

# The Incorporation of the Triune God in the Character and Service of the Apostles (1)

by Kerry S. Robichaux

*I know a man in Christ.*  
(2 Cor. 12:2)

I have been interested for some time in what I would call an underlayer, or subtext, in the writings of the New Testament. This underlayer involves the mode of the divine operation in the ministry of Christ and in the work of the Holy Spirit. I hope that I have shown in previous articles in this series (see Works Cited) that the New Testament describes the operation of Christ and the Spirit as one that Witness Lee has characterized as incorporation (*Issue* 21-22, 24-26, 40-42). By the term *incorporation* Witness Lee and I refer to the principle that when any one of the three of the Divine Trinity acts, all three operate. In other words, when any one of the three acts, He incorporates the operation of the other two in His action. What is manifest is the action of the one, but in that manifest action there is the incorporate operation of the other two. Thus, every action of God, of Christ, and of the Spirit is an incorporation of the operations of the Triune God. Even in actions that have been traditionally associated with one of the three (for example, the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ), all three operate by the one incorporating the others. Certainly, the distinctions between the three are preserved, and thus, we should rightly understand, for example, that it was the Son of God who became flesh, died for our redemption, and rose from the dead. Yet at the same time we should recognize that in what are distinctly the Son's manifest actions, the Father and the Spirit operate by way of the Son's incorporation of them in His being and doing. The same is true of the actions of the Father and the Spirit.

In my five previous articles in this series I have attempted to show in detail the textual basis in the New Testament for the principle of incorporation. The Gospel of John is especially rich in showing the incorporate operations of the Triune God in the manifest actions of Christ, and

perhaps one example from it will help to more clearly illustrate the principle. In John 14:10 the Lord Jesus said, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works." Here two discrete aspects of the relationship between the Son and the Father are explicitly referred to, and one is implied. These three aspects more finely define what I wish to describe by the term *incorporation*. The implied aspect is one of mutual interdependence of existence, whereby the Son is the Son in the Godhead because there is a Father in the Godhead, and the Father is the Father in the Godhead because there is a Son in the Godhead. In terms of classical Latin theology this mutual interdependence of existence is called *coinherence*, or *circuminsession*. But also in this verse we explicitly see the mutual indwelling of the Son and the Father: "I am in the Father and the Father is in Me." This aspect of the relationship between the Son and the Father has more technically been called *perichoresis* (Greek for "mutual interpenetration") in Greek theology and *circuminsession* in Latin thought. Here the point is not a mutual interdependence of existence but a mutual interpenetration of hypostases and a dynamic fellowship in the divine life that exists among the persons of the Trinity. Also, John 14:10 explicitly refers to the hidden mutual operation of the Father in the manifest action of the Son on the earth. When the Son spoke openly on the earth, He did so not only by virtue of His own agency but also through the operation of His heavenly Father, who abides in Him and does His work in Him. The Son's action of speaking, and the effectual benefit of His speaking, occurred because the Father operated ("does His works") in the Son. The mutual operation of the three in every action of any one of the Divine Trinity is no doubt the most obvious aspect of incorporation to be found in the Gospel of John, because so much of the Gospel of John relates to the actions of the Son. But it should be noted that the mutual

operation of the three in the Godhead manifests and depends on the other two aspects of incorporation—circuminsession (coinherence) and circumincession (perichoresis). While this one verse shows the Son incorporating the operation of the Father, there are ample verses in the Gospels that show the Son incorporating the Spirit's operation as well (e.g., Matt. 4:1; 12:18, 28; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21) and others that show the Son incorporating both the Father's and the Spirit's operation (e.g., Matt. 3:16-17).

In John 14:10 the Son declared explicitly that in His manifest action of speaking the Father is operating (“does His works”) and that the Father is operating in His speaking because He is in the Father and the Father is in Him. Thus, the notion of incorporation is the ideational focus of John 14:10. But in most instances where the New Testament textually indicates the incorporation of the operations of the Triune God, the indication is what I am calling an underlayer, or subtext; that is, the ideational focus of the text in these instances is not usually the incorporation of the Triune God but some other matter,

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in line with the running narrative or exposition. Thus, instances of incorporation in the New Testament are primarily what we may call background information that usually relates to how the agents in the narrative or exposition do what they do. It is almost uncanny how often the writers in the New Testament characterize the actions of their text agents (which are often themselves) as incorporating the operations of the Triune God. It is safe to say that in many instances the matter of incorporation is indicated almost casually. But that does not detract from the importance of the notion. In fact, that it seems to be so pervasively mentioned, even in a casual way, indicates that the notion was strongly held by the New Testament writers even when it was not apparently important to the actual points that they were making. It is as if they felt compelled to qualify the actions they described as incorporate operations of the Triune God and not merely as manifest actions of their text agents. I hope that an examination of my previous articles will confirm this observation.

In my last three articles I was mainly interested in the

incorporation of the operations of the Triune God in the actions of Christ and the Spirit as seen in Acts through Jude. In this article and the ones to follow, I wish to turn my attention to instances of the incorporation of the Triune God in the life of the New Testament believers. In determining instances of incorporation by Christ and the Spirit, what I was looking for were textual indications that in the manifest action or function by Christ or the Spirit there is also the distinct operation of another of the Divine Persons, similar to what was seen in John 14:10: “I say..., but the Father...does His works.” In considering instances of the incorporation of the Triune God by the New Testament believers, I am looking for textual indications that in the believers' manifest life and service there is also the operation of at least one of the persons of the Divine Trinity, that the text clearly indicates that the believers incorporate the operation of the Triune God in their life and service. As it was with the instances of incorporation by Christ and the Spirit, we find that instances of incorporation by the believers are very often in the background textually. Frequently they are not the ideational focus of the passages we find them in, and they can easily escape our notice or be dismissed as too casual to focus on. But they are supported by genuine textual material, and hence, they deserve our notice. Hopefully, the plethora of instances of incorporation by the believers found in Acts through Jude will affect how we view our life and service as New Testament believers.

The instances of incorporation by the believers are greater in number by far than those related to Christ and the Spirit. According to my reading of Acts through Jude, which is admittedly imprecise and perhaps generous in what it admits, I find 85 instances of the incorporation of the Triune God by Christ, 61 by the Spirit, and 368 by the believers (all told, 514 instances). Even allowing for the imprecision and generosity of my reading, one must be impressed with the magnitude of instances of the believers' incorporation of the Triune God. In a sense, it should come as no surprise that the New Testament frequently characterizes the actions of Christ and the Spirit as incorporating the operations of the Triune God. If we properly understand that the three of the Trinity, though always distinct, are never separate in being and action, we should expect the writers of the New Testament to occasionally manifest this understanding, even if only casually. What is significant in the greater number of instances involving the believers is that apparently the writers of the New Testament also understood that the believers likewise incorporate the operations of the Triune God in their being and living. It is quite easy to read the New Testament and gather mere ethical standards of outward behavior. But when we pay close attention to the subtext of incorporation as it relates to the believers, we begin to understand that the believers should have more than mere moral behavior based on a

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highly ethical existence. Rather, the believers, as the New Testament writers describe them, should incorporate the operation of the Triune God in their life and service, and it is this incorporated operation that gives the believers their real worth in God's economy and among humankind. In this article and the ones to follow, I hope to lay bare this underlayer of incorporation in Acts through Jude as it relates to the believers.

As I was reading Acts through Jude, looking for instances of the incorporation of the operations of the Triune God, it was quite easy to distinguish those instances which relate to the actions and functions of Christ and the Spirit from those that relate to the life and service of the believers. It is easy to distinguish the divine persons of God from the believers, and the full set of instances falls neatly into two unequal stacks of cards. But in the 368 instances of incorporation by the believers, I noticed a complication in texture. A significant number of these do not seem to actually relate to the life, service, and experience of the common believers. Some of these are particular to the experience of the apostles, and the number of these are not insignificant. Of the total 368 instances that relate to the believers generally, 115—almost a third—appear to relate to the unique experience of the apostles particularly. Paul makes clear that not all are apostles (1 Cor. 12:29), and thus, it seems right to make a distinction among the believers between those who function specifically in the gospel, in the raising up of local churches, and in defining, teaching, and propagating the truth (Recovery Version, v. 28, note 2), and those who function commonly, though not less importantly, as the vital members of Christ's Body in local churches everywhere. This is not to say that the experiences of the apostles have no bearing on what the believers should experience in their own life and service. Indeed, Paul presents himself, an apostle, as a pattern to be imitated by the believers (Phil. 3:17; 2 Thes. 3:9). Thus, the principles we see in the apostles' life and service should be considered as principles that the believers should strive to attain to in their own life and service. The particular point that I am hoping to establish in this article is that the defining characteristic of the apostles' life and service is one of incorporation, whereby in their manifest activities for God's economy the divine persons of the Triune God operate. My contention is that it is this incorporated operation of the Triune God that gives the apostles their real worth in God's economy and indeed defines their very existence and function as apostles.

