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THE GLORY OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

AN ANALYSIS OF 2 CORINTHIANS 2:14—4:18

HOMER A. KENT, JR.

SOME activities have a special appeal about them. People are drawn to certain pursuits because of the excitement generated by the activity itself. Others are attracted by the financial rewards, by the adulation of an audience, or by the popular esteem in which some activities are held. The sense of satisfaction and fulfilment afforded by such occupations as medicine, education, and social work can lead to an entire career.

The Christian ministry was once one of those highly respected vocations. Shifting attitudes in recent years, however, have caused changes in society's values. Our "scientific" age tends to place on the pedestal of public esteem the research scientist, the surgeon, and the sports hero. Yet the reasons why the Christian minister once headed the list of respected leaders in American life are still valid and worthy of serious reflection.

The apostle Paul wrote in this passage about the activity that had captivated him. He was not attracted by any financial rewards, for it offered none to him. He gained from it no earthly pomp, no public prestige (except the respect of the Christians he had helped, and even this was mixed). He experienced abandonment and hatred that would demoralize most men. Nevertheless he was so enthralled with the privilege of Christian ministry that he made it his career and never found anything that could entice him away from this glorious passion of his life.

Although "the Christian ministry" is an expression often used to designate a certain career, "Christian ministry" should be an activity in which every believer is engaged. Even if it is not one's vocational

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career, each Christian can share many of the same satisfactions that Paul describes here. The glory of this ministry can be enjoyed by every Christian when he understands what Christian ministry involves. Paul described the character of his ministry in a fascinating discussion which revealed why he regarded it as the most challenging of occupations.

IT WAS A SINCERE PROCLAMATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF
CHRIST (2:14-17)

Verse 14. At this point in the letter, Paul interrupted the description of his search for Titus, not resuming it until 7:5. Nevertheless the content of this section is pertinent to the discussion, for it reveals Paul's attitude of confidence in God's leading, even in times of disappointment. There is no need to suspect a combination of several documents here.

Though he had been concerned at not finding Titus in Troas (2:12-13), Paul could still express thanks to God for His unfailing leadership. Disappointment over certain details and events did not cause the apostle to lose sight of the larger aspect of God's program. He was convinced that God was always leading him and his associates in the triumphant accomplishment of his glorious will. The figure is probably that of the Roman Triumph, in which a conquering general and his victorious legions would parade in Rome, displaying some of their captives and other trophies of war. In this use of the figure Paul seems to be equating his missionary party with the victorious forces in the triumph, rather than with the captives who would soon be executed.¹

As part of a Roman Triumph garlands of flowers along the route and the burning of incense and spices provided a fragrant aroma as one of the characteristics of the parade. So Paul recognized that whether he and Titus were at Troas, or Corinth, or somewhere else, and whether circumstances were pleasant or grim, God was using his messengers to disseminate the precious knowledge of himself in the gospel of Christ.

Verse 15. In verse 14 the fragrance referred to the gospel which was proclaimed by Paul and his associates. In verse 15 the preachers themselves are identified with the gospel they preach. They are called a "fragrance of Christ" (NASB) because they are the deliverers of that gospel.

¹The only other NT use of the verb θριαμβεύω (lead in triumph) may be understood in the same way (Col 2:15). See H. A. Kent, Jr., *Treasures of Wisdom* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 88-89.

Paradoxically, these messengers of the gospel were a harbinger of diametrically opposite results to two groups of people. "Those who are being saved" and "those who are perishing" describe the two kinds of responses to the preaching of the gospel. At the Roman Triumph the aroma of the incense was a token of victory and honor for the conquering legions, but was a sign of sure execution to the captives in the parade.

Verse 16. The previous statement is further explained by this verse. To unbelievers the preachers who announced the gospel were proclaiming a message of eternal doom which would eventually be experienced in the unbeliever's destruction (ἐκ θανάτου εἰς θάνατον, "out of death unto death"). To those who responded in faith, the gospel preacher had brought a message which comes from Christ the Source of true life and produces life eternal (ἐκ ζωῆς εἰς ζωὴν, "out of life unto life").²

The rhetorical question, "And who is sufficient for these things?" has been answered differently by readers. Some have suggested the answer to be, "We apostles are sufficient," inasmuch as they did not peddle a false message (2:17-3:1).³ Others regard the answer to be, "No one is, if he depends on his own resources" (3:4-6). The latter explanation is best and could be expanded as follows: Certainly the religious peddlers are not sufficient, for they depend upon a personal sufficiency with selfish motivation. Only those who depend solely upon God for His sufficiency can hope to bear this heavy responsibility (3:5).

