

Paul's Theology of the Cross: A Case Study Analysis of 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10

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Abstract

This journal article builds on the work of an earlier essay (Lioy 2015) to undertake a case study analysis of one representative passage in Paul's writings through the prism of his crucicentric thinking (especially in dialogue with a confessional Lutheran perspective). The major claim is that the apostle's theology of the cross (in Latin, *theologia crucis*) helps to clarify his apocalyptic view of reality. The corresponding goal is to validate the preceding assertion by exploring Paul's cruciform mindset in 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10.

1. Introduction

In an earlier essay (Lioy 2015), I explored Paul's apocalyptic interpretation of reality. The treatise dealt with the nature of apocalyptic literature, Paul's end-time view of existence against the backdrop of Judeo and Greco-Roman cultural contexts, and how the apostle's eschatological worldview exercised a controlling influence on his writings. The preceding assertion was validated by a case study analysis of Ephesians 1:15–23.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Concerning Paul's apocalyptic convictions, I articulated five key premises that formed the building blocks of his narrative discourse, as follows: (1) Since the dawn of time, the forces of darkness (i.e. Satan, sin, and death) have threatened to undermine the cosmic order, including humankind; (2) The Father has triumphed over these malevolent entities through his Son's redemptive work on the cross; (3) Believers, through their baptismal union with the divine-human Son, are co-participants in his victory won at Calvary; (4) Because the Son reigns supreme over every aspect of the believers' life, all their thoughts, feelings, and actions must be submitted to his rule; and (5) Believers are a foretaste, down payment, and guarantee of the Father fulfilling his promise to reclaim and restore the entire created realm, all of which will be finalized at the second advent of his Son.

Of particular interest to this journal article is premise number 2, specifically its mention of Jesus' redemptive work on the cross. For example, in taking account of the imperial ideologies that prevailed in the first century AD, I observed that Rome's cultural heroes were renowned for their wealth, fame, and power. Also, I pointed out that the latter were seized by brazen self-interest, ruthless competition, and savage violence. In contrast, I noted that Paul urged believers to live in ways that were cruciform in nature. I also maintained that the Cross was the premier expression of God's power and wisdom, both during the present age and for all eternity. According to Elliot (1997:174), Paul regarded 'Jesus' death as the decisive event in a cosmic struggle. Furthermore, the Cross was the central narrative feature of Paul's apocalyptic view of reality (cf. Rom 6:3–8; 1 Cor 1:18–25; 2 Cor 4:10; Gal 2:20; 5:22–26; 6:14; Phil 2:1–8; 3:10; Col 2:11–12, 20).

Taking a cue from Hyers (2015), the historical event of the Cross, as interpreted through the writings of Paul, offers a theocentric and Christocentric view of how to make sense of existence. For instance,

along with the rest of Scripture, the Pauline corpus affirms that ‘all regions and forms are the objects of divine creation and sovereignty’. The corresponding truth is that the ‘one true God ... transcends and governs’ the entire universe. Moreover, the Cross defines Paul’s ‘approach to organising the cosmic reality’, both ‘spatially and temporally’. Specifically, through the Son’s redemptive work, ‘chaos is brought under control’ and ‘order’ is reestablished. In a manner of speaking, through the cross-resurrection episode, the Redeemer has entered space-time history and engaged his archenemies ‘on their own turf, with the result that they are soundly defeated’ (cf. Luke 10:18; John 12:31; Col 2:15).

Beker, in his writings (1990:80–91; 2000:198–208), has drawn attention to Jesus’ atoning sacrifice at Calvary and how it fundamentally shaped Paul’s end-time view of existence. As Beker (2000:199) observes, the Cross was crucial to the apostle’s ‘apocalyptic hermeneutic’. Beker (p. 200) also states that the cross-resurrection dyad inaugurated a ‘new age’ in which the ‘glory of God’ becomes the ‘destiny of creation’. Expressed another way, ‘Paul interprets the death and resurrection of Christ primarily in terms of a cosmic-apocalyptic judgment and renewal’ (p. 204). Moreover, the Cross is the ‘ultimate ground’ (p. 205) for the eternal ‘blessings’ God bestows on believers. In short, the Cross is the ‘apocalyptic turning point of history’ (p. 205), wherein the ‘old age’ (p. 207) is destroyed and the ‘future age dawns’. Included is the ‘overthrow of death’ (1990:81), which Paul labelled the ‘last enemy’ (1 Cor 15:26).