I will not stray into the question of how apostles function today or even if they do at all. There is a wide spectrum of opinion among Christians today on the matter of apostles—at one end, a very formalized notion in Roman Catholicism that equates the papacy with apostleship and, at the other end, a radical notion in Protestantism

that apostles existed only at the beginning of the church age but not since. In the middle is the compromise that there are some who function as apostles even if they have no actual and formal appointment as such. Perhaps because of sin in our nature, the compromise is safest for all, for those who so function and for the churches who benefit from their function. But regardless of the actual status of apostles in the church today, the New Testament presents a very thorough view of the apostles' life and service in their ministry, and as patterns to us all, the apostles should be considered carefully. In this article I will focus on the character of apostles as seen in Acts through Jude insofar as it relates to the incorporation of the operation of the Triune God. In the article to follow I will focus on the service of apostles as it relates to the incorporation of the Triune God.

In previous articles I was careful to distinguish instances of incorporation of the Father, of the Son, and of the Spirit in the manifest actions of Christ and the Spirit. I felt that it was instructive to keep these lines straight so that we might peer with some greater attention into how God operates in the Trinity in all His actions and how the distinctions among the three of the Godhead are preserved in every one action of God. But in turning to the incorporation of the Triune God by the believers, and first particularly by the apostles, I feel it more appropriate not to divide up their experience according to the distinct operation of each of the three of the Godhead but to simply distinguish between the character and the service of the apostles as they incorporate the Triune God. In their experience the apostles and the believers incorporate one God, who is triune, and the New Testament text notices in one instance the distinct operation of the Father, in another the distinct operation of the Son, and in yet another the distinct operation of the Spirit. Sometimes the text indicates the distinct operations of two and sometimes of all three of the Godhead. But in experience the apostles and believers always manifest the operation of the one God, who is triune, and based upon what we gleaned in the preceding study of the actions and functions of Christ and the Spirit, we now know that whenever God acts, He does so as an incorporation of the operations of all three. Thus, as we now examine the character and the service of the apostles, what we will see are repeated instances of the apostles *incorporating the incorporate operation* of the Triune God. The redundancy in the phrase is deliberate, and the concept may be somewhat peculiar, but I believe that an examination of the passages below will bear this out.

As I have done previously, in this article I will adopt a catalog-and-commentary format in which I present groups of verses arranged by similar theme and, following each group, some comments that I hope will bring out the qualities of the incorporation of the Divine

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Trinity as it relates to the character of the apostles. In each group I will arrange the verses thematically and not necessarily in the order in which they appear in Acts and the Epistles.

### **Incorporation in the Character of the Apostles**

In examining aspects of the character of the apostles insofar as it manifests the incorporation of the Triune God, we will be considering the apostle Paul in almost all instances, for Paul is noticeably more vocal about the character and service of the apostles than the other New Testament writers. While there are other portions in the New Testament that describe and even define the work of the apostles, only in Paul's writings do we find an apostle "thinking out loud" about his being and working as an apostle. He does not shy away from expressing his understanding and feelings concerning the apostles' position and function in God's economy. More than with the other apostles, much of the effect of Paul's labor came, and still comes, through his writing, and his writing is imbued with his continual realization of what it means to

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be and work as an apostle. Although he was not one of the twelve, he was nevertheless a genuine apostle and ably represents all apostles in their character and their service. By his own admission he was "the least of the apostles" and "not fit to be called an apostle," because formerly he persecuted the church of God, but by the grace of God he was what he was, and he "labored more abundantly than all of them" (1 Cor. 15:9-10). In Paul we see that the apostleship was not limited to the twelve, whose unique function was to serve as witnesses to Christ's earthly life and His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22, 26). The apostleship that was committed to Paul was for the spread of the gospel, the establishing and building up of local churches, and the defining and publishing of the truth, and in these functions Paul was inferior to none. Finally, although we will be examining mainly Paul's testimony, we should note that Paul usually writes in the first person plural ("we," "us," "our") when he comments on the character and service of the apostles. Thus, to his mind he was functioning as part of the one body of apostles and probably considered his experience as common to and representative of all the apostles.

### ***In Their General Character***

Second Corinthians offers 34 instances of the incorporation of the Triune God in the character and service of the apostles, almost a third of all such instances. In this Epistle, more than in any of his others, Paul expresses much concerning the apostleship, and frequently he characterizes the apostleship as incorporating the operations of the Triune God. In chapter 2 he offers a graphic description of the function of the apostles, which serves as a statement about the character of the apostles in general:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in the Christ and manifests the savor of the knowledge of Him through us in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God in those who are being saved and in those who are perishing: To some a savor out of death unto death, and to the others a savor out of life unto life. And who is sufficient for these things? (2 Cor. 2:14-16)

Here Paul relies on the image of the triumphal procession for a conquering general to express how the apostles are presented to the world in which they travel and serve. They are captives led by God in triumph over His enemies, and He leads them "in the Christ;" that is, Christ incorporates the operation of the triumphant God to lead the apostles in their gospel move. But Paul goes on to include an interesting detail from this image—the fragrant incense that often accompanied these processions. That the apostles are a fragrance of Christ indicates that in character they exude Christ wherever they go. The impression they leave on people is not of themselves but of Christ, and through them God manifests the savor of the knowledge of Christ in every place they visit. To give off the fragrance of Christ to others, the apostles must incorporate Christ in their living and work. What they do and say and how they move are characterized by Christ's operation within them. Paul's view here is not common and should not be reduced to that of a mere traveling preacher with a gospel message. In their person the apostles are a fragrance of Christ because they live out the incorporation of Christ before all. To some this incorporate existence is odious; to others it is appealing. But in either case the reaction is not merely to the apostles themselves but more intrinsically to God in Christ, whom they incorporate. This quality of the apostles' character is beyond their human capacity, for Paul concludes the image with this question: "And who is sufficient for these things?" No one naturally, we should understand, for in their natural state the apostles are mere human beings, grossly void of the kind of savor that manifests a triumphant God in Christ. But in the character of those who incorporate Christ in their manifest actions, the apostles are more than sufficient, and through Christ's operation in their living and

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work they manifest God in Christ triumphing over His enemies in every place.

### *In Their Bearing About the Putting to Death and the Life of Jesus*

Another aspect of the character of the apostles is their incorporation of the subjective experience of Christ's death and resurrection.

Always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who are alive are always being delivered unto death for Jesus' sake that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death operates in us, but life in you. (2 Cor. 4:10-12)

Paul here relates the apostles' mystical experience of the putting to death of Jesus and the making alive of Jesus in resurrection. While the death and resurrection of Jesus are historical events, for the apostles these events have subjective reflexes that they bear in their bodies always. The many sufferings that characterize the life of the genuine apostles are in Paul's estimate the bearing about of the putting to death of Jesus on a continual basis (11:23-28), and this bearing about is their incorporation of Jesus in His death on the cross. Paul is not suggesting that the apostles participate in the redemptive function of Christ's death. Christ solely and uniquely served to accomplish redemption. But there is more effect in Christ's death than redemption, for through His death He also terminated the old man (Rom. 6:6). As the Firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15), when He died, the old creation died in Him, and He stands forever as the last Adam because His death serves as the ending of humankind in its natural creation (1 Cor. 15:45). The efficacy of this aspect of Christ's death is lived out continually in the sufferings of the apostles for their ministry. According to Paul's presentation here, the operation in Christ by which He terminated the old man and the old creation has efficacy over time, and that operation is incorporated by the apostles and characterizes their life and work. Outwardly, they are the ones who suffer, but intrinsically, it is the putting to death of Jesus that is in operation here. In their suffering they incorporate Jesus in His being put to death, and they live out the termination of the old man and the old creation in their life and work. In similar fashion, the resurrection of Christ is incorporated into the character of the apostles, who experience the making alive of Christ in their mortal bodies, thus manifesting His resurrection life in their life and work. It is significant that Paul uses the word *operates* in 2 Corinthians 4:12, for it indicates that something more than their own actions is involved in the ministry of the apostles, that in their manifest actions an inward operation occurs. "Death operates" in what they do, and this death is the subjective experience of Jesus' death to terminate the old

man and old creation. Further, attendant to this death, "life operates" in the believers as the benefactors of the apostles' ministry. In his previous breath, Paul says that the life of Jesus is manifested in the mortal flesh of the apostles; now he shifts and says that life operates in the believers. This transfer of the resurrection life of Jesus is the function of the apostles' New Testament ministry. Through their ministry the resurrection life that the apostles experience in their sufferings and manifest in their living and work is ministered to the believers through the word of the truth and becomes life to the believers as well. Thus, through the incorporation of the dying and being made alive of Jesus, as the character of their life and work, the apostles' ministry serves to bring the believers into the incorporation of the life of Jesus in their own experience.