Verse 17. Paul and his companions were not like "so many" (NIV),⁴ who were "peddling the word of God" like common hucksters. The Greek term occurs only here in the NT. It is derived from the term for "retailer," and carried the suggestion of trickery, deceit, and falsehood. The verb meant "to sell at illegitimate profit, to misrepresent, to hawk."⁵ The picture comes to mind of the cheap huckster haggling over prices and cheapening his goods when necessary to make a sale.

On the contrary, Paul's proclamation of the gospel was done with complete sincerity. The term (εἰλικρινεῖα) always denoted

²Another view of these two ἐκ . . . εἰς phrases regards them as simply indicating continuous progression as in Rom 1:17 ("from faith to faith") and 2 Cor 3:18 ("from glory to glory"). J. H. Bernard, "Second Corinthians," *Expositor's Greek Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.) 3. 51.

³R. C. H. Lenski *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1946) 902.

⁴Greek: οἱ πολλοί. It is not always necessary to press this to its extreme sense of "the majority."

⁵κάπηλος. See Hans Windisch, "Καπηλεύω," *TDNT* 3 (1965) 603-5.

moral purity and was apparently derived from the words for sun (ἥλιος) and test (κρίνω). Hence the sense is "tested by the light of the sun, spotless, pure."⁶ From the subjective side of Paul's own mind, he had spoken with purity. Objectively, the source of his commission was from God (ἐκ θεοῦ). Furthermore, he and his companions had carried on their ministry "in the sight of God," that is, with full consciousness that they were responsible to him and were being watched by him. Finally, they had spoken "in Christ," being fully aware of their position as members of Christ's Body and drawing power from their vital union with Him. Such a ministry left little room for suspicion.

ITS BEST RECOMMENDATION WAS THE LIVES OF THE CORINTHIAN
CONVERTS (3:1-3)

Verse 1. At this point Paul felt a bit of awkwardness over the possibility that his previous statement might have sounded self-serving. The use of "again" could imply certain prior claims about himself made in previous contacts with the Corinthians or perhaps may reflect accusations made against him by the religious "peddlers" who caused him trouble (2:17). Lest the wrong impression be left, he quickly added another question which should have shown how baseless such a suspicion was. Surely Paul did not need letters of recommendation at this point, either to them (he had led many of them to Christ and had founded their church), or from them (as if he depended on them for acceptance elsewhere). Letters of recommendation were a common practice when persons were otherwise unknown. The Corinthian church had once received one regarding Apollos (Acts 18:27). Antioch had received one from Jerusalem about Silas and Judas (Acts 15:25-27). Paul himself had written many such commendations (for example, Phoebe, Rom 16:1-2; Timothy, 1 Cor 16:10-11; Barnabas, Col 4:10). If Paul had been recently disparaged on grounds that no one recommended him, then let the Corinthians pause to remember a few things.

Verse 2. The Corinthians themselves were Paul's letter of recommendation, far better than formal credentials. Furthermore, they had formed such an important part of his ministry that it could be said they were actually inscribed in the hearts of the missionary party. Hence Paul and his companions had the interests of the Corinthians close to their hearts wherever they went. This living proof of Paul's authority and effectiveness as a minister of Christ should have been

⁶F. Buchsel, "Εὐαγγελισμὸς . . . ," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 397-98.

perfectly obvious to all persons who would take the trouble to examine the transformed lives of the Corinthians.

Verse 3. Actually, it had been made clear⁷ that they were Christ's letter. Paul and his helpers were more like amanuenses⁸ whom Christ had used to communicate his message. Christ was the one who had wrought the change in the Corinthians' lives. Through his power they had become his letter to the world as to what the gospel could do. As such they were no mere document written with ink but had been acted upon by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Nor were they like the inanimate tablets of stone in the old covenant of law given to Moses. Rather, Christ had written his message on tablets of human hearts. This concept was undoubtedly based on the OT prophecy of the new covenant (Jer 31:33, compare Heb 8:8-12). The new covenant mediated by Christ through the Spirit produced an inward change whereby God's Word was actually implanted in believers, not just externally imposed. This transforming work made the believers Paul's greatest recommendation.

IT MINISTERED THE NEW COVENANT (3:4-18)

The source of Paul's competence (3:4-6)

Verse 4. The confidence Paul had that Christ was speaking through him was no mere personal boasting. It had not resulted from any self-satisfaction based on strenuous effort, skillful performance, or unusual human competence. It was rather a conviction supplied by Christ himself and was a confidence that would stand up before God.

Verse 5. Here Paul answers the question he raised in 2:16. Whatever adequacy or sufficiency he and his companions possessed was not the product of their own ability or origination. He did not deny that a competent piece of work had been done in their midst, but he disclaimed all personal credit. Adequacy for the task had come from God.

Verse 6. It was God who had made his ministers competent for their task. Their ministry was the proclamation of the new covenant. This covenant was God's promise to deal in grace with his people by forgiving their sin and granting them new hearts. The covenant was validated by the death of Christ (Matt 26:28). Although national Israel

⁷Greek: φανερούμενοι. The term denotes making something visible which is invisible.

