sees beyond issues of personality to the nature of the apostolic gospel and of apostolic authority. Here is a man who hates to boast, but whose profound concern for

and grasp of the gospel forces him to step outside his own skin, as it were, to handle a pastoral problem of immense complexity and delicacy. Here is an apostle who is fully prepared to serve as the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world, but whose outstanding feature to Christians with any depth of understanding is his almost incredible spiritual, emotional, and intellectual maturity.

(4) We shall learn, too, that individual Christians and local churches alike must take responsibility for the styles of leadership they follow. If it is true that Christian leaders are responsible before God for the teaching they provide, the models they display, and the directions they take, it is no less true that Christians and Christian assemblies are responsible for choosing what and whom they will emulate. The problems at Corinth depicted in 2 Corinthians 10–13 would never have arisen if the Corinthian church had handled the intruders in a mature and biblical fashion in the first place. That they failed to do so reflects their spiritual immaturity, their unsettling inability to perceive that the norms of their own society were deeply pagan and not to be nurtured in the church.

(5) We shall be reminded once more that the early church was not an amalgam of ideal congregations, but, as today, a called-out community of pilgrims whose allegiance is to Jesus Christ but whose maturity is often wanting. Infiltrated by impostors and seduced by siren voices to follow cheaply Christianized versions of what they were already used to from their pagan past, the Corinthian believers remind us that perfection awaits the parousia. Meanwhile, Henry's wisdom remains: "Let not any ministers of Christ think strange, if they meet with perils, not only from enemies, but from false brethren; for blessed Paul himself did so."