### *In Their Suffering and Comforting*

Because of the sufferings attendant to their ministry, the apostles incorporate God's operation to comfort others.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassions and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction that we may be able to comfort those who are in every affliction through the comforting with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For even as the sufferings of the Christ abound unto us, so through the Christ our comfort also abounds. (2 Cor. 1:3-5)

Second Corinthians is a book heavy with Paul's experiences of suffering. In his function as an apostle, he underwent numerous trials and tribulations as he carried out his commission from the Lord. Paul's ability to endure these sufferings came from the comfort that he received directly from God. So prevailing was that comfort that he came to know God as "the Father of compassions and God of all comfort," and he introduced his second Epistle to the Corinthians with this appellative. Paul's characterization of the Father in this way points to the Father's operation within the apostles to comfort them in their afflictions. (It may also be that because this appellative is in apposition to "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul implies God's similar operation in Jesus Christ during His earthly ministry to comfort Him in His sufferings and afflictions.) As the apostles underwent numerous afflictions in their ministry, comfort abounded to them because the God of all comfort operated within them. While Paul explicitly mentions in verses 3 and 4 that "the Father of compassions and God of all comfort... comforts" the apostles, in verse 5 he says that their comfort abounds through the Christ. Paul's switch from God the Father to Christ exposes some fine points in his understanding of God's operation in the apostles. As is frequent throughout his writing, he indicates that God the Father's operation is through Christ the Son's action; that is, Christ

incorporates the comforting operation of God the Father in the experience of the apostles.

Further, Paul characterizes the apostles' sufferings as "the sufferings of the Christ." While we may easily understand this phrase to refer to the apostles' suffering for Christ or because of Christ, this interpretation is somewhat out of line with the strong indication of incorporation in the context here. The apostles' comfort by God is "through the Christ"; thus, we should understand that their sufferings are more than merely their own. Elsewhere Paul speaks of filling up that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in his own flesh (Col. 1:24), and Peter says that the believers share in the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 4:13). Hence, here Paul's phrase *the sufferings of the Christ* should be taken to refer to Christ Himself suffering in the sufferings of the apostles. This is akin to Paul's first and very dynamic conversation with the Lord: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?...I am Jesus, whom you persecute" (Acts 9:4-5). Christ, though ascended, is still very much a human being, and He experiences the persecution of His saints as His own persecution, because being in His

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saints, their persecution incorporates His persecution. "The sufferings of the Christ" here fall into the same category. As the apostles traveled and met opposition to the gospel often in physical ways and more so in psychological and spiritual ways, the Christ within them experienced the same opposition and suffered the same afflictions because they incorporated Christ in their actions.

Lastly, Christ's incorporation of the Father's comforting within the apostles gives them in turn the ability to comfort the believers. But this function to comfort others is also "through the Christ" and not of themselves. God comforts the apostles, and this operation is in Christ. Then, through this incorporated comfort the apostles are able to comfort the believers, and when they do so, they do so "through the Christ," thus, incorporating Christ's operation within them and giving their actions divine effect. As we saw with the putting to death of Jesus operating in the apostles so that the life of Jesus might operate in the believers, here also the sufferings of the Christ abound in the apostles so that through the Christ the apostles' comfort may abound to the believers.

Paul's explicit phrase *through the Christ* points to Christ's direct operation within the apostles first to incorporate the comforting work of the God of all comfort and then to provide divine comfort to the believers in the ministry of the apostles.

### *In Their Virtues for the Ministry*

In 2 Corinthians Paul also offers several statements about the virtues that the apostles possess for the carrying out of their ministry. As he testifies in the passages below, these attributes, while certainly expressed in the human virtues of the apostles, are suffused with God's divine character and are incorporated into their demeanor and deportment.

For our boasting is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in singleness and sincerity of God, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and more abundantly toward you. (2 Cor. 1:12)

For we are not like the many, adulterating the word of God for profit; but as out of sincerity, but as out of God, before God we speak in Christ. (2 Cor. 2:17)

Paul was constantly dealing with other companies of workers who came behind him (and sometimes even before him) in the churches and did a fundamentally different work. Paul had the full assurance that the work which he and the genuine apostles did was the one work sourced in God and the only work that would properly build up the churches and perfect the saints. Paul did not shrink back from declaring the basis of his confidence in the work of the genuine apostles, for that basis was the very attributes of God Himself. Further, the basis of the apostles' work was sharply at odds with what motivated other workers and with the way the other workers conducted themselves. In recommending the work of the apostles to the Corinthians, Paul offers the testimony of their conscience; that is, he speaks forth the apostles' inward conviction concerning their work. In doing so, he implies that if the other workers were to be so honest and so forthright with the testimony of their own conscience, they would have to admit that their work was not of the same kind as that of the apostles. The apostles came to the churches "in singleness and sincerity of God," that is, with only one motive and with pure intention. *Singleness*, in Greek as in English, refers to a lack of complication in one's demeanor, "free from pretence and dissimulation" (Thayer, on ἀπλότης). The Greek word for *sincerity* here, εἰλικρίνεια, literally means "tested [judged] by the light of the sun," "completely pure," "spotless," and refers to moral purity (TDNT 2:397). In this context, the word denotes a demeanor that is without alloy in intention and

in presentment. Paul declares that with the apostles these two virtues are “of God,” meaning, to be sure, that these virtues do not derive from the personalities of the apostles or even from the best of human nature. The apostles rely on God’s attributes for their work, and they do so by incorporating God with His attributes into their life and service among the churches. In 2:17 Paul goes so far as to even equate the sincerity in their ministry with God Himself: “but as out of sincerity, but as out of God.” The apostles differ from other workers because the apostles incorporate God with His attributes in their ministry. Paul is quite blunt about the motive and manner of other workers—“for profit” and “in fleshly wisdom”—and it seems that he believes that the Corinthians should be able to discern this difference. It may very well be that by simply declaring these things, he brings the real situation to the light of day, so that the Corinthians may judge for themselves who are really apostles. At any rate, Paul’s boast for the apostles is that they incorporate God with His attributes of singleness and sincerity in their ministry, while other workers apply fleshly wisdom in their work and seek to profit themselves. In contrast to these workers and their fleshly wisdom, the apostles come to the churches by the grace of God, that is, by what God is doing in them for the churches, and this too implies the incorporate character of their life and service. Further, while these other workers go about “adulterating the word of God for profit,” the apostles, out of the pureness of God that they incorporate in their ministry, speak “in Christ.” Here Paul employs his signature phrase *in Christ* to indicate that the speaking of the apostles is the operation of Christ within them. Their speaking and their writing, though certainly their own words, incorporate Christ’s operation and give the words of their ministry the divine character. Paul can boast in the apostleship because the real worth of the apostles’ ministry is not in the apostles themselves but in the God and Christ whom they incorporate. All that the other workers have to offer is themselves alone, with their duplicity and base intentions, and this, “judged by the light of the sun,” exposes their real value among the churches. Even Paul’s boasting here incorporates spiritual wisdom and is thus in contrast to the way of these other workers.

**I**n his care for the believers in the churches, Paul exercised more than his own human virtue. The qualities that he and the other apostles needed in order to properly touch the situations among the saints were more than mere human virtues, even in their best expression.

