

B.G. WHITE

# Pain and Paradox in 2 Corinthians

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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B.G. White

# Pain and Paradox in 2 Corinthians

The Transformative Function  
of Strength in Weakness

Mohr Siebeck

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ment, not least toward the end when my research interests began to merge with some of her own. I always benefited from our meetings. I also wish to thank my examiners, Dr. Jonathan Linebaugh and Prof. Francis Watson. Both offered useful feedback during the viva. Jonathan was especially perceptive in discussing the main contributions of my study and helping me to see aspects of my work that could be developed in the future. He recommended that I submit my work to Mohr Siebeck, and I am grateful for this advice. I want to express my appreciation to Prof. Markus Bockmuehl, Prof. Jörg Frey, and the editorial board of WUNT II for accepting the manuscript for publication, to Elena Müller for facilitating the publication process, and to Tobias Stäbler for a detailed review of the manuscript that saved me from many errors. I must also mention the contributions of my assistants at The King's College, where much of the editing and formatting was completed. Raegan Stanley deftly handled the formatting while Brent Buterbaugh and Rachel Williamson assisted with the creation of the indices. All three were of immense help to me.

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one could humanly be, for this project. Too many times over the last few years my work has distracted or tired me and, through all of it, she has remained deeply committed to me and to this project. She did all of this while working to pay many of our bills and then carrying, birthing, and nurturing our first child, Gideon. As I prepare this book for publication, she continues to do many of these things with the added burden of weathering a pandemic and caring for our newborn, Thaddeus. In everyone listed above, but especially in her and especially now, I have seen ‘the love of God poured into our hearts’.

New York City, April 2021

Benjamin Grant White





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## Abbreviations

- CWE.* *Collected Works of Erasmus.* 89 vols. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975–2018.
- SOED.* Lesley Brown, ed. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- LB.* J. Le Clerc, ed. *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami opera omnia.* Leiden: 1703–06; repr. 1961–62.
- LW.* Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, eds. *Luther's Works.* 55 vols. St Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955–1986.
- WA.* *Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Schriften).* 65 vols. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1993.

All other abbreviations can be found in *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).





## Chapter 1

# Introduction

‘Paul never spoke other than as a pastor’.<sup>1</sup> While this claim by Dunn may be overstated, Paul’s deep interest in his communities – not least his effort to see others transformed by his gospel concerning Jesus Christ – has been a recent point of scholarly emphasis.<sup>2</sup> The apostle carries an undeniable ‘anxiety for all the churches’ (2 Cor. 11.28).<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, in studies that focus on 2 Corinthians, Paul is depicted in a manner that is not easily reconciled with this portrayal: he is so self-focused, stern, and defensive that one might wonder what has happened to him. Interpreters point to the Corinthians, who are rebelling against Paul’s leadership due to the claims of opponents that he is weak in appearance and speech (e.g., 10.10).<sup>4</sup> In response, Paul is widely understood to offer a ‘defense’ of the apostolic ministry.<sup>5</sup> He even formulates a ‘rhetorical flourish’ to turn the tables: his experience of the strength in weakness paradox.<sup>6</sup> This paradox possesses both literary and theological di-

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<sup>1</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 626.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 6; John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 573–574; Brian S. Rosner, Andrew S. Malone, and Trevor J. Burke, eds., *Paul as Pastor* (New York: T&T Clark, 2017), xi; Tom Wright, *Paul: A Biography* (London: SPCK, 2018), 404–405.