⁸An amanuensis was a stenographer or copyist, who did the actual writing for an author.

has not yet experienced the fulfilment of the covenant, the spiritual benefits of it are available to every believer through the gospel. It was as a proclaimer of this new covenant which offered regeneration to men that Paul was carrying out his ministry.

The new covenant is "not of the letter but of the Spirit." We must not suppose that the common English contrast between "letter" and "spirit" as distinguishing "the letter of the law" from its underlying spiritual principles is meant. Paul certainly did not mean that the literal meaning of the OT was harmful and that only spiritual principles or allegorical interpretations were valid. On the contrary, he was contrasting the two covenants, as is clear from the context. By "letter" he meant the old Mosaic covenant which was a document externally imposed upon its adherents. "Spirit" characterizes the new covenant which provides an internal change wrought by the Spirit of God (3:3).

The contrast between the two covenants is noted in their results. "The letter kills" clearly refers to the Mosaic covenant, as v 7 indicates. It killed in the sense that it confronted man with God's righteous standard but left him condemned to death. The law could not of itself provide righteousness. Regeneration, however, is produced by the Spirit and provides life for everyone who by faith comes under the provisions of the new covenant. This is not to imply that no one in the OT had spiritual life. What it does indicate is that life comes by the action of the Spirit, not by human ability to keep God's standards. OT saints were saved by faith in the transforming power and grace of God, just as NT believers are.

The great glory of the new covenant (3:7-11)

Verse 7. As Paul continued to describe his ministry as involving the preaching of the new covenant, he showed its superiority over the old covenant. Doubtless the opposition he continually received from Judaizing teachers who stressed the Mosaic law made this emphasis especially important. The argument was based on the admitted glory of the old covenant, called here "the ministry of death." In view is the giving of the law on Sinai with its glorious accompanying circumstances. It is called the ministry of death because it "killed" (3:6) by placing its offenders under condemnation.

In spite of its death-dealing results, the old covenant was nevertheless a product of God and was initiated with impressive phenomena. One of those remarkable displays was the appearance of Moses' face. When he descended from the mountain, his face shone with a supernatural glow so that he had to put on a veil (see Exod 34:29-35). Paul reminded his readers, however, that this glorious glow

was a fading thing, and later he expands this thought to symbolize the temporary nature of the old covenant (3:11).

Verse 8. The question is then asked, to which the answer should be obvious: "Will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?" (NIV). If the former dispensation had a covenant which ministered death, surely the new covenant, which provides regeneration by the Spirit⁹ of God (3:3, 6), should be regarded as even more glorious.

Verse 9. The argument is reinforced by another comparison. Once again Paul argues from the assumption that the old covenant, here termed "the ministry of condemnation," possessed a genuine glory. This was true even though it was a covenant that placed man under condemnation because no one was ever able to keep it perfectly.

The new covenant was a different sort, and not only did not leave its subjects under condemnation, but provided something positive. Paul calls it "the ministry of righteousness" because it supplies its recipients with God's approval instead of condemnation. "Righteousness" is a legal term which denotes the judge's pronouncement that the defendant is acceptable without any broken law to accuse him. In the new covenant which is based upon Christ's substitutionary death for sinners, all who believe are provided with God's verdict of righteousness—His approval and acceptance, based not on the merits of the sinner but on the perfect righteousness of Christ. Surely a ministry that involves such a covenant must abound with glory!

Verse 10. Paul now reaches the climax of his argument by pointing to the temporary character of the old covenant and the evident superiority of that new covenant which was planned to take its place. The Greek text at this point does not translate easily into clear English. Both NASB and NIV have paraphrased somewhat, but the sense is made clear. "That which has been glorified" (literal) refers to the old covenant mediated by Moses which had certain attendant glories already mentioned. "Has not been glorified in this respect" indicates some limitations upon the glory which it did have. "The glory which surpasses it" refers to the greater glory of the new covenant which the apostles were ministering. Paul's point is that the glory of the old has been eclipsed by the greater glory of the new. Just as the moon becomes invisible in the overpowering sunlight of the day, so the glory of the old covenant and its ministry has faded away.

⁹ τοῦ πνεύματος (of the Spirit) is regarded here as an objective genitive, parallel with the other objective genitives τοῦ θανάτου (of death) in 3:7, and τῆς κατακρίσεως (of condemnation) and τῆς δικαιοσύνης (of righteousness) in 3:9.

Verse 11. After acknowledging that the law existed with a genuine glory for a time, while at the same time noting that it was a transitory, fading instrument just as the glow on Moses' face (3:7), Paul drew the significant conclusion: How much more should we understand that the new covenant which replaced the former one *remains* in glory. It should be obvious that anything which God has given to supersede a glorious covenant must be even more glorious.