Tannehill (1967:70) contends that the cross-resurrection event ‘must be understood’ within the ‘context’ of Paul’s ‘eschatology’. This includes the ‘decisive transfer’ of ‘believers from the old to the new aeon’. According to Treat (2014:136), Paul regarded the Cross as a

verification that the 'end of the ages' had arrived. Even the 'coming kingdom of God' (p. 227) was impacted by the Cross. Not only was God's reign 'cruciform' in its essence, but also throughout eternity it would be defined by the Cross (230; cf. John 20:27; Gal 6:14; Rev 5:6).² Bradbury (2012:67) affirms the preceding observations by stating that as a consequence of Jesus' 'cruciform work' an 'inbreaking age has already formally overcome the age that was'. Horton (2011:524) shifts the focus to the 'present age' when he states that right now the 'kingdom' appears 'weak and foolish to the world'. Despite that, the 'kingdom is more extensive in its global reach'. Likewise, it is 'more intensive in its redemptive power', especially when compared with 'any earthly empire in history'. Along similar lines, Treat (2014:246) concludes that 'God advances his kingdom through the church' whenever it conforms itself to the Cross.

In keeping with the above observations, the major claim of this journal article is that an understanding of Paul's theology of the cross (in Latin, *theologia crucis*) helps to clarify his apocalyptic view of reality. Knowles (2005:64) likens the apostle's paradigm to a 'simple heuristic device' or 'key' that holds the potential to unlock a 'door' enabling one to access a far-reaching 'conceptual domain'. Nolte (2003:52) advances

² For a deliberation of the cruciform nature of the divine kingdom, cf. Treat (2014:227–46). It is worth noting that Moltmann (1974) has written extensively about the relationship between the Cross and the kingdom; nonetheless, as Eckardt (1985:19) argues, while both Luther and Moltmann 'focus on the crucifixion', along with its 'effects as the locus of theology', their respective interpretations of the 'redemptive act' (p. 20) are completely dissimilar. For instance, in contrast to Luther, Moltmann rejected the 'language of the atonement' (p. 22) and the 'traditional "two-natures" doctrine of Christ' (p. 23). Also, unlike Luther, Moltmann advocated the 'psychological and political liberation of man from the forces of oppression in the world' (p. 24). In sum, while at times Luther and Moltmann may use similar language in reference to the Cross, what they mean and intend by doing so are 'radically different from each other' (p. 25).

the discussion by reasoning that the Cross is the ‘crucial focal point of all theology’, for it defines, illuminates, and guides the ‘entire theological enterprise’. This includes understanding, as Tannehill (1967:1) puts it, the ‘motif of dying and rising with Christ’. These observations are upheld by the synopsis in section 2 and affirm the potential value of using crucicentricity as a hermenutical approach to engage Paul’s writings. The corresponding goal is to use section 3 to validate the major claim by exploring Paul’s cruciform mindset in the following representative passage in his letters: 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10.³

The choice of the preceding text is motivated, in part, by the recognition that as Gorman (2001:18) puts it, ‘for Paul cruciformity encompasses and defines’ the ‘character of God’. Moreover, the Cross defines the nature of existence for Jesus’ followers in the present era, which is dominated by unbelief and disobedience. Concerning the latter, Paul revealed that the Son sacrificed himself for our transgressions in order to ‘rescue us from the present evil age’ (Gal 1:4). The apostle also disclosed that through the cross-resurrection event, Jesus vanquished Satan (Col 2:15), who is the overlord of the malevolent spiritual forces in the unseen ‘world’ (Eph 2:2). Amazingly, as the apostle explained, the religious and civil ‘rulers of this age’ (1 Cor 2:6–8) failed to appreciate ‘God’s wisdom’ revealed in Jesus’ death at Calvary; otherwise, they would not have ‘crucified’ the glorious Lord. Finally, Paul taught that the Son’s triumph over the grave was the basis for believers rejecting the ‘ungodliness and worldly passions’ (Titus 2:12) of the ‘present age’ and living in a manner that is ‘self-controlled, upright and godly’.