<sup>3</sup> Unless stated otherwise, the translations of NT texts are mine and based upon NA28. Translations of classical sources follow the Loeb Classical Library where possible.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1987), 1–10; Jerry Sumney, *Identifying Paul’s Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 9–12.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g., Timothy Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul’s Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 86 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 99; John T. Fitzgerald, *Cracks in an Earthen Vessel: An Examination of the Catalogues of Hardships in the Corinthian Correspondence*, SBLDS 99 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1988), 160; Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians: From Biblical Text to Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 21; Hans Dieter Betz, *Der Apostel Paulus und die sokratische Tradition: Eine exegetische Untersuchung zu seiner Apologie 2 Korinther 10–13*, BHT 45 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1972), 132.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas D. Stegman, *Second Corinthians*, CCSS (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 250. Also Ben Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), 35–68 and Fredrick J. Long,

mensions,<sup>7</sup> and it is presented using a variety of closely related terms. Paul refers to his possession of the ‘treasure [θησαυρός] in jars of clay [δοτράκιος σκευός]’ (4.7), his experience of receiving the ‘sentence of death [θάνατος]’ only to be saved by ‘the God who raises [ἐγείρω] the dead [νεκρός]’ (1.8–11), or his revelation that ‘power [δύναμις] is perfected in weakness [ἀσθένεια]’ (12.9).<sup>8</sup> In most cases, one could minimally understand Paul’s paradox to be two opposed realities that are simultaneously true.<sup>9</sup> This includes 12.9–10, where the paradox is widely seen as the ‘summit’ of 2 Corinthians.<sup>10</sup> It proclaims that Paul experiences divine power in his weakness: ‘when I am weak, then I am strong’ (12.10). However, as I show below, interpreters rarely develop the paradox’s potential implications for the Corinthian community despite its prominence in Paul’s argument. In fact, Paul’s emphasis on his own experience leads to Hafemann’s representative conclusion that the apostle is ‘didactic’ in 1 Corinthians, but he embraces ‘apologetic’ in 2 Corinthians.<sup>11</sup> This distinction raises the question: is Paul only *defending his ministry* in 2 Corinthians or is he also *actively ministering* to the community? If the latter, how might the Corinthians benefit from hearing about Paul’s strength in weakness?

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*Ancient Rhetoric and Paul’s Apology: The Compositional Unity of 2 Corinthians*, SNTSMS 131 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 230.

<sup>7</sup> The context will generally indicate whether I am using the term ‘paradox’ to refer to one dimension or the other. As the study progresses, my analysis is increasingly theological. See esp. 3.7.3.

<sup>8</sup> See 2.3.1 for further discussion on why passages that lack the *δυν-* or *ἀσθεν-* word groups can be read as examples of the strength in weakness paradox.

<sup>9</sup> Gerhard Hotze, *Paradoxien bei Paulus: Untersuchungen zu einer elementaren Denkform in seiner Theologie*, Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen 33 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1997), 27–30, 35. Also Edmund B. Keller, *Some Paradoxes of Paul* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1974), 11 and Karl A. Plank, ‘Confronting the Unredeemed World: A Paradoxical Paul and His Modern Critics’, *Anglican Theological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 1985): 127–136 [131]. This definition is a slightly developed version of the definition often given to a literary or theological paradox. For instance, A.G. Lee in his introduction to Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum* (London: MacMillan, 1953): ‘The word [paradox] is applied to a statement “seemingly self-contradictory or absurd, though possibly well-founded or essentially true”’ (p. ix). For more on rhetorical paradox in antiquity, see Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 48–59. More generally, see Henning Schröer, *Die Denkform der Paradoxalität als theologisches Problem. Eine Untersuchung zu Kierkegaard und der neueren Theologie als Beitrag zur theologischen Logik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), 28.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 451. Also e.g., P. J. Gräbe, ‘The All-Surpassing Power of God through the Holy Spirit in the Midst of Our Broken Earthly Existence: Perspectives on Paul’s Use of Dynamis in 2 Corinthians’, *NeoT* 28, no. 1 (1994): 147–156 [150]; Savage, *Weakness*, 1; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 465. For more on the paradox’s occurrence throughout 2 Corinthians, see p. 6 below and 2.3.1.

<sup>11</sup> Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 29.