The openness of the new covenant (3:12-18)

Verse 12. The previous reference to the fading glory of the old covenant and the experience of Moses led Paul to emphasize another important feature of the new covenant—its openness in contrast to the old.

“Having such a hope” is Paul’s statement of assurance that the provisions of the new covenant will all be realized. Therefore, he and his assistants had no hesitancy in proclaiming its truth with great boldness. They were not fearful of the Judaizers, even though it was surely a startling message in Jewish circles to proclaim that the Mosaic law as a system for God’s people had been replaced by another covenant.

Verse 13. Paul used the incident at Sinai where Moses placed a veil over his face (Exod 34:33-35) to illustrate his point. The KJV translation of Exod 34:33 implies that Moses wore the veil while he was speaking with Israel, and then took it off. The supplied word “till” has been corrected to “when” in ASV, NASB, and NIV. The proper sense of the passage is that Israel was allowed to see the radiant face of Moses when he was conveying God’s word to them, but that he covered his face when he was finished. Paul correctly understood the reason to be that Moses did not wish the Israelites to be watching his face each time the glory faded away.¹⁰

Verse 14. This dramatic procedure of Moses, however, was confronted by the spiritual hardness of Israelite hearts. Most of them failed to understand the true nature of the glory of Moses’ face. Paul explains that the same spiritual dullness existed among the Jews of his day. Just as the veil hid the fading glory of Moses’ face from Jewish observers, so the same sort of obscuring veil seemed to hide the true meaning of the old covenant when it was read by Israel. They

¹⁰This is the view of most modern commentators. P. E. Hughes, however, rejects this explanation and suggests Moses’ action as merely intended to prevent Israel from continually beholding even this transient glory because of their sinfulness. *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 107-10.

were unable to see that it was transient, that it pointed to Christ, and that it would be replaced by a new covenant.

The obscuring veil of unbelief remains unlifted for Israel because it is removed only in connection with Christ and his work. Only by faith in him can the glory of the new covenant be seen, as well as the replacement of the old by the new.

Verse 15. The previous verse described the veil as resting upon the old covenant and obscuring the proper understanding of it. Here Paul makes it clear that the fault was not with that covenant, but with the people. The veil was actually over their hearts. The old covenant was not misleading. The problem lay in the unbelief of Jewish hearts. This circumstance was true at the writing of 2 Corinthians twenty-five years after Christ's resurrection. It still characterizes Israel as a nation more than nineteen centuries later.

Verse 16. The language of this verse is adapted from Exod 34:34. There it described Moses who took the veil off when he went to speak with the Lord. Paul used that terminology to illustrate what happens when anyone turns to the Lord. Faith in Christ removes the obscuring veil from the heart and there is open communion with God under the terms of the new covenant as announced in the gospel.

Because no subject is given in the original text for the verb "returns," the KJV has supplied "it," referring presumably to "heart" as the antecedent. NASB supplies "a man" and NIV uses "anyone." Contextually it is likely that "the heart of a Jew" is meant. However, the statement could also be regarded as a general one, "whenever one turns. . . ." The truth is the same for Jew or gentile: turning to the Lord in faith removes the separating veil of obscurity, and the true understanding of the old covenant can be gained.

Verse 17. There is a clear relationship of this verse to 3:6 and 8. There it was stated that the new covenant proceeds from the Spirit, it is life-giving, and is more glorious than the old covenant. Paul then illustrated from the life of Moses the transitory character of the old covenant, in contrast to the open unveiled nature of the new. Now he points out that the Lord Himself is the Spirit about whom he has been speaking. On the understanding that "the Lord" is a reference to Christ, as is usual with Paul, the thought is that Christ and the Spirit are one in essence, just as Christ and the Father are one (John 10:30) in that mysterious union of the Trinity. In the new covenant Christ brings about the inner transformation of believers by the action of the Spirit (called in 3:3 the Spirit of the living God).

This activity of the Spirit of the Lord brings liberty, not deadness (3:6) or bondage. New birth by the Spirit has infused believers with

new life, and brings freedom from enslavement to sin's guilt and power (Gal 5:1-5).

Verse 18. Consequently, all Christians, not just the apostles, behold God's glory with an unveiled face. Because they have turned to the Lord, the veil has been removed from their understanding and they have open access to the revelation of God in Christ.

Our versions vary between the concepts of "beholding as in a mirror" or "reflecting" as translations for a Greek word appearing only this once in the NT.¹¹ Although the idea of reflecting fits the parallel with Moses who reflected the glory of God, the translation "beholding" is usually preferred. The ancient versions commonly understood it this way. There is no clear instance of the verb having the meaning "reflect" unless it is in the active voice (it is middle here). Furthermore the passage speaks of believers who can now see clearly because the veil has been removed from them.