But I myself, Paul, entreat you through the meekness and gentleness of Christ, who (as you say) in person am base among you, but while absent am bold toward you. (2 Cor. 10:1)

The truthfulness of Christ is in me, that this boasting

shall not be stopped as it regards me in the regions of Achaia. (2 Cor. 11:10)

All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Before God in Christ we speak; but all things, beloved, are for your building up. (2 Cor. 12:19)

This therefore intending, did I then use fickleness? Or the things which I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, so that with me there should be Yes, yes and No, no? But as God is faithful, our word toward you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you through us, through me and Silvanus and Timothy, did not become yes and no, but our word has become yes in Him. (2 Cor. 1:17-19)

**N**o doubt Paul had his own unique personality and disposition, as each of us all do, and certainly the texture of his human disposition shows through the brilliant presentation of divine truth in his writings. Indeed, it may be that in the New Testament we perceive more of Paul’s personality and disposition than of any other writer, and this is not merely a consequence of the greater volume of his writing. Paul is very open about his feelings, disappointments, encouragements, anxieties, and aspirations for his work in God’s economy. In 2 Corinthians 10:1 he refers to his disposition, or at least to how it was perceived by the Corinthians: “I...in person am base among you, but while absent am bold toward you.” Apparently, Paul could be quite muted in person, but he is more forceful in writing. Yet here in writing to the Corinthians, he does not exercise his own disposition but incorporates the very fine attributes of Christ, that is, “the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” It is hard to determine if Paul actually agrees with the Corinthians’ assessment of his disposition or if he simply concedes the point to them, but it is clear that his entreaty here is not through the qualities of his own disposition but through those of Christ. Paul does not claim meekness and gentleness as his own qualities; rather, he claims that he applies Christ’s attributes of meekness and gentleness here in his ministry to the Corinthians. Christ’s meekness and gentleness override the personal qualities of Paul’s disposition. Paul’s disposition is not abolished; it is still manifest to all. But through his organic union with Christ, Paul is able to incorporate Christ’s disposition into his own, and the greater and finer attributes of Christ override how Paul is naturally, to the benefit of God’s economy and the believers in the churches. *Meekness* and *gentleness* are the translations of two Greek synonyms with very fine nuances in meaning. The first (πραΰτης, *meekness*) refers to being mild in one’s disposition, without having a disputing attitude; while the second (ἐπιείκεια, *gentleness*) refers to being restrained in one’s dealings with others, without insisting on one’s right (cf. Trench, §xliii). We all can hope to have such virtues in a

consistent and reliable way, but we all know that this aspiration is beyond our frail condition. Even in regeneration we often fall short on our own. Only Christ in His perfection manifests these attributes in every situation without fail, and Paul incorporated them into his ministry as he cared for the church in Corinth. Paul does not deny what the Corinthians say about his disposition, and while he may not agree with them on the matter, at least he concedes the point to them because in the most important sense it does not really matter how he is dispositionally. What matters is how well he can incorporate Christ's attributes into his living and service, and it is this incorporation, not his natural disposition, that is the earmark of his apostleship.

The next three passages above—2 Corinthians 11:10; 12:19; 1:17-19—relate to the integrity that is to be found in the words of the apostles, and here also we find Paul taking Christ's attributes, by way of incorporation, as his intrinsic virtue for the apostleship. In 2 Corinthians 11:10, the Greek word ἀλήθεια is rendered "truthfulness" in the Recovery Version quoted here. In the phrase

ministry, and this gives his ministry the integrity of Christ Himself. As we are seeing in all these passages, what makes the apostles' ministry what it is are not the virtues that the apostles possess in themselves but instead are the attributes of God that the apostles incorporate in their being and work.

In 2 Corinthians 12:19 we also see that Paul is speaking in Christ even while he defends his apostleship and that his incorporation of Christ gives that defense the integrity of Christ for the apostleship. Beginning from 10:1, Paul vindicates his apostleship, and after this long span of defense he admits that his writing may seem as though "we are defending ourselves to you." But he makes it clear at this juncture that his speaking is in Christ, that is, that he incorporates Christ in the presentation of his defense. Thus, his words are not to be taken as a self-serving vindication of himself personally but should be understood as the very testimony of Christ concerning his ministry as an apostle. Paul speaks in Christ, and as we have seen, any doubt about his genuineness in this is washed away by his testimony that he also speaks before God.

*What gives integrity to the apostles' ministry is their incorporation of Christ in their speaking. It is their word indeed, but their word has become faithful and sure because it is spoken in Christ. That their word is in Christ points to Christ's operation in their speaking.*

*the truthfulness of Christ* Paul is apparently referring not to some external point of truth (as opposed to a falsehood or lie) but to Christ's excellent quality of being honest, genuine, and truthful. Paul does not call upon his own virtue to validate his claim in this portion; rather, he testifies that the truthfulness of Christ is in him as he makes his claim. As he writes, he incorporates Christ's attribute of truthfulness, and what Christ is in this regard becomes Paul's expression in his ministry. Of course, the skeptic in us may suggest that Paul could be simply lying about the truthfulness of Christ being in him and thus abusing this attribute of Christ to his own advantage. But taking the whole of Paul's character as an apostle, we should realize that Paul is ever mindful of the God before whom he speaks and that he does not call upon the attributes of Christ to his own advantage or even casually refer to them. Here in 11:10 his reference to the truthfulness of Christ has the solemnity of testimony before a listening judge. In 12:19 as well as in 2:17, Paul explicitly indicates that in his speaking to the Corinthians he is mindful of God: "Before God...we speak." Thus, we should have no doubt that Paul genuinely incorporates Christ's truthfulness in his

Paul incorporates the integrity of God not only when he defends his apostleship in particular but also when he and the other apostles preach Christ in their ministry in general. Contrary to what the Corinthians suspect, Paul and his co-workers did not use fickleness in coming to them. He did not purpose according to the flesh so that with him there would be first a Yes and then a No (1:17). In saying that he did not purpose according to the flesh, he implies that he purposed according to the spirit and thus makes an indirect reference to the Spirit's operation in his purposing (cf. Fee 330-331). This constitutes an instance of incorporation, albeit an indirect one. Further, in verse 18 when Paul denies that his word and purpose were Yes then No, he calls upon God's faithfulness as the basis for his own faithfulness. The faithfulness of God here is not to be understood as being external to Paul, as though God is in heaven attesting to Paul's denial. Rather, we should understand Paul to be saying that because God is faithful, the word and purpose of the apostles are faithful as well, and this is possible because the apostles incorporate the faithful God in their speaking and intention. Paul concludes the matter in verse 19 with this very clear declaration: "Our word has become yes in Him [the Son of God, Jesus Christ]." What gives integrity to the apostles' ministry is their incorporation of Christ in their speaking. It is their word indeed, but their word has become faithful and sure because it is spoken in Christ. That their word is in Christ points to Christ's operation in their speaking. Thus, in these few verses Paul calls upon the operation of the entire Divine Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit (by implication)—as the real basis for the apostles' speaking and purposing to act in the churches.



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## *In Their Feeling for the Churches*

We know from his writing that Paul was full of feeling about his work among the churches, but in a few passages he testifies that his feeling issues from his union with Christ.

But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, that I also may be encouraged by knowing the things concerning you. (Phil. 2:19)

But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly because now at length you have caused your thinking for me to blossom anew; for which matter you had indeed taken thought, but lacked opportunity. (Phil. 4:10)

For God is my witness how I long after you all in the inward parts of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:8)

My love in Christ Jesus be with you all. (1 Cor. 16:24)

The first three verses above are from Philippians, an Epistle to a church that Paul had a special relationship with. Luke stayed behind in Philippi in Macedonia after Paul proceeded to Thessalonica (cf. the change in narrative person between Acts 16:10 and 18:1), and it seems that the church in Philippi stayed attuned to Paul's travels and needs (cf. Acts 18:5). In this Epistle Paul freely expresses his feeling for the church, and in these three verses he makes it clear that his feeling is in Christ. Paul hopes, rejoices, and longs for the believers, but these emotions are drawn from his union with Christ and are governed by Christ within him. In the first two verses the references to Christ are almost offhand, and it would be easy to dismiss this as embellishment. But what may be embellishment to us, after centuries of similar custom in Christian parlance, was for Paul an innovation in utterance, expressing a reality that he genuinely experienced. He hoped and rejoiced in Christ, and from this we should understand that he drew his hope and joy from the Christ who operated within him. Thus, when Paul hoped and rejoiced, he incorporated Christ's inward operation and expressed it in his human emotions. The third verse is far from offhand and gives us a glimpse into the reality of Christ that Paul experienced in his emotions. Paul testifies to the union of his human emotion with the inward parts of Christ and calls on God as his witness to this union. This experience, then, is very real to him. While few of us can identify with Paul's experience here, there can be little doubt that Paul genuinely longed for the Philippians not merely according to his own feeling but more significantly according to Christ's inner feeling. Again, Paul incorporates Christ in his emotion for the believers by sensing Christ's deep inner feeling and expressing it through his own emotion. This should be something communicated to Paul through the Spirit dwelling in his human spirit (cf. Rom. 8:5; John

16:14-15; 1 Cor. 6:17); otherwise, it is difficult to understand exactly how Christ's inward parts could motivate Paul's longing for the Philippians. In the final verse above, 1 Corinthians 16:24, Paul again ties his feeling for the saints to his union with Christ and thereby points to his incorporation of Christ in his love for the churches.