To be clear, I do not intend to create a dichotomy between Paul's apologetic impulses and his broader pastoral agenda; in fact, most interpreters rightly conclude that the apostle's defense is meant to build up the Corinthians (e.g., 12.19).<sup>12</sup> But as I explain below, the field continues to classify the material largely as a defense or an exposition of the apostleship and, above all, fails to investigate the overarching framework which Paul's argument is said to serve.<sup>13</sup> So the question of whether Paul is defending his ministry or actively ministering is a matter of penetrating to the *purpose* of 2 Corinthians. There are undeniable points of defense and rebuke (e.g., 3.1–3; 11.1–6); nonetheless, my project considers whether Paul moves beyond these elements – whether he consoles, instructs, and explains how Christ redeems the community's brokenness. In this sense, I consider whether 2 Corinthians speaks more *directly* and *deeply* to the community than previously thought. To grasp the significance of this focus, one must further consider 2 Corinthians scholarship, where the apologetic reading forms a paradigm that permeates the field.<sup>14</sup>

## 1.1 An Apologetic Paul: The Paradigm of 2 Corinthians Studies

The material constituting 2 Corinthians is typically described as 'explosive' and 'incendiary'.<sup>15</sup> After discussing a variety of issues in 1 Corinthians, it is commonly held that the conflict between Paul and Corinth escalates due to two events: an offense committed against Paul's authority that pains both apostle and community (2.1–7; 7.5–16) and the arrival of a mysterious group of opponents labelled 'super-apostles' (11.5).<sup>16</sup> Barth describes the dominant approach to 2 Corinthians with the quip that the letter is the 'harassed, long-drawn-out sigh' of a beleaguered apostle.<sup>17</sup> The Corinthians are in danger of abandoning Paul, and he appears to respond with a series of crisis arguments,

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<sup>12</sup> See e.g., Margaret Thrall, *II Corinthians 8–13*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 860–861; Stegman, *Corinthians*, 282; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 487.

<sup>13</sup> See 1.1. below. For further discussion, see 5.6.3.

<sup>14</sup> The language of 'paradigm', 'anomaly', and 'crisis' in this chapter are borrowed from Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 35–65.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Calvin J. Roetzel, *2 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 13. Savage prefers 'offensive' (*Weakness*, 99).

<sup>16</sup> See e.g., C. K. Barrett, 'O ΑΔΙΚΗΣΑΣ (2 Cor. 7.12)', in *Essays on Paul* (London: SPCK, 1982) 108–117; Margaret Thrall, *II Corinthians 1–7*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 61–69; L. L. Welborn, *An End to Enmity: Paul and the "Wrongdoer" of Second Corinthians*, BZNW 185 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 23–211.

<sup>17</sup> Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief*, 5th ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1929), 241. In German: the 'erschütternder langgezogener Seufzer'.

goading the Corinthians to re-affirm their commitment (e.g., 6.10–13; 12.14–15). This view is so influential that *none* of the major interpreters of the last century fail to characterize the material as largely or wholly apologetic. The only exception are those interpreters – headed by Gorman and Stegman – who take the material to be an exposition of the apostleship, where Paul explains his Christ-like behaviour and tries to instill it in Corinth.<sup>18</sup> But for a variety of reasons, not least being that they remain fixated on Paul's experience, these interpreters do not escape the prevailing paradigm.<sup>19</sup> This uniformity of opinion allows Bultmann to conclude that 'the only question of introduction that needs mentioning concerns the situation from which 2 Corinthians was written.'<sup>20</sup> Plummer insists that Paul's focus is 'plain enough' and 'sure ground': he deals with a 'very serious crisis' in which 'his Apostolic authority had been opposed'.<sup>21</sup> More recently, Schmeller states – without critical discussion – that the focus of 2 Corinthians is the 'correct assessment' of Paul's ministry.<sup>22</sup>