With faces (and hearts) unveiled, believers may behold the glory of God as they are brought into relationship with him through Christ (see also 4:6). Those who press the imagery may identify the mirror as the Word, or Christ, or something else. Inasmuch as mirrors in Paul's day were polished metal giving somewhat imperfect images, the thought is explained as indicating that even though our vision of Christ's glory is vastly superior to the OT experiences, it is still something less than the final vision when we see him face to face (1 Cor 13:12; 1 John 3:2). It is not necessary, however, to push the interpretation this far, since the emphasis in the statement is not upon the mirror but upon the beholding.

As believers behold the Lord's glory, now that the veil of spiritual dullness is removed, they are continually being transformed¹² into his image. The word describes a change of form which is intrinsic. The true nature of the child of God is progressively revealed, just as the process of metamorphosis transforms the true nature of the caterpillar into a butterfly. Paul is referring to the progressive sanctification of believers whereby as they behold Christ and increase in their understanding of him, they become more and more like him, from one stage of glory to the next. We perceive Christ's glory as we seek spiritual nourishment in the Word of God, the Scripture. The transformation is then accomplished in us supernaturally by the Lord, identified here as the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who gives the new covenant its distinctive character (3:6, 8). No wonder the apostle

¹¹The verb κατοπτρίζω in the active means "to produce a reflection" and in the middle "to look at oneself in a mirror." It is the middle voice which appears in 3:18. So BAGD, 425-26; *TDNT* 2 (1964) 696.

¹²The present tense of the verb μεταμορφούμεθα denotes progressive action.

exulted as he did at being involved in Christian ministry which could accomplish such a feat!

The glory of the Christian ministry which Paul has been describing did not, however, mean that it always enjoyed uninterrupted successes. Its glory pertained chiefly to its spiritual significance, and this feature is not seen by everyone. Those who tend to judge the value of anything solely by immediate results, outward trappings of "success," or by physical and temporal benefits need to realize another aspect of true Christian ministry.

The sobering fact is that Christian ministry is faced with obstacles. The accomplishment of God's work is no easy task. Paul informed the church that his own ministry was beset with various kinds of accusations and criticisms. Furthermore, he and his assistants lived constantly under the threat of death. Their physical bodies were paying a price for their commitment to this ministry. The secret of their steadfastness lay in their unshakeable faith in God's revealed truth and in the eternal value of Christ's cause. In this vein Paul continued the description of the character of his ministry which he began in 2:14.

IT WAS CARRIED OUT OPENLY (4:1-6)

Verse 1. This paragraph not only is a positive assertion of the openness and candor with which Paul and his assistants had ministered, but seems also to be a response to criticisms leveled against him by certain Corinthians (see 1:12, 17; 3:1).

"This ministry" to which he referred was the ministry of the new covenant (3:6). It was the task of proclaiming and teaching the gospel of Christ, the glorious news that sins have been forgiven through Christ's death, and that his perfect righteousness has been made available to those who will trust him for it. Paul had previously disclaimed any personal adequacy that had made him worthy of this responsibility (3:5). Now once again he evidences deep humility by saying "we received mercy" in being given such a task. Does this imply that some of the religious peddlers at Corinth (2:17) were suggesting that Paul and his associates were too high-handed or authoritarian when they preached among them? Then let them know that Paul's ministry was no display of ego or personal vanity, but the response of one who viewed his position as an instance of God's mercy on undeserving men.

Consequently, Paul and his men did not "lose heart" (ἐγκακοῦμεν). In spite of accusations and difficulties, they continued performing their ministry without cowardice or discouragement. A firm conviction of the nature of their mission kept them going.

Verse 2. Paul claimed an openness about his ministry with complete absence of any sort of secrecy or subterfuge. There had been a renunciation or disowning of those things which one hides because of a sense of shame.¹³ As ministers of God, there had been no trickery in their methods or their message. They had done no falsifying or adulterating of the Word of God when they proclaimed the gospel. They were not guilty of giving wrong emphases or withholding significant parts of the truth.

Again, one can imagine that certain criticisms of Paul may be alluded to here. Had Judaizing teachers accused him of omitting certain teachings regarding compliance with Mosaic rites? Were they accusing him of enticing gentiles with a watered-down message of salvation at the outset, with the scheme in mind of adding the other essentials later? Paul's clear answer was that the Word of God had been handled in such a way as to display its truth to every open-minded listener. It has been taught not only for intellectual stimulation, but its moral and spiritual implications had been clearly aimed at the conscience of each hearer. This in turn should have commended the preachers themselves to the conscience of every Corinthian as being faithful messengers of God. These words reflect no self-seeking on the part of Paul, but rather were his solemn recognition that his ministry was carried on "in the sight of God," who was not only guiding his labors, but was also enlightening the consciences of those who were open to his truth. How refreshing it would be if it could be said of every preacher that his chief commendation was his fidelity to the truth of God's Word and the impact which he makes upon the consciences of his hearers.