While not strictly referring to Paul's feeling for the believers, the following verse refers to his relationship to them and implies the incorporation of the Spirit's operation in the apostles so that they can know the believers according to Christ.

So then we, from now on, know no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him so no longer. (2 Cor. 5:16)

Gordon Fee points out that in this verse "Paul's language and argument...demand [an] implicit contrast between 'flesh' and Spirit" (331). If the apostles know no one according to the flesh, they must know the believers according to the spirit, as Paul's typical contrast dictates (Rom. 1:3-4; 8:4, 11; Gal. 4:29), and the implied spirit here is the human spirit of the apostles indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Paul goes on to say that though the apostles had once known Christ according to the flesh, they knew Him so no longer, and again he implies that the apostles know Christ according to the Spirit in their spirit. Paul's appeal here is to a change in perspective, in knowledge, from that of the physical and fleshly realm to that of the spiritual and divine realm. In this realm, which is according to spirit, the apostles know everyone differently now, the believers and even Christ Himself. Further, this new knowing incorporates the Spirit's operation within the apostles to know the believers and even Christ in the divine and mystical realm. To know the believers according to the flesh is naturally easy and according to human habit. But the apostles exercise a higher kind of knowing that incorporates the Spirit's operation to make Christ and His believers manifest in the divine and mystical realm (cf. Eph. 1:3). Of course, the whole tenor of Paul's argument from 2 Corinthians 5:12 on is that the Corinthians should do as the apostles do and view them not according to the flesh but according to the spirit. In verse 17 he goes on to say that everyone in Christ is a new creation and that the old things of the flesh have passed away in Christ. Thus, Paul presents the apostles' practice to incorporate the Spirit's operation in their knowing of the believers as a pattern for how the Corinthians should know the apostles. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, which Paul references in verses 14 and 15, a new realm has been created in Christ, a realm in which Christ, the apostles, and the believers, including the troublesome Corinthians, now exist. This new creation cannot be known according to the flesh, for the flesh is of the old creation. It can be known only according to the spirit and, more precisely, according

to the regenerated spirit of the believers including the apostles, which is indwelt and mingled with the Spirit of God.

### *In Their Power for the Ministry*

In order to carry out their ministry, with all its hardships and demands, the apostles certainly need more than mere human strength. Paul's catalog of labors and afflictions in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 indicates what kind of life the apostles have. But even beyond the demands in the physical realm, there is the greater need for the spiritual power that gives their work its more-than-human quality. Paul frequently testifies that the work of the apostles is supplied by the power of God. In being so supplied, the apostles incorporate the all-powerful God in their actions.

In the word of truth, in the power of God; through the weapons of righteousness on the right and on the left. (2 Cor. 6:7)

*The ministry is the treasure within the apostles, but for the carrying out of that ministry, the apostles must serve not by their own common power; they must incorporate the power of God, with its transcendent excellence, in their service so that the churches can be properly cared for according to God's own character and attributes.*

For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, even as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake. (1 Thes. 1:5)

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not out of us. (2 Cor. 4:7)

Since you seek a proof of the Christ who is speaking in me, who is not weak unto you but is powerful in you. (2 Cor. 13:3)

For indeed He was crucified out of weakness, but He lives by the power of God. For indeed we are weak in Him, but we will live together with Him by the power of God directed toward you. (2 Cor. 13:4)

And He has said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly therefore I will rather boast in my weaknesses that the power of Christ might tabernacle over me. (2 Cor. 12:9)

For which also I labor, struggling according to His operation which operates in me in power. (Col. 1:29)

I am able to do all things in Him who empowers me. (Phil. 4:13)

Again, 2 Corinthians provides the greater number of instances of this aspect of the incorporation of the Triune God in the character of the apostles. In 6:4 Paul says that in everything the apostles commend themselves as ministers of God, and then he offers an extensive list of the many matters in which the apostles particularly commend themselves as ministers of God. Among these is "the power of God" in 6:7. On its own, the phrase *the power of God* can be easily misconstrued as something emanating from God yet being apart from Him. While it is true that the power of God is in term distinct from God, we should not view it as a reality separate from Him or even anything less than God Himself. In the Scriptures the power of God is often associated with the function of the Spirit (Luke 1:35; 4:14; Acts 1:8; 10:38; Rom. 15:13, 19; 1 Cor. 2:4; Eph. 3:16; Heb. 2:4), and hence, *the power of God* should refer to God's operation in power through the function of the Spirit. The Spirit incorporates God's operation in power, and that operation is realized in the life and work of the apostles.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5 Paul joins power, the Holy Spirit, and much assurance, and the implication is that these are not separate realities but facets of one experience. Fee comments,

But lest "power" not be fully understood, Paul immediately qualifies by adding, "that is, with the Holy Spirit and deep/full conviction." Thus, the Holy Spirit is being designated as the source of the power in his preaching the gospel, the evidence of which was the full conviction that accompanied his preaching and resulted in their conversion. (44)

To function in the power of God, the apostles manifest the work of the Holy Spirit within them. In this respect the work of the Holy Spirit is the operation of God as power in the apostles, and the apostles incorporate the Spirit's work within them as their intrinsic supply to meet all the needs that they face in their service. This is the "kind of men" that the apostles are among the churches, not men who offer only words ("not...in word only") but who also incorporate the operation of the Holy Spirit as the power of God and thereby manifest much assurance.

In 2 Corinthians 4:7 Paul refers to the ministry of the apostles mentioned in verse 1 as "this treasure in earthen vessels." According to the image that Paul uses, the apostles are vessels filled with the treasure of the New Testament ministry. Paul implies that power is needed for

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the carrying out of this ministry, and he says explicitly that the power that the apostles have is of God and not of them. Thus, the power of God makes the ministry that they have a real treasure within them. What natively pertains to the apostles is earthen and only the vessel for what pertains to God, the New Testament ministry energized by the power of God. This power is what gives the apostles their intrinsic worth in their work among the churches. It is striking that Paul does not refer to the power of God directly but to “the excellency of the power,” focusing on the quality that recommends the apostles’ ministry to the churches, not merely on the existence of power in it. The Greek word for *excellency* here (ὑπερβολή) refers to something that goes beyond all else, that transcends the norm, that is superior to all else. What is needed for the apostles’ ministry is something that transcends the situation in the churches and their own condition; thus, Paul focuses on the inherent quality of the power of God to transcend all and to excel all, and says that that excellence is of God and not of them. The ministry is the treasure within the apostles, but for the carrying out of that ministry, the apostles must serve not by their own common power but by the transcendence of the power of God. They must incorporate the power of God, with its transcendent excellence, in their service so that the churches can be properly cared for according to God’s own character and attributes. As we have seen above, the power of God that they incorporate is the Holy Spirit operating within them as the God of power.

**T**he power of God that is manifest in the apostles’ ministry is, according to 2 Corinthians 13:3, a proof of the Christ who is speaking in the apostles. There are two points here. First, Paul says that Christ is speaking in him. When Paul ministered among the churches, the manifest action was Paul’s speaking, but within that manifest action was the operation of Christ’s speaking. Paul did not stand upon his own speaking as the basis for his apostleship; rather, he relied on the incorporate operation of Christ speaking within him, and this was what gave his ministry its intrinsic merit. But, second, Paul does not ask the Corinthians to simply take his word on the matter. Instead, he points out that the Christ who is speaking in him turns out to be powerful within them. In his ministry as an apostle, Paul incorporated the Christ who was speaking in him, and as he ministered, this Christ operated within the believers as power for their going on in their Christian and church life. Paul certainly knew that Christ was speaking within his speaking; he could no doubt sense that his own natural resources fell short and that the operation of Christ within him provided the real effect in his speaking. But Paul calls upon the experience of the Corinthians to prove that Christ was speaking in him: “Christ was powerful in the believers while He was speaking in the apostle. This was indeed a strong and subjective proof to the believers that Christ was speaking in

the apostle” (Recovery Version, note 1). Paul not only incorporated Christ in his speaking but also relied on the believers’ incorporation of Christ in power in their personal experience to validate his apostleship. No doubt, such should be the validation of every ministry in the church today.