The confidence in the apologetic reading of 2 Corinthians becomes more surprising given Paul's tender attention to his fractured relationship with Corinth (e.g., 2.1–7; 7.5–16). He expresses his love for the community (2.4) and his regret at the thought of the community being pained (7.8). Although it appears plausible that the Corinthians are in need of more than a verbal drubbing – the pain stemming from Paul's previous visit affected 'every one [πᾶς]' of the Corinthians (2.5) – most interpreters assume that this emotive struggle is identical to the 'godly grief [κατὰ θεὸν λύπη]' (7.5–16).<sup>23</sup> This

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<sup>18</sup> Michael J. Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 1–8; 268–303; Thomas Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*, AnBib 158 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 304; C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1973), 243; Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians*, vol. 32A, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1995), 42, 44; Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*, SP 8 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 1; Sze-Kar Wan, *Power in Weakness* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 15.

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 202, 239; Stegman, *Character*, 304. For further discussion (and critique) of these interpreters, see 1.3 below.

<sup>20</sup> Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *Second Letter to the Corinthians*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 19. To be fair, Bultmann makes this statement after a brief discussion of the material's purpose. The statement is still significant because Bultmann aligns with the apologetic view yet does not offer a developed discussion on his rationale even as he notes the paradigm's difficulties (p. 18).

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1915), xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Schmeller, *Der Zweite Brief an Die Korinther*, vol. 1, KEK 2/8 (Zürich: Patmos-Verlag, 2010), 17.

<sup>23</sup> See e.g., A. E. Harvey, *Renewal Through Suffering: A Study of 2 Corinthians*, SNTW (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 43–44 and George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT

emotion endured ‘only for a while [εἰ καὶ πρὸς ὄραν]’ (v. 7) and resulted in ‘repentance [μετάνοια]’ (v. 9), thus suggesting that the community’s pain quickly ceased. Consequently, the Corinthians are not typically portrayed as a humbled or hurting party; rather, they are rebellious converts who believe they have become ‘strong’ enough (13.9) to distinguish themselves from their apostle. They accuse Paul of insincerity (1.15–22), a refusal of support (11.7–15), and poor appearance and speech (10.10). Such accusations serve as a key ground of support for the prevailing paradigm.<sup>24</sup>

A decision to follow the above reading of the Corinthian conflict creates the need to identify and characterize the anonymous opponents who embolden this troubled community. In fact, a whole sub-field of literature on this topic has appeared with key contributions from Georgi, Sumney, and Welborn.<sup>25</sup> The opponents are typically read as either law-touting Judaizers, super-spiritual teachers, or Gnostic philosophers, but a clear consensus has not yet emerged.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, these mysterious individuals are a focus for discussion regarding the tone changes and literary breaks found throughout 2 Corinthians.<sup>27</sup> My analysis of these issues occurs later,<sup>28</sup> but a common response to the literary integrity problem is Bornkamm’s proposal that the canonical letter is a series of separate documents (later joined by an editor) that originate from different phases in the conflict: 2.14–6.13, 7.2–4 (an early, subtle apology); 10.1–13.14 (the harsh, painful letter); 1.1–2.13, 7.5–16 (a later, reconciliatory letter).<sup>29</sup> A determining characteristic of each letter relates to Paul’s engagement with the opponents – in the subtle apology, for instance, Paul ‘speaks with clear superiority’, whereas he appears in the painful letter in ‘an almost hopeless position’.<sup>30</sup> Alongside of these arguments is an increasing number of

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(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 376; Thrall, *Corinthians*, I:490. For further discussion, see 2.1.

<sup>24</sup> See e.g., Betz, *Sokratische*, 44–69; Calvin J. Roetzel, ‘The Language of War (2 Cor. 10:1–6) and the Language of Weakness (2 Cor. 11.21b-13:10)’, *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 77–99 [78–81]; Lars Aejmelaeus, *Schwachheit als Waffe: Die Argumentation des Paulus im Tränenbrief* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), 11–46; Paul Duff, *Moses in Corinth: The Apologetic Context of 2 Corinthians 3* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–17.