³ Due to the limitations of space in this essay, only one of numerous passages within the Pauline corpus is the focus of the case study analysis appearing in section 3.

2. A synopsis of Paul's Theology of the Cross from a Confessional Lutheran Perspective

At first glance, one might advocate culling through the entire Pauline corpus to determine the apostle's theological understanding of the cross; yet, such an endeavour would be unrealistic for the present modest-sized essay. Another option might be to engage all the scholarly publications dealing with Paul's cruciform teaching. Admittedly, though, the secondary literature is vast and there is no consensus within the academic guild concerning the meaning and significance of the apostle's crucicentric perspective. This reality makes it unfeasible to itemize and evaluate comprehensively what other specialists have said on this subject over the course of church history.⁴ So, for the sake of

⁴ For an exploration of how the Cross formed the centre of Paul's relationship with God, including the themes of faith, love, power, and hope, cf. Gorman (2001). For an exploration of the relevance of the Cross for the Christian faith, including how the Cross indicates the way in which God is actively present in the world, cf. McGrath (1987). For a synopsis of the place of the Cross within contemporary theology, cf. Madsen (2007:1–13). For a review of trends in contemporary evangelicalism dealing with a crucicentric spirituality, cf. Tidball (2001:21–9). For an appraisal of the gaps in the academic literature on the significance of the Cross in the New Testament and Christian theology, cf. Hood (2007). For an analysis of various proposed solutions to the problem of evil and the importance of the Cross within this debate, cf. Blocher (1994). For contrasting approaches in understanding Paul's cruciform theology, cf. Anthony (2010:52–105); Bayer (2003:6–7); Beer (1984); Becker (1990:80–91; 2000:182–212); Bradbury (2012:13–146); Brandos (2006); Cousar (1990); Fast (2011); Forde (1997); Heim (2006); Hendel (1997); Hinkson (1993:18–51); Käsemann (1970); Klug (2003:39–56); Kolb (2002); Madsen (2007:15–63); Mateo-Seco (1982); McGrath (1993:192–7; 2011); Nestingen (1992); Nolte (2003); Persaud (2014); Schreiner (2001:87–102); Stott (2006:302–28); Tomlin (2006:111–8); Watson (1947:102–48); Wells (1992); Wengenroth (1982); Wengert (2002).

expediency, in this section, I provide a synopsis of Paul's theology of the cross from a confessional Lutheran perspective.⁵

One reason for adopting this particular approach is that I minister as an ordained clergyperson and teach as an exegetical theologian within this ecclesial tradition (i.e. the North American Lutheran Church and the Institute of Lutheran Theology, respectively). A second reason is that, as von Loewenich (1976:13) argues, 'Luther's theology of the cross . . . corresponds exactly' with what Paul articulated in his letters. A third reason is the rich and well-established discourse within Lutheran scholarship concerning the apostle's writings on the Cross, including how it shaped his apocalyptic view of reality. A fourth reason is that the Lutheran perspective has been a major point of reference and interlocutor (of sorts) for specialists from other philosophical and theological perspectives, especially as they deliberate Paul's understanding of the cross-resurrection event.