In contrast to the foregoing passages, in 2 Corinthians 13:4 Paul refers to quite an unusual aspect of the incorporation of Christ by the apostles, their being weak in Him. The apostles live in union with Christ, and that living includes both being weak in Him and living together with Him by the power of God. It is quite strange that Paul would tie the weakness of the apostles to Christ, as he does here. But the weakness mentioned here is not the weakness of the apostles in their natural state. Rather, it must refer to a perceived weakness that the Corinthians held as they viewed Paul according to their misguided concepts of what an apostle should be. To counter their misconceptions, Paul refers them to the life of Jesus, who “was crucified out of weakness.” In His humanity Jesus lived a life of manifest weakness, even submitting to death by crucifixion, and the apostles followed His pattern in their own ministry, living a life of manifest weakness under the killing of their situation. They lived out the Lord’s mandate in Matthew 16:24: “If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me.” What the Corinthians perceived as human weakness in the apostles was in fact their “willing to be weak in the organic union with [Christ] that they might live with Him a crucified life” (Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 13:4, note 3). Thus, Paul incorporated Christ in his being weak before the Corinthians. It was probably not his choice to appear weak, but even in “weakness” he lived Christ out by incorporation. Likewise, as Christ incorporated the power of God to resurrect from the dead and to live on in resurrection, the apostles incorporated the power of God to be enlivened in their crucified living (i.e., their weakness) and to live together with Christ for the sake of the churches. The phrase *directed toward you*, a translation of the Greek εἰς ὑμᾶς (unto you), is probably a reference to the Corinthians’ experience similar to that mentioned in the preceding verse, “powerful in you.” While it was the personal experience of the apostles to incorporate Christ both in being weak by living a crucified life and in living together with Him by the power of God, their living affected the Corinthians’ experience of the Christian and church life. The Corinthians needed only to examine in their own experience the effect of the apostles’ incorporation of Christ in order to know assuredly that what Paul was saying was indeed true.

**I**n the preceding chapter of 2 Corinthians Paul refers directly to something of his native weakness, which he refers enigmatically to “a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan” (12:7). Speculation about what this weakness

or infirmity actually was abounds, and there is no need to enter into that discussion here. What is important is that in the face of this natural weakness or infirmity in his flesh, Paul experienced Christ's grace as the power to bear his limitation. Paul had the direct speaking of Christ on this matter: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness" (v. 9). Paul's weakness did not preclude his proper service as an apostle, because to that weakness Christ applied His grace as power. In fact, Paul's weakness complemented Christ's power and manifested its effectiveness. "For the sufficiency of the Lord's grace to be magnified, our sufferings are required; for the perfectness of the Lord's power to be shown forth, our weakness is needed" (Recovery Version, v. 9, note 2). In his weakness Paul experienced Christ's operation to sustain and empower him for his ministry, and his experience was so extensive that he came to boast in his weaknesses so that Christ's power would overshadow him like a tabernacle. Even in his native weakness, and especially in his native weakness, Paul incorporated the operation of Christ within him for his ministry as an apostle.

with the endeavor of an Olympian and sometimes to the point of exhaustion, but his labor was propelled by God's operating within him and was powered by the God of power Himself. Manifestly, it was Paul who was laboring, but intrinsically it was God who was operating within him and providing the inherent strength for his work. This is incorporation as Paul describes it, and while our term *incorporation* properly captures the essence of the notion, Paul's description lay bares the intricacy of the experience far better.

In Philippians 4:13 Paul summarizes his preceding testimony concerning his "secret of sufficiency" (Recovery Version, v. 10, outline) by declaring: "I am able to do all things in Him who empowers me." In verse 11 Paul says that in whatever circumstances he was in, he had learned to be content, employing a word in Greek (αὐτάρκης) that refers to a state of self-sufficiency that relies on no external support or aid. But two verses later he makes it clear that his "self"-sufficiency was actually undergirded by Him who empowered him. Outwardly, Paul had no lack and needed no aid, but that was because God was within him meeting all his internal needs and keeping him content even in hardship and scarcity. He had "learned the secret" (in Greek, "been initiated into the mystery") of living contently in all situations (v. 12), and the secret was that God was within him empowering him and that he could live through every situation by God's empowering operation within him. The secret was that he could incorporate God's powerful operation in every situation, and that operation could satisfy his internal needs even in the face of extreme external conditions.

*The confidence the apostles have cannot be something that they stand in before God unless Christ fills that confidence with His merit and worth, and as they have confidence through Christ toward God, they incorporate Christ in their own character, and He becomes effectively their confidence toward God.*

In the last two verses above, Paul relates the power for the ministry to the operation of God within him. There can probably be no clearer reference to the incorporation of God's operation in Paul's work than in Colossians 1:29. Here Paul concludes an overview of his role in the apostles' ministry (vv. 24-28) with a graphic description of his endeavoring in it. He employs four related terms to show vividly how he works in the ministry: *labor*, *struggling*, *operation*, and *power*. In Greek the first of these (κοπιῶ) refers to labor with toil, often to the point of exhaustion. The second term in Greek (ἀγωνίζομαι) is metaphorical and refers to the endeavor of athletes in competitions like the Olympic games. The third term in Greek (ἐνέργεια), from which we get our English word *energy*, refers to the inward working (ἐν-ἔργον) of God in Paul's ministry, and in employing it here, Paul uses a Semitic grammatical formula to intensify his expression of this inward working: "His operation which operates in me." The fourth term in Greek (δύναμις), from which we derive words like *dynamo*, *dynamite*, and *dynamic*, refers to power that is inherent in a thing. Put together, these four terms show that Paul labored aggressively and arduously in his ministry,

### ***In Their Sufficiency, Confidence, Boldness, and Even Boasting***

For their ministry, as great a work as it was, the apostles certainly needed an inward sense of confirmation that what they were doing was indeed God's work. Paul often testifies that the sense of confirmation he had was drawn from the indwelling Christ Himself. This sense resulted from his incorporation of Christ. But it was not just a sense of confidence, drawn from Christ, that Paul relied on; rather, he also realized that God operated in him and all the apostles to actually make them sufficient for their ministry. This inward operation gave Paul great boldness, and at times he even boasted in it.

And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God, who has also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, ministers not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor. 3:4-6)

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But I trust in the Lord that I myself also will come shortly. (Phil. 2:24)

I am confident in the Lord concerning you that you will be of no other mind; but he who is troubling you shall bear the judgment, whoever he may be. (Gal. 5:10)

And we have confidence in the Lord concerning you that what we charge, you both are doing and will do. (2 Thes. 3:4)

Therefore though I have much boldness in Christ to charge you what is fitting. (Philem. 8)

But having suffered previously and having been outrageously treated, even as you know, in Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much struggle. (1 Thes. 2:2)

I protest by the boasting in you, brothers, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. (1 Cor. 15:31)

I have therefore my boasting in Christ Jesus in the things pertaining to God. (Rom. 15:17)

As we are seeing repeatedly, the apostles did not rely on themselves for their ministry but on Christ, who operated within them. In 2 Corinthians 2:16, after presenting the rich metaphor of the apostles as incense bearers of Christ, Paul asks what is almost obvious: “Who is sufficient for these things?” To be ones who express the victorious Christ and not themselves requires something more than a natural sufficiency, and in what follows in 3:4-6 Paul makes it clear that the sufficiency that the apostles have is “from God” and not of themselves. God made them sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, ministers not of the letter but of the Spirit. Thus, through God’s operation within them the apostles were enabled to minister not merely mandates for the Christian life but the Spirit of God Himself as the intrinsic reality of the Christian life. This being made sufficient is not a moral or forensic action by God and external to the apostles. The apostles are not simply declared sufficient by God; they are made intrinsically sufficient through the Spirit’s operation in their ministry. When they minister, the Spirit is in operation, and the effect is that life is given to the believers. This sufficiency that is from God makes them sufficient as ministers of the new covenant.