<sup>25</sup> Georgi, *Opponents*, 1–10; Sumney, *Opponents*, 1–18; Welborn, *Wrongdoer*, 1–52.

<sup>26</sup> See the excellent overview of the various options in Sumney, *Opponents*, 15–42. I provide further discussion on these options in 5.2.2.

<sup>27</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 51 suggests that there is a connection between the purpose of 2 Corinthians and how one understands the integrity problem—if Paul is defending himself, then how the canonical letter is partitioned will be based upon the nature of the conflict and its participants.

<sup>28</sup> See 2.3.4. For the time being, I do not assume a particular position on the issue.

<sup>29</sup> Günther Bornkamm, ‘History of the Origin of the So-Called Second Letter to the Corinthians’, *NTS* 8, no. 3 (1962): 258–264 [258–261]. See the excellent summary of partition theories in Thrall, *Corinthians*, I:3–48.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

unity theories, led by Vegge, Witherington, and Long, who believe that 2 Corinthians is rhetorically coherent even if it contains some disparate sections.<sup>31</sup> This conclusion, however, is reached in the confines of an apologetic reading: Paul's rhetoric is formulated to 'persuade'.<sup>32</sup>

All of the above must be understood with respect to the summit of the material in 2 Corinthians, which is – as noted previously – Paul's experience of strength in weakness. The existence of any 'summit' in 2 Corinthians is notable not least because the material is typically understood to be totally disparate, as suggested by the prevalence of partition theories. Yet interpreters continue to return to the meta-theme of strength in weakness, which occurs in various forms that coalesce upon Paul's experience of divine power in weakness.<sup>33</sup> The theme is not limited to a particular partition, and it incorporates several of the apostle's climactic statements from across the material: the possession of the 'treasure in jars of clay' (4.7); his description of 'receiving the sentence of death' only to be saved by 'the God who raises the dead' (1.8–11); and the assertion 'when I am weak, then I am strong' (12.10). However, interpreters typically place a chasm between these experiences and the attitude of the Corinthians. Not only do the community's beliefs and values contradict Paul's argument – they indulge in boasting (11.21b), demand references (3.1), obsess about honour (10.12) – the apostle never seems to explicitly relate his experiences to the community's.<sup>34</sup> God's power is not meant to comfort the Corinthians; rather, it confronts them with the authority of Paul's apostolic call. Despite the seemingly formative nature of strength in weakness for Paul, some interpreters describe this experience as a paradox without qualifying what they mean by this term.<sup>35</sup> Still others – such as Heckel and Hotze – conclude that Paul's experience of strength in weakness is an equivocation.<sup>36</sup> One might say that its significance lies merely in its ironic take on the will to power: Paul is the superior apostle, even if he is weak. Consequently, the strength in weakness paradox is resoundingly 'offensive'.<sup>37</sup> The Corinthi-

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<sup>31</sup> Ivar Vegge, *2 Corinthians – a Letter about Reconciliation: A Psychagogical, Epistolographical, and Rhetorical Analysis*, WUNT 239 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 389. Witherington, *Corinth*, 69–77; Long, *Rhetoric*, 1–16. See 2.3.4 for further discussion.

<sup>32</sup> Witherington, *Corinthians*, 145.

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 187–190 and Harvey, *Renewal*, 104. See 2.3.1 for a thorough justification of reading the paradox beyond the occurrence of *δυν-* and *ἀσθεν-* words.

<sup>34</sup> Brian Dodd, *Paul's Paradigmatic "I": Personal Example as Literary Strategy*, JSNTS 177 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 30; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 466; Thrall, *Corinthians*, II:831; Fitzgerald, *Cracks*, 206.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 16; Guthrie, *Corinthians*, 249; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 268–303.

<sup>36</sup> Ulrich Heckel, *Kraft in Schwachheit: Untersuchungen zu 2. Kor 10–13*, WUNT 56 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), 115; Hotze, *Paradoxien*, 218–219.