Verse 3. Paul recognized, however, that not everyone responds favorably to the gospel. The reference to "every man's conscience" (4:2) was a generalization with many exceptions. "Even if our gospel is veiled" (NASB, NIV) states a condition which he was willing to assume as true.¹⁴ He quickly explained, however, that the problem was not with the gospel nor its preachers but with the unbelieving hearers. It is veiled to "those who are perishing." Paul has moved in his figure from the veil over the face of Moses (3:13) to the veil over the heart of Israel (3:15), and now the veil is over the gospel as far as unbelievers are concerned.

Verse 4. This veiling of the gospel was not because Paul had used secrecy in his preaching or deviousness in his methods. Rather it was

¹³This is BAGD's translation of τὰ κρυπτά τῆς αἰσχύνῃς ("the hidden things of shame"). The translation "hidden things of dishonesty" (KJV) reflects the obsolete English usage of "dishonest" in the sense of "shameful."

¹⁴A first class condition, using εἰ with the indicative mood.

because the thoughts of perishing unbelievers had been blinded by the "god of this world." The reference is to Satan, who is called elsewhere by the similar titles "prince of this world" (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and "prince of the power of the air" (Eph 2:2). He is "god," not in any dualistic sense as equal to and independent of the true God, but only in the limited sense that his followers so regard him, and at present God allows him to utilize this power over the minds of sinners.

Because of Satan's action in blinding the minds of sinners, they are not able to see the illumination of the glory of Christ which the gospel provides. The good news about Jesus Christ as Lord, his unique Person, his stupendous works, and his incomparable teachings—all are minimized, explained away, or otherwise perverted so that the spiritual enlightenment which could save their souls from destruction is disregarded. The glory of Christ is essentially his unique person as the image of God, the one who is the revealer of the invisible God (Col 1:15; John 1:18), on whom men must depend if they would see the Father (John 14:9) and receive salvation.

Verse 5. Paul will not let his readers escape the real issue involved in Christian ministry. It was not a promotion of the preacher, directly or indirectly. He and his associates had never preached themselves. The heart of their ministering the gospel was their proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord.¹⁵ This acknowledgment is basic to the gospel (Rom 10:9; 1 Cor 12:3) and thus lay at the heart of Paul's message. One should beware of drawing categorical distinctions between accepting Christ as Savior and accepting him as Lord. Both are clearly involved in any true commitment to Christ.

Just as Paul had been faithful in presenting Christ as Lord in his preaching, so he and his associates had been careful to maintain their own position as servants among the Corinthians. He did not mean that the Corinthians were the masters, for Christ was the Master whom they served. But he did mean that as Christ's servants, they had followed his orders and that had involved ministering to the Corinthians.

Verse 6. The reason why the messengers gave no thought to promoting themselves was due to the overwhelming grandeur of the Source from which their message came. God, who had once brought physical light out of darkness by his creative command (Gen 1:3), had himself shone with spiritual enlightenment in the hearts of believers. At creation, light resulted from a command of God. At regeneration, God himself shines as the illumination.

¹⁵Word order suggests that κύριον should be regarded as a predicate usage, "Jesus Christ as Lord." If it were simply part of the title, one would have expected it to be first in the series: "Lord Jesus Christ."

This light from God is explained as the knowledge of God as revealed in the face of Jesus Christ. Sin hardens the heart (3:14), makes it unbelieving and insensitive to God (3:16), and is utilized by Satan to keep men in the spiritual darkness of unbelief (4:4). The great mission of Christ is his role as the image of God to reveal the Father's glory to men when they have a spiritual encounter with his Son.

For Paul this transforming encounter had occurred on the Damascus road more than twenty years earlier. At that time he had been struck down with an overpowering light and had seen the glorious Lord who identified himself as Jesus (Acts 9:1-9; 22:5-11; 26:12-18). Some of the phenomena of that occasion probably influenced Paul's language here ("light," "glory of God," "face of Christ"). However, one must not limit the thrust of this verse simply to the miraculous physical happenings on that day. The use of the plural "our hearts" shows that more than one person was in the apostle's thought, and the reference to God's action of shining in "hearts" applies to the spiritual experience of every believer.

IT WAS PERFORMED, HOWEVER, IN BODILY WEAKNESS (4:7-18)

Present trials of God's messenger (4:7-12)

Verse 7. Paul's ministry of proclaiming the new covenant (3:6) carried with it certain burdens. Not the least of them was the presence of various trials which God's messengers must undergo. "This treasure" refers to the light of the knowledge of God in Christ as explained in the preceding verse. This sublime truth is contained, however, in "earthen vessels" ("jars of clay," NIV). The figure depicts pottery jars used as storage for all sorts of items. Household lamps were made of clay to hold oil and a wick. Valuables were stored in such jars. The Dead Scrolls were found in pottery jars after being hidden for nineteen centuries. Paul used the figure to depict either the human body with its frailties, or perhaps the entire human personality¹⁶ inasmuch as body, soul, and spirit are a unity, and all are subject to weakness, suffering, and discouragement.