To begin, Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518 is regarded as the classic text on the Pauline concept of cruciform theology (cf. Luther 1957:39–58). Even though, as Wengenroth (1982:272) notes, the crucicentric tradition 'dominated Luther's entire theological and

⁵ In Lioy (2014:72–9), I discussed the issue of Jesus' atoning sacrifice, particularly as it relates to 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:12; nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of the present journal article to delve deeply into the debate regarding the nature and significance of the Son's redemptive work at Calvary. The latter includes the penal substitution view of the atonement, which I favour. For a salient defence of the preceding stance, including a biblically grounded and theologically nuanced response to objections made against it, cf. Erickson (2013:731–52) and Marshall (2005:1–16). Also, for one recent approach to reconcile penal substitution and the *Christus Victor* theory, cf. Treat (2014:174–226). In essence, he argues for a synthesis of 'Christus Victor through penal substitution'.

ecclesiastical career',⁶ Hendel (1997:223) appropriately clarifies that the *Disputation* theses are Luther's 'most focused articulation' of his thoughts in this area. To be sure, there are a number of scholarly treatises that elucidate the historical setting and development of Luther's reasoning.⁷ This includes the recognition that, as Hinkson (1993:20) indicates, 'Luther's *theologia crucis* . . . did not arise in a vacuum'. In particular, he was 'influenced' by the 'mystical traditions' found in 'late medieval spirituality'. To the latter, Madsen (2007:83–91) adds that Church 'tradition' about 'humility' and 'free will' also 'shaped Luther's theology of the cross'.

Despite the importance of the preceding historical backdrop, the intent of the present section moves in a different direction, namely, to provide a concise distillation of what Luther taught in his *Disputation* about Paul's theology of the cross. Admittedly, my area of expertise is exegetical theology. For this reason, I draw upon the work of various Luther scholars to inform the discourse appearing in this section. Forde (1997), in particular, provides a lucid and cogent treatment of Luther's thought, and for this reason serves as a useful primer here. Specifically, Forde (xii) explains that Paul's cruciform mindset signifies a distinctive way of perceiving the 'world and our destiny'. Jesus' followers have died to the 'old' (p. 13) reality, now live in vital union with the Saviour, and eagerly anticipate 'being raised with him'. This mindset is radically different from the 'optimism' (xiii) found within a 'theology of glory' (in Latin, *theologia gloriae*), especially its heretical, legalistic emphasis on the 'place of good works in the scheme of salvation'.

⁶ Along with Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation*, as the analysis of Madsen (2007:75–83) demonstrates, Luther's emphasis on the Cross can be found in *Lectures on the Hebrews* (early 1518), the *Asterisci Lutheri adversus Obeliscos Eckii* (March 1518), and the *Explanations of the 95 Theses* (August 1518).

⁷ E.g. Bradbury (2012); Madsen (2007); McGrath (2011); Tomlin (2006); von Loewenich (1976); Westhelle (2006).

On the one hand, the preceding approach is characterised by a ‘suffocating sentimentality’ (Forde 1997:viii) that portrays God as using the Cross to identify with ‘us in our pain and suffering’;⁸ on the other hand, Paul’s theology of the cross teaches that Jesus laid down his life at Calvary to atone for the sins of humankind. In turn, God allows Jesus’ followers to endure ‘suffering’ (ix) because they ‘look on the world anew in light of Christ’s passion’. The focus in Paul’s theology of the cross is on people being ‘sinners’ (x) in need of redemption, not ‘victims’ requiring ‘affirmation and support’. Ironically, the pagan religionist’s ‘thirst for glory’ (xiv), which is often evidenced by the performance of allegedly meritorious deeds, leads to greater ‘despair’ (xiv). Just as counterintuitive is the outcome of increased ‘hope’ being found in Paul’s cruciform teaching. Furthermore, in keeping with what Luther observed in his *Disputation*, the cure for humanity’s existential plight is not endless sessions involving psychotherapy; rather, as Paul stressed in his letters, it is to hear the good news and be saved. The paradox is that when the cross-resurrection event and its implications are either downplayed or abandoned, it leads to increased pessimism, not optimism, and insecurity, not self-esteem (xi).