<sup>37</sup> Savage, *Power*, 99.

ans must embrace Paul's superiority, willing themselves to reconciliation, or else reap the consequences of apostasy (e.g., 13.5).<sup>38</sup>

As a result of this overview, it is evident that the interpretation of 2 Corinthians involves a variety of interconnected issues – the community's pain, the opponents, the history of composition, and the strength in weakness paradox – all of which presently contribute to the sense that Paul is delivering a defense or an exposition of his ministry. This paradigm is too widespread for a focused study to truly endanger it, and it is so entrenched that it is difficult to envision how a larger study could unravel it. However, as I demonstrate in the following sub-section, the confident and rapid assertions of the field have rendered it vulnerable to the charge of offering a selective reading of the material.<sup>39</sup> This is most evident in textual anomalies found across 2 Corinthians.

## 1.2 Anomalies in the Paradigm – a Possible Crisis?

An immediate point of resistance to the prevailing paradigm comes at the beginning of 2 Corinthians: Paul does not refer to the opponents nor to the Corinthians' pride. Instead, the Corinthians are portrayed as those who 'patiently endure [ἐν ὑπομονῇ] the 'same sufferings [αὐτῶν παθημάτων]' as Paul (1.6b). Far from the combative apostle, Paul states that he suffers for the Corinthians' 'comfort and salvation [παρακλήσεως καὶ σωτηρίας]' (v. 6a). This proclamation becomes even more confusing for the prevailing paradigm if one accepts that, like the rest of Paul's corpus, the thanksgiving is programmatic for the material generally.<sup>40</sup> Of course, many interpreters conclude that 1.3–7 is the beginning of a conciliatory letter that was written at the end of the conflict between Paul and Corinth (i.e., 1.1–2.4; 7.5–16).<sup>41</sup> A key theme of this document, however, is said to be the *resolution* of the Corinthians' pain – so why does Paul write as though the community is suffering?

Related to this issue are two studies by Welborn concerning the pain created by Paul's previous visit and letter (2.1–7; 7.5–16). The first considers Paul's argument in light of the ancient 'pathetic proofs', where a rhetor at-

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<sup>38</sup> So David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, NAC 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 545: The Corinthians must 'conduct a spiritual audit on themselves to see how they check out as Christians'. Also see Schmeller, *Korinther*, I:365–366 and Harris, *Corinthians*, 924.

<sup>39</sup> While the *origin* of the prevailing paradigm is an important issue, I am far more concerned with its present *existence*. If I had to identify its starting point in critical scholarship, I would suggest Betz's *Sokratische*, esp. 44–69. But it clearly has its roots in prior scholarship (cf. e.g., Plummer, *Corinthians*, xiv).

<sup>40</sup> E.g., Rom. 1.1–5; Gal. 1.1; P.T. O'Brien, *Introductory Thanksgivings in the Letters of Paul*, NovTSup 49 (Leiden: Brill), 1–10.

<sup>41</sup> For more on this explanation, see 2.3.4.



tempts to ‘implant conviction’ with respect to the emotions.<sup>42</sup> Welborn concludes that Paul’s series of self-portrayals, in which he experiences a shift in his emotions (1.8–11; 7.5–16), are meant to communicate to the Corinthians that they can experience this same transformation in Christ.<sup>43</sup> Welborn elsewhere contextualizes Paul’s discussion of the Corinthians’ pain with the methods of ancient psychagogy, suggesting that the apostle creates an ‘emotional therapy’ for the Corinthians.<sup>44</sup> He argues that rather than pushing the community to overcome their pain, the apostle points to Christ’s suffering and passion, which sanctifies a certain form of pain (7.10) and allows it to have a constructive role within the community (7.11).<sup>45</sup> The combined effect of Welborn’s studies is the emergence of a new dimension to Paul’s response – his comforting of the community’s pain. This raises many questions about the interpretation of 2 Corinthians: might Paul’s argument about strength in weakness be more related to the issue of pain and less about his apostolic credentials? How can one be certain that the community’s pain is ongoing (cf. 7.8)? Could Paul’s comforting agenda be expanded beyond 1.1–2.13; 7.5–16? While Welborn intentionally limits the scope of his arguments, his conclusions are still more than enough to raise questions about the broader interpretation of 2 Corinthians even if he does not choose to pursue them. In this way, the paradigm arguably exerts its influence: those studies which raise serious questions about the paradigm’s veracity are left to operate within its bounds.