Paul wanted no mistake to be made about the true nature of the Christian message in comparison to the significance of the minister. The human instrument is weak and expendable; the message is vital and of inestimable value. By utilizing frail human ministers, God demonstrates that the "surpassing greatness of the power" (NASB) which transforms men's lives is from God and not from any preacher.

¹⁶ Alfred Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 127.

Verse 8. In a series of four contrasting parallels, Paul shows what he and other true ministers were continually facing. "Troubled on every side, yet not distressed" (KJV) has been also translated "hard pressed . . . but not crushed" (NIV). The idea is that in spite of pressures that would thwart their effectiveness, they were never completely crushed so that their ministry totally failed. In Paul's ministry such experiences were multiplied. At Philippi, for example, he was arrested and imprisoned; yet the gospel was not stopped, for the jailer and his household were converted (Acts 16). At Corinth, he had been arrested and accused before the provincial governor, but dismissal of the case gave new opportunities for the gospel.

"Perplexed, but not despairing" is a play on words¹⁷ which is not easily preserved in English. One has rendered it "being at a loss, but not having lost out."¹⁸ These contrasting phrases emphasize human inability as offset by divine enablement. Perhaps Paul was thinking of experiences like his recent one at Ephesus, where the riot in the city left him powerless to act, and yet God still preserved his Christian witness (Acts 19).

Verse 9. They were continually being persecuted by opponents of the Christian message, but they were never abandoned by the Lord who had sent them. Paul regularly experienced pursuit by one group or another. He was frequently a hunted man (Acts 9:23-24, 28-29; 13:50; 14:5-6, 19-20; *et al.*). Yet never did they conclude that God had forsaken them, and for this reason they continued their ministry. From time to time adversaries might succeed in casting them down, but never would this result in their destruction before their mission was accomplished. God's enablement was still in operation, even though great obstacles were faced by his messengers

Verse 10. Here Paul begins an explanation of the preceding paradoxes. The sufferings which the apostolic party experienced, along with the successful accomplishment of their mission in spite of impending disaster, must be interpreted as Paul here indicates. Their sufferings were actually a "carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus." The next verse (4:11) is parallel in thought and makes it clear that Christ's physical sufferings and death were in view. Paul and the other apostles were constantly under threat of physical death just as Jesus was. Now the hatred of men for the Son of God was being directed against Paul and others as they attempted to carry out their Christian ministry. The word "dying" (νέκρωσιν) does not mean simply "death," but the process of dying. He chose this term to

¹⁷Greek: ἀπορούμενοι ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐξαπορούμενοι.

¹⁸R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, 977-78.

emphasize not just one act, but the repeated sufferings which were directed against his life in order to put him to death.

Nevertheless Paul could look beyond the trials to the grander purpose which was being served. God's suffering servants not only showed their identification with Christ by their willingness to suffer as he did, but they also displayed his life in their bodies. It was Christ living in them that enabled them not to be crushed, be despairing, feel forsaken, or be destroyed. They ran the risk of death in order to proclaim the new life in Christ, and they did this by personal demonstration of Christ's life in their own lives.

Verse 11. In this parallel expression, Paul's meaning in the preceding verse is more fully explained. As ministers of Christ he and the other apostles were continually exposed to the danger of physical death. This was what Paul meant by carrying about in his body "the dying of Jesus." He had learned at the very beginning of his Christian life that persecution directed against Christians was regarded by Jesus as actually directed against him (Acts 9:4-5; cf. Col 1:24). The purpose, however, was not to undergo suffering for suffering's sake, but that "the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh." The proclamation of the new life in Christ became more clearly manifested when it was set forth against such a dramatic background. The eternal life provided by Jesus who said "I am the life" (John 14:6) enabled his messengers to be victorious in spite of physical weakness and would ultimately make them triumphant even though many of them would experience a martyr's death.

Verse 12. In summation, death was an ever-present reality with Christ's messengers, but his purposes were being accomplished because eternal life was being received by the Corinthians and others who had responded to the gospel.

Paul was not describing explicitly the experience of every Christian in this passage, but primarily that of himself and the other apostles. In the context he was not talking about the Corinthians, but about those who had preached to them. Nevertheless the principle was set forth that God's servants have his truth in earthen vessels that are fragile and subject to damage. By application of this principle every Christian may recognize that physical weakness and opposition from adversaries can cause hardship in the performance of any Christian ministry.