⁸ Billings (2014) refers to the trite view of God that prevails in the West as ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’ (or MTD; 133). He summarises its ‘set of core beliefs’ (p. 134) as follows: (1) ‘A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth’; (2) ‘God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions’; (3) ‘The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself’; (4) ‘God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life, except when God is needed to resolve a problem’; and, (5) ‘Good people go to heaven when they die’. Billings explains that within the context of a postmodern, consumer-oriented, and religiously pluralistic culture, it is typical for people to ‘pick and choose’ (p. 135) from a range of traditions, beliefs, and philosophies to create their own private spirituality, one that bears no resemblance to the ‘biblical and Christ-centred’ teachings of the historic, Christian church.

Forde (1997:3) emphasizes that a theology of the cross is not the same as crafting dogmatic 'propositions' about what the Pauline writings teach concerning Jesus' death and resurrection, even though the latter emphasis serves an important role within academic discourse; instead, the emphasis is on the Cross itself being the locus of attention. As Luther put it, the 'cross alone is our theology' (in Latin, *crux sol est nostra theologia*). In accord with this cruciform perspective, the 'goal' (p. 4) is to 'become a theologian of the cross'. This entails believers 'operating' in a certain way, not just researching and composing tractates in a detached manner about the subject. Taking a cue from Galatians 2:20, Forde (p. 7) observes that 'just as Jesus was crucified, so we also are crucified with him'. On one level, believers *take part* in the cruciform narrative; yet, on another deeper level, the Cross *becomes* their personal defining narrative. In brief, it marks out the course of their temporal and eternal 'destiny' (p. 10).

While Paul's theology of the cross has an existential component, there remains a place for articulating key propositional truths connected with a crucicentric outlook. In this regard, McGrath (2011:211–4) advances the discussion by listing five 'leading themes' or 'motifs', as explained by Luther:⁹ (1) It is a 'theology of revelation, which stands in sharp contrast to idle speculation'; (2) This divine disclosure should be 'regarded as indirect and concealed' (cf. Luther's reference to the 'crucified and hidden God'; in Latin, *Deus crucifixus et absconditus*; Exod 33:18–23; Isa 40:13; 45:15; Rom 11:33–35; 1 Tim 6:16); (3) 'God's self-revelation' is centred in the 'humility and shame' of the Cross, not in 'human moral activity or the structures of the created order'; (4) The 'eye of faith alone', not unaided and speculative 'human

⁹ The general contours of McGrath's analysis are echoed in the following: Anthony (2010:56–7, 103–4); Bradbury (2012:131–4); Hendel (1997:224–31); Kolb (2002:449–54); Nolte (2003:53); Treat (2014:228); Tomlin (2006:114, 183–5); von Loewenich (1976:22).

reason’, recognises the ‘veiled disclosure’ of the Father in the agony and ignominy of the Cross as being an authentic ‘revelation’; and (5) The Father deliberately ‘chooses to be known’ through the ‘suffering’ endured by the Son as well as his followers, both corporately and individually.

The way in which God works through the suffering of believers warrants further attention. Kolb (2002:443) aptly remarks that it was ‘not in flight beyond the clouds’ that the Creator came to disclose the unvarnished truth ‘about himself and about humanity’; rather, it was ‘in the dust of the grave’. Stott (2006:320) provides a bit of perspective in stating that though the Cross does not philosophically resolve the ‘problem of suffering’, it ‘supplies the essential perspective’ from which to consider it. Paul’s experience is an illustrative case in point. He not only taught a theology of the cross, but also lived it out in his evangelistic work. In truth, he regarded his suffering as vital to his mission as an apostle to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 9:15–16; 14:22; 20:23–24; 21:11; 2 Cor 11:23–29; 2 Tim 3:12). Expressed another way, the trials Paul endured were the means by which he proclaimed the gospel to the nations. His distress validated and legitimated his message, demonstrating the truth of the gospel.

There is a sense in which Paul regarded his sufferings as a corollary to the sufferings Jesus endured (cf. Col 1:24).¹⁰ The emphasis here, as Treat (2014:229) observes, was not on believers such as Paul imitating Jesus’ life and ministry, as salutary as the latter might seem; rather, the priority was on living in baptismal ‘union’ with the Saviour’s ‘death

¹⁰ For an overview of the history of interpretation for Colossians 1:24, cf. Ruemann (1990). For an exploration of the cruciform or cross-bearing aspect of the Christian life, cf. Clancy (1994); Clark (2006); Ellington (2012); Hendel (1997:229–31); Hood (2009:286–94); Kolb (2002:454–64).

and resurrection'. As Schreiner (2001:100–1) explains, this does not mean the apostle thought Jesus' atoning sacrifice at Calvary was deficient and that Paul's anguish helped to bring about the pardoning of repentant sinners. Likewise, the apostle never claimed that in his distress he somehow bore the sins of God's people in a substitutionary death as Jesus did; instead, Paul regarded his adversities as mirroring what Jesus endured. In this way, the apostle replicated the earthly sojourn of Jesus. Accordingly, the apostle's tribulations were central to his calling, since they provided evidence for the veracity of the gospel he declared.

To return to the main discussion, McGrath (2011:205–6) notes that God's decision to reveal himself through the Cross sheds light on the affective and cognitive realms of the believers' faith. The *theologia crucis* also challenges natural human judgments about God, revelation, and justification. Paul's cruciform perspective is the means by which God demolishes the impediments of hubris and foolishness, which inhibit people from discerning the divine presence and purpose. Furthermore, McGrath (p. 210) observes that in the crucicentric tradition, 'faith and doubt, righteousness and sin' are shown to be 'correlates' that are simultaneously 'intrinsic to the identity' of the whole person (in Latin, *totus homo*). It is a 'dialectic' or tension that cannot be rectified this side of eternity. While the circumstance of being justified and a sinner at the same time (in Latin, *simul iustus et peccator*) is 'theologically messy and existentially distressing', it corresponds exactly with the pattern of life that believers experience.

According to McGrath (2011:206–8), Paul regarded the Cross to be the underpinning and benchmark for any trustworthy approach to knowing God. The Cross challenges natural human perceptions of what God is like and how he should act. The Cross not only contests human self-confidence and complacency, but also forces people to seek and find the

mercy of God. McGrath (209–10) explains that the Cross, as an epistemological metanarrative, recognises the inscrutable aspects of faith and resists any attempts to extract some abstract, sterilised dogmas from the savagery and trauma of Jesus' execution. The Cross also illuminates how believers are to exist in the murky, barren terrain of a sin-cursed world filled with uncertainty and iniquity. Moreover, the Cross helps believers cope with the anxiety produced by the inexplicable contradictions of living on a planet characterised by strife, narcissism, and injustice. Affirming the presence of God in a world of shadows, confusion, and distress speaks to those who would otherwise be driven to atheism, especially due to the seemingly irresolvable tension between theory and experience, belief and practice.

3. Paul's Theology of the Cross in 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10

Both external and internal evidence point to Paul's authorship of 2 Corinthians.¹¹ The letter was widely circulated by AD 140 and was

¹¹ In this section, the latest editions of the Nestle-Aland / United Bible Societies' *Novum Testamentum Graece* have been used. Also, unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are my personal translation of the respective biblical texts being cited. Moreover, I have intentionally refrained from filling every paragraph and page in this portion of the journal article with an excessive number of formal citations from secondary sources. So, for the sake of expediency, the following are the lexical and grammatical sources I consulted in the researching and writing of the corresponding discourse: *A dictionary of biblical languages: Greek New Testament* (J Swanson); *A grammar of the Greek New Testament* (N Turner, JH Moulton, and WF Howard); *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (FW Danker, ed.); *Exegetical dictionary of the New Testament* (H Balz and G Schneider, eds.); *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament based on semantic domains* (JP Louw and EA Nida, eds.); *Greek grammar beyond the basics: an exegetical syntax of the New Testament* (DB Wallace); *Greek New Testament insert* (B Chapman and GS

recognized without question as the work of the apostle.¹² The writer twice identified himself in the epistle (cf. 1:1; 10:1), and in addition, referred to himself in ways that unmistakably mark himself as Paul. While there is considerable certainty about the authorship of 2 Corinthians, numerous questions