There are only a couple of voices that have openly questioned the modern reading of 2 Corinthians. Paul often turns autobiographical in delivering his strength in weakness argument, and generally, such discourses have been viewed as apologetic tools.<sup>46</sup> But through the work of Ellington and Stegman, Paul’s strength in weakness discourses are re-envisioned as hortatory passages.<sup>47</sup> The most direct assault to date on the current paradigm is found in Ellington’s article on Paul’s use of first-person pronouns in 2 Cor. 10–13, where it is argued that Paul’s experience of strength in weakness is instructive for

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<sup>42</sup> Laurence L. Welborn, ‘Paul’s Appeal to the Emotions in 2 Corinthians 1.1–2.13; 7.5–16’, *JSNT* 82 (June 2001): 31–60 [34].

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 58–59.

<sup>44</sup> L. L. Welborn, ‘Paul and Pain: Paul’s Emotional Therapy in 2 Corinthians 1.1–2.13; 7.5–16 in the Context of Ancient Psychagogic Literature’, *NTS* 57, no. 4 (October 2011): 547–570 [547–548]. Also see Welborn, *Enmity*, 43–52.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 569–571.

<sup>46</sup> See the excellent literature review in George Lyons, *Pauline Autobiography: Toward a New Understanding*, SBLDS 73 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 75–83.

<sup>47</sup> Dustin Watson Ellington, ‘“Imitate Me”: Participation in Christ and Paul’s Vocational Model for the Church in 1–2 Corinthians’ (Ph.D. thesis, Duke University, 2004), 144–256; Thomas Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul’s Argument in 2 Corinthians*, *AnBib* 158 (Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), 304–376.

the Corinthians through their participation in Christ (e.g., 13.5).<sup>48</sup> The difficulty, however, with the approach of Ellington and Stegman is that they do not analyze Paul's strength in weakness argument with a focus on its tangible benefits for the Corinthians. Most importantly, they do not propose an alternative situation which explains why the Corinthians are weak and need to learn from Paul's experience in the first place. Thus, it is easier for interpreters to continue viewing these discourses as merely self-referential and apologetic.

Perhaps the most significant anomaly is that Paul himself draws the present paradigm into question in 12.19: 'Have you been supposing all along that we have been defending ourselves [ὕμῖν ἀπολογούμεθα] to you? It is...all for your upbuilding [ὕμῶν οἰκοδομῆς], beloved'. To be fair, there is a level of irony here: Paul certainly defends his ministry in 2 Corinthians.<sup>49</sup> Yet, as many commentators suggest, this verse ends with the clarification that Paul's defense serves the broader goal of deepening the Corinthians' commitment to Christ.<sup>50</sup> This concession from Paul is not, however, developed further in the literature, and it is generally overlooked by modern interpreters – if Paul says he is not simply defending his ministry, why is the material so often characterized in this way?<sup>51</sup> Paul's remark points to the possibility that, enveloping his defense, there is an agenda that has yet to be defined and explored.