Importance of faith to God's messenger (4:13-18)

Verse 13. It must not be supposed, however, that Paul's previous words were a bitter complaint about the personal difficulties of his

ministry. What sustained him and his companions was the same viewpoint and attitude which the psalmist expressed in Ps 116:10, "I believed, therefore I spoke." The context of these words in the psalm reveals the writer to have been in great adversity (116:3, 6, 8). Yet his faith in God caused him to pray for deliverance (116:4), and he continued to bear his testimony, believing that God ultimately brings vindication to his saints whether in this life or the next (116:2, 9, 10, 15). This same "spirit of faith"¹⁹ permeated Paul and his suffering companions. It was because they had an abiding faith in God who had revealed his Son to them that they continued to speak forth the gospel in spite of continual risk and frequent affliction.

Verse 14. A firm faith in the resurrection made Paul willing to risk death in order to carry out his ministry. He was convinced that the Father had raised Jesus for he had seen him on the Damascus road. He also firmly believed that Christ's resurrection had guaranteed the resurrection of all others who were united to him by faith. Consequently, no fear of death could divert him from his mission of proclaiming the new covenant that God has provided for men (3:6).

Does it seem that Paul had earlier expected to avoid death through the rapture (1 Thess 4:13ff.), but has now become resigned to dying and looks only to the resurrection? It is better to understand Paul's view as exactly what our Lord had taught: namely, that his coming was imminent, but unpredictable. Every believer should be ready at all times for either eventuality. We should long for the Lord's return and the prospect of meeting him by whatever route he may require of us.

Verse 15. So firm was Paul's faith that he could look with joy at the outcome of his labors, even though they were being done at tremendous cost. "All things" that he and the other ministers were undergoing were for the benefit of the Corinthians and other Christians. His eye of faith saw beyond the immediate trials. What he saw was God's saving grace being multiplied through a continuous stream of new converts. As the grace of God in the gospel was received by more and more people, the thanksgiving of their grateful hearts would overflow and bring glory to God. It was faith that enabled him to have God's perspective.

¹⁹Some interpreters explain this phrase as "the Spirit of faith," a direct reference to the Holy Spirit; others have suggested an indirect reference to the Spirit as the bestower of a gift of faith. However, the expression is more generally understood here as denoting a spiritual state or disposition. Compare the similar phrase of Paul, "a spirit of meekness" (1 Cor 4:21, Gal 6:1).

Verse 16. In spite of great obstacles, therefore, Paul and his associates did not “lose heart” (ἐγκακοῦμεν). The same verb is used as in 4:1. No amount of discouragement could make him abandon his mission. He freely admitted that his “outer man” was decaying. He had previously spoken of physical life as “earthen vessels” (4:7) and would later refer to it as an “earthly tent” (5:1). Furthermore, the hardships of travel and the heavy burden of the care of the churches placed great strain upon his physical body. His various imprisonments, beatings, and continual harassments had left their scars.

Nevertheless, of far greater significance in Paul’s eyes was the “inner man,” and here the story was far different. His inner man was being renewed as each day passed by. The reference is to the Christian’s regenerated spiritual existence which can grow stronger in spite of physical weakness. This inner man is also called by Paul the “new man” (Col 3:10), and is described as experiencing continuous renewal as believers increase in their understanding of God through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (Eph 3:16). As Paul’s Christian life progressed toward its inevitable earthly close, his physical capacities might lessen, but his spiritual awareness of God’s program continued to develop. He understood more clearly the values which should govern the Christian’s outlook, and he shared them with his readers.

Verse 17. Because of the spiritual insight which his inner man now understood, he could refer to his incredible trials as “momentary, light affliction.” Humanly considered, they could have been regarded far differently, and Paul himself did not minimize their severity (4:8-12). Yet Paul here was looking at them in the light of Romans 8:28 and the eternal purposes of God. He understood that, severe as they were, they were momentary and light in comparison to the “eternal weight of glory” which lies ahead for all who trust the Lord and serve him faithfully. “Weight” (βάρος) is probably used in contrast to “light” or “lightness” (ἐλαφρόν). Human assessment would call physical afflictions a heavy weight. Paul said they were actually light in comparison to the glory that “far outweighs them all” (NIV). Faith enabled him to view his life this way.

Verse 18. This statement gives the essence of Paul’s ability to see the glory of Christian ministry rather than to be disillusioned by the obstacles. He and others like him had learned not to focus their gaze on things which are seen, but to fix their attention with eyes of faith on things which are not seen. They had learned the basic truth that the matters of this present world, including even the most serious of human afflictions, are only transitory. It is the unseen things of the

spiritual life that are of eternal value. The regenerated life, the continuing ministry of the Spirit, the growing comprehension of God through daily communion with him, the promises of God for the present and the future—all of these and many more are things not seen, but they are just as real as the visible objects of this world and are far more permanent. With this kind of spiritual emphasis in Paul's life, no earthly obstacle could blur his vision of the glory of serving Christ.