**I**n this same passage Paul says that the apostles have confidence “through Christ toward God.” Is the confidence here simply the apostles’ own response in their hearts to God’s inward operation to make them sufficient, or is this confidence a distinct and direct operation of Christ within them and therefore also an instance of

incorporation? It could very well be that *through Christ toward God* anticipates the finer utterance in the next sentence and that in the next sentence Paul is expanding on these modifiers: the apostles have confidence through Christ toward God because God operates in the apostles to make them sufficient. If this is Paul’s intended sense, then he is identifying *through Christ toward God* with the operation of God to make the apostles sufficient, and this identification would probably point to Christ’s incorporation of God’s operation within the apostles. However, there is some problem with this interpretation. Is the apostles’ being made sufficient both from God and toward God? I suppose that all things are possible in the mystical realm of the incorporation of the Triune God’s operation in the character and service of the apostles, but perhaps it is more reasonable to see two distinct though surely related matters in these verses. There is the apostles’ being made sufficient, which is from God, and there is the apostles’ being confident, which is toward God. Their confidence is founded in their being made sufficient, but it is not simply their psychological reaction to God’s working in them. It is not as though Paul is saying, “We really feel good about ourselves because God has made us sufficient as ministers. We are confident in ourselves because of what He is doing in us.” Rather, it seems that we should take Paul’s statement at face value: The apostles have confidence through Christ, and that confidence is toward God. It is related to what God is doing within them, but it is a distinct experience of the apostles and one that is filled with Christ’s operation within them. Through Christ’s operation within them the apostles experience a sense of confidence before God. To be confident before God is no small matter. Is there any human being except Christ who can stand before God and feel confident? Even assuming that one’s sins have been propitiated for, that one is redeemed back to God, that one is justified by Him, and that one is reconciled to Him, can anyone except Christ stand confidently before God in one’s ministry? The confidence the apostles have cannot be something that they stand in before God unless Christ fills that confidence with His merit and worth, and as they have confidence through Christ toward God, they incorporate Christ in their own character, and He becomes effectively their confidence toward God.

**I** may be splitting hairs here, and if I am, I apologize. This finer teasing out of the sense of Paul’s statement at the beginning of 2 Corinthians 3:4 may not be sustainable if it were based only on Paul’s utterance here. But in the next three verses above, Paul is quite direct in saying that his confidence is “in the Lord.” First, we should point out that *trust* and *confidence* in these three verses are all from the same root in Greek (πίθω, have trust, be confident), and thus, they refer to a single notion. Second, we should note that *in the Lord* in these

three verses does not signify the object of Paul's confidence but the means. Paul is not confident about the Lord; he is confident through the Lord. The object of his confidence is variously that he will make a trip to Philippi soon (Phil. 2:24), that the Galatians will be of no other mind than his (Gal. 5:10), and that the Thessalonians both are doing and will do what the apostles charge (2 Thes. 3:4). But his confidence in these matters is not drawn from his own intentions and evaluations. He is confident through an operation of the Lord within him. It is probably easier and more convenient to cast aside Paul's little phrase ἐν κυρίῳ. But what may seem casual, insignificant, and almost formulaic to us today should not be taken as such for Paul when he forged this phrase. Paul no doubt includes this modifier in these statements because it reflects something genuine in his experience. His confidence is an experience of Christ, not simply a personal psychological reaction. As an experience of Christ, Paul's confidence is an instance of his incorporation of Christ's operation within him which contributes to the special character that the apostles have for their ministry.

*Paul and the apostles can be bold in their ministry because God is working within them to make them sufficient and to provide them confidence, and the boldness that they have is a further incorporation of that inward operation of God in Christ through the Spirit.*

Confidence is an inward attitude, while boldness is an outward manner. The two notions are related, in that boldness comes out of confidence. In the next two verses above Paul says that he and the apostles have boldness in Christ and in their God. Again, it is easy to dismiss these expressions as mere embellishment, but there must be some real sense in which Paul could say that the apostles have boldness in God and Christ. A minimalist approach would be to say that their boldness comes out of their simple association with Christ: "We have boldness because we do Christ's work." But many scholars agree that Paul uses his unique phrase *in Christ* to refer to something deeper than a mere ethical association, and in Philemon 8 his use of the phrase should be understood as yet another reference to the mystical union between Christ and His believers. If we accept that, then we should understand that the boldness Paul speaks of here is drawn not from his natural character but from his incorporation of Christ's operation. Likewise, the boldness in God in 1 Thessalonians 2:2 should be taken as reference to the apostles' incorporation of God's operation within them. As the confidence of the apostles is

their inward attitude toward their work that has been filled with the working of God in Christ within them, so their boldness, as their outward manner, is also filled with the same working within. Paul and the apostles can be bold in their ministry because God is working within them to make them sufficient and to provide them confidence, and the boldness that they have is a further incorporation of that inward operation of God in Christ through the Spirit.

For Paul the confidence he had in the apostles' ministry took an even stronger form of expression, one that our typical Christian character would seem to bristle at. Paul frequently boasts in his standing as a believer and as an apostle. But in all cases his boasting is almost ironic because the basis of his boasting is always either God's operation in him, as in the last two verses above, or his natural weaknesses and afflictions, as in 2 Corinthians 11:16-30. To borrow his own phrase (Rom. 3:27), where then is the boasting? Stripped of self-assuredness or founded on what one should be ashamed of, Paul's boasting is devoid of vanity and self-promotion, yet he flatly calls it boasting. One would suspect that perhaps in Greek the family of words for boasting (καυχάομαι, καύχημα, καύχησις) has some positive connotation, but this is not the case. "The meaning of this group is 'to boast,' 'boasting,' usually in a bad sense, so that we find warnings against it in the philosophers and satirists" (Kittel 3:645). The older English translations and lexicons often render these words with some form of the verb *glory*, for example: "I have therefore whereof I may glory through Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:17 KJV); "I protest by that glorying in you, brethren, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord" (1 Cor. 15:31 RV[1885]); "to glory (whether with reason or without)" (Thayer, on καυχάομαι). Many newer versions and lexicons have abandoned the attempt to give the ancient Greek word group an ethically proper modern sense and have used some form of *boast* to render this family of words (cf. NAB, NASB, NRSV). Linguistically, it seems a bit feigned to try to take the Greek word group in a positive sense. Rather, what we are probably looking at is yet another of Paul's very sophisticated expressions of a very subtle reality that he enjoyed. It may be difficult to pin down exactly why Paul chose to "boast" in this way, but perhaps he realized that asserting his apostolic commission in any form would be easily misconstrued as boasting and that, because of the rhetoric of the "super-apostles" (i.e., the false apostles of 2 Corinthians 11:5, 13; 12:11), his assertions should be examined in the most unfavorable light and evaluated, with the qualification he places on them, from that perspective. The qualification that he imposes, which is of interest to us here, is that his boasting is "in Christ Jesus." Thus, unlike the rhetoric of the false super-apostles, Paul's boasting is based not on what he is in

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himself but on what Christ is doing within him, that is, on his incorporation of Christ's operation in his life and service. Armed with this reality, Paul certainly had the full confidence and the attendant boldness that his boasting could be thoroughly scrutinized and would fully vindicate his ministry as a genuine apostle.

If we consider the object of Paul's boasting in Romans 15:17, there is also an indirect reference to his incorporation of God's operation within him. Paul says that he has his boasting "in the things pertaining to God," and he continues in verse 18: "For I will not dare to speak anything of the things which Christ has not accomplished through me..." Thus, *the things pertaining to God* should refer to the things which Christ accomplished through Paul, and this makes them something of Paul's incorporation of Christ's operation within him. We will consider more deeply these things that Christ accomplished through Paul when we consider the apostles' incorporation of the Triune God in their service. But it seems that in verse 17 the reference to the things pertaining to God, as the object of Paul's boasting, relates more to his character as an apostle than to his service. We should also notice that in this juxtaposition of phrases in verses 17 and 18 there is the implication that Christ Himself incorporated God's operation in what He accomplished through Paul. Paul's ministry and the boast in his ministry involved the things pertaining to God, but in Paul's mind these things pertaining to God were the things which Christ accomplished through him. What Christ accomplished through Paul were at the same time things that God could be credited with, and this implies that Christ was incorporating God's operation as He accomplished His heavenly ministry through Paul. Taken as a whole, what we see in Romans 15:17-18 is a fine picture of the operations of the Triune God in the ministry of Paul as an apostle—God in Christ working to accomplish His economy through the apostle Paul's endeavors in his ministry.

### *A Man in Christ, in His Ways and as a Pattern to All*

I know a man in Christ, fourteen years ago (whether in the body I do not know, or outside the body I do not know; God knows) such a one was caught away to the third heaven...On behalf of such a one I will boast, but on behalf of myself I will not boast, except in my weaknesses. (2 Cor. 12:2, 5)

Because of this I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, even as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Cor. 4:17)

The last few verses that I wish to examine in this article refer to Paul's personal experience as an apostle. It is probably safe to say that in the first passage above Paul is

speaking of an experience that is unique to him and one that is not common to all the apostles. The second passage above, though referring to Paul specifically, is probably representative of all the apostles. In 2 Corinthians 12:2 Paul refers to himself in the third person as "a man in Christ." This rhetorical device emphasizes the transcendence of the experience he underwent. While he does not know precisely whether his being caught away to the third heaven was in the body or not, he does know that he was a man in Christ when he experienced it. If Paul is so mystified by his own experience that he externalizes it as though it were someone else's experience, we probably cannot expect to understand fully what he is talking about. But what he does know, that he was a man in Christ when he underwent the experience, is something that we can probe since it ties into his other experiences "in Christ." As we have seen elsewhere in his writings, Paul's use of this phrase refers to his incorporation of Christ in his life and service. When he uses it, he wishes to make clear that the merit and the effect of his manifest actions are drawn from his union with Christ and not from his own natural ability and virtue. For Paul, being in Christ means that Christ's attributes and operations fill his virtues and actions, that he incorporates what Christ is and does for his being and doing. At most times Paul's incorporation of Christ, while tremendously significant, is part of his normal daily experience, and often he refers to it in an almost offhand way, as we have seen. But in this instance described in 2 Corinthians 12, Paul reached an apex in his incorporation of Christ, and he speaks of it as a transcendent experience (v. 7) that is almost (though not really) outside of himself. In verse 5, when Paul picks up the defense of his boasting again, he once more indicates that his boasting is not about himself but about "such a one," that is, the man in Christ that he is. If he dares boast about himself at all, he adds, he will boast in his weaknesses, but even then his weaknesses provide the opportunity for Christ's abundant power to be perfected, and they manifest still more his incorporation of Christ within him (v. 9). Paul, as a man in Christ, exemplifies the full spectrum of the experience of incorporating Christ in one's character and service. For Paul, the incorporation of Christ is a normal, daily, and almost casual experience, even in its breathtaking significance. But Paul surpasses all of us and most of the apostles in the degree of his experience of this incorporation, entering somehow into the third heaven and Paradise and hearing unspeakable words that humans are not allowed to speak (v. 4). While we cannot expect to enter to the full degree of that experience or even to fully understand it, each of us can certainly aspire to be, like Paul, a person in Christ in a normal and daily way. Each of us should hope to incorporate Christ and make His attributes and operations the intrinsic content of what we are and do.

In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul recommends Timothy to the

church in Corinth as one who will remind them of his ways which are in Christ. *My ways* refers to Paul's conduct and manner in his ministry, and he takes special care to point out that these are "in Christ." Again, the signature phrase points to Paul's incorporation of Christ in his movement and activity among the churches. Paul must have fully trusted that Timothy could perceive Christ's operation in Paul's ministry and that he would vouch for it among the Corinthians. Timothy did not promote Paul himself per se; rather, he reminded the churches that Paul's apostleship relied on Christ's operation within him, and because of that, Paul's ways, being in Christ, should be followed. Further, this incorporation of Christ, even if he did not so term it, was the content of what Paul taught everywhere in every church. The grammatical connection between the last two clauses in this verse is admittedly loose, but there seems to be no other way to understand it than this: What Timothy would remind the Corinthians of was the very same thing that Paul taught everywhere in every church. Of course, while Timothy would no doubt have openly characterized Paul as one whose ways were in Christ, it is doubtful that Paul promoted himself as such

many centuries the church has either done without apostles completely or done without acknowledging them openly. If the latter is the case—and I suspect that it is—then apostles today serve without the designation, even if they exercise the effectiveness, of the office. Over the past centuries, since the time of the early church, the gospel has been preached almost everywhere, churches have been raised up throughout the world, and the truth of God's New Testament economy has been thoroughly defined, extensively taught, and widely propagated. These are the works of the apostles, even if we do not recognize the persons who have done them. It is probably better that they have not been recognized, for our long history proves how easily we exalt men and how easily men abuse exaltation. But the Lord knows who the apostles are, and He will reward each according to his labor, as He will do with all who serve Him. For us the simple believers the signs of the apostles should not be that one simply declares himself or herself to be an apostle or even that one performs the outward works of the apostles. We can be easily deceived on the matter, as many today obviously are. It is an old problem, which Paul himself addressed:

*The apostles are a very distinct kind of person in God's economy, and Paul presents this clearly in his writings. Apart from what they do, they are intrinsically persons who incorporate the Triune God in their being, living, and character.*


For such ones are false apostles, deceitful workers, transfiguring themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself transfigures himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if also his ministers transfigure themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. (2 Cor. 11:13-15)

personally among the churches. Thus, the common thread in the teaching of Timothy and Paul had to be the ways themselves which are in Christ, regardless of who was living and working according to those ways. This is significant in this present study because it shows that incorporation, if not in terminology, then certainly in notion, was part of the content of the apostles' teaching in the early church. It also shows that Paul understood that in this matter of incorporation he was clearly to be a pattern to the believers and permitted Timothy to present him as such to them.

In the church today we hardly know apostles, their proper function being so obscured by suspicion and misconception. Like the high priests in the Old Testament, no one should take the honor of being an apostle upon himself (Heb. 5:4), but only as he is called by God, and yet unlike the high priests in the Old Testament, apostles do not have the outward, visible tokens of God's calling to validate them. Further, if anyone does take the honor of being an apostle upon himself—and today many do—for the most part he is derided and ignored. It seems that for

I realize that the folly that would permit someone today to take the honor of being an apostle upon himself is the same folly that would cause such a one to ignore Paul's strong indictment above and to convince himself that it does not apply to him. But we simple believers are usually less foolish than this, and Paul did much to help the simple believers, even the ones in Corinth, know who the genuine apostles are. That is perhaps the practical benefit of the points I have made in the preceding sections. Certainly the apostles are persons who do much in God's economy, and we will see that in my next article in this series. But apostles are also a very distinct *kind* of person in God's economy, and Paul presents this clearly in his writings. Apart from what they do, they are intrinsically persons who incorporate the Triune God in their being, living, and character. They are not beyond natural human weakness; in fact, they are beset with weakness, as are all human beings. But in their natural weakness the power of Christ is not only manifested but even perfected. So different from today's self-proclaiming "apostles," the genuine apostles abide in the sufferings of Jesus and die daily in His being put to death, and the appearance of this deep experience is often quite simply human weakness, not an ostentatious display of power, authority, and mere human personality. The genuine



apostles bear the brands of their ministry in the most radical sense of the term (Gal. 6:17); they fill up the afflictions of Christ in their own sufferings (Col. 1:24). In their character they exhibit virtues that are filled with the attributes of God, not with their own personal dispositions. As I hope I have shown above, the apostles incorporate God in Christ through the Spirit in their spirit and manifest the Triune God in His attributes, not themselves, for their intrinsic identity. They are not simply sent from God, as the title of their office may literally indicate; they are sent in God and with God, as the written testimony of their most prolific representative makes clear. We the simple believers today have adequate help from the New Testament to know who are apostles and who are not. It is not as shallow a matter as many self-proclaiming “apostles” would have us think, but deep as it is, it is not beyond our discernment, thanks to the clear pattern we have in Paul, a genuine apostle to us all. 

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### Footnote from the Recovery Version of the Bible (continued from p. 23)

John wrote this Gospel in part to refute the heresy of the Docetists and to prove strongly that Christ, the God-man, is indeed God who became flesh (having only the likeness of the flesh of sin but not the sin of the flesh) that through this flesh, on the one hand, He might destroy the devil (Heb. 2:14) and put away the sins of man (Heb. 9:26), and, on the other hand, God might be united with man and be expressed through humanity for the fulfillment of His glorious purpose, a purpose He planned in eternity past for eternity future.

The deep thought of the Gospel of John is that Christ, the incarnate God, came as the embodiment of God, as illustrated by the tabernacle (v. 14) and the temple (2:21), so that man could contact Him and enter into Him to enjoy the riches contained in God. Both the tabernacle and the temple had an outer court, a Holy Place, and a Holy of Holies. Therefore, John points out first that Christ was the Lamb (who took away sin—v. 29) offered on the altar, which signifies the cross, in the outer court of the tabernacle, and then that He was like the bronze serpent (which caused man to have life) lifted up on the pole (3:14), which signifies the cross. This shows how Christ in His redemption was received by His believers that they might be delivered from sin and obtain life and might enter into Him as the embodiment of God, typified by the tabernacle, to enjoy all the riches that are in God. The foot-washing in ch. 13 may be considered the washing in the laver in the outer court of the tabernacle, which washed away the earthly defilement of those who drew near to God, so that their fellowship with God and with one another could be maintained. In ch. 14 those who receive Christ are brought by Him into the Holy Place to experience Him as the bread of life (6:35), signified by the bread of the Presence, and as the light of life (8:12; 9:5), signified by the lampstand. Eventually, in ch. 17, through the highest and most mysterious prayer, which is typified by the burning incense on the golden incense altar, those who enjoy Christ as life and as light are brought by Him into the Holy of Holies to enter with Him into the deepest enjoyment of God and to enjoy the glory that God has given Him (17:22-24).