Finally, in the latter stages of 2 Corinthians, Paul becomes more explicit in his engagement with the Corinthian community: 'Test yourselves [ἐαυτοὺς πειράζετε]. Or do you not understand this about yourselves: that Jesus Christ is in you [Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν] – unless you fail to meet the test!' (13.5). This is arguably *not* the kind of conclusion that one would expect for a thoroughgoing *apologia*, whether it is the end of a unified letter or the harsh letter of chs. 10–13. There is also the variety of inherently transformative terms and phrases that Paul employs throughout the material – his climactic interest in grace (12.9), the focus on inner renewal (1.8–9; 4.16), and Paul's calls for reciprocity (5.15; 6.11–13; 12.15; 13.8–9). The placement of the latter is especially interesting given that it often comes immediately after a strength in weakness discourse (e.g., 6.11–13; 12.15). As mentioned above, this is typically explained by Paul's defense: if the Corinthians become convinced of Paul's superiority, they will choose to reciprocate his love for them.<sup>52</sup> But is it possible that Paul's strength in weakness discourses reveal Christ's redemp-

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<sup>48</sup> Dustin Ellington, 'Not Applicable to Believers? The Aims and Basis of Paul's 'I' in 2 Corinthians 10–13', *JBL* 131, no. 2 (2012): 325–340 [339–340].

<sup>49</sup> E.g., 2 Cor. 3.1–3; 10.7; 11.7–11.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 466–468; Guthrie, *Corinthians*, 616–618; Harris, *Corinthians*, 894–896.

<sup>51</sup> E.g., Savage, *Weakness*, 11, 187–190; Gorman, *Cruciformity*, 202; Hafemann, *Corinthians*, 487; Witherington, *Corinthians*, 333.

<sup>52</sup> See esp. 4.5.1. for further discussion.

tion of human weakness – for a community which appears to have Jesus ‘in them’ – and thus help the Corinthians to reconcile with their apostle?

The questions produced by these textual anomalies serve as a series of bad omens for the prevailing paradigm of 2 Corinthians. While this paradigm offers legitimate insights, including the community’s significant objections to Paul and his ministry and the apostle’s need to vindicate himself, it appears at risk of deeming these largely *circumstantial* issues to be the centre of gravity in 2 Corinthians. The observations above suggest that the Corinthians may have a more inward, emotive problem (of which their rebellion against Paul is simply a symptom) and Paul’s response, girded with a series of self-referential defenses, climaxes in the *theological* task of describing the implications of the ‘Christ...in you’ (13.5). It seems advisable, if not necessary, that some solutions be sought for this emerging dilemma. Of course, possessing a plethora of questions is not new in the study of this genuinely difficult material. More than a century ago, Plummer was comparing the interpretation of 1 Corinthians with that of 2 Corinthians by likening it to ‘the passage from the somewhat intricate paths of a carefully laid-out park to the obscurity of a pathless forest.... The forest is not only obscure, it is thick with roots which trip one up.’<sup>53</sup> Here Plummer is referring largely to questions created by the literary integrity problem in 2 Corinthians. Given the anomalies above, one could argue that issues in the apologetic reading of the text contribute to the degree of interpretive difficulty. The field is in the midst of a subtle crisis in which the ‘awareness of anomaly’ is significant, but not dominant.<sup>54</sup> The work of Ellington, Stegman, and Welborn has brought the field to an early staging ground, where it could move in a new direction, but it is one that has yet to be fully defined, let alone proven. In order to determine whether the prospect of a paradigm shift is real – where a study reaches conclusions that are ‘sufficiently unprecedented’ so as to ‘leave all sorts of problems’ for researchers – one needs to consider the work completed on the strength in weakness paradox.<sup>55</sup> If there are problems with the prevailing interpretations of 2 Corinthians, it is likeliest to be present within the theological substance of Paul’s response to the community.

### 1.3 Readings of Strength in Weakness in 2 Corinthians

Although any study of 2 Corinthians must acknowledge the strength in weakness theme, the following survey is focused upon those works within 2 Corinthians studies which are *devoted* to this theme. It begins with the first extend-

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<sup>53</sup> Plummer, *Corinthians*, xiii.

<sup>54</sup> Kuhn, *Revolutions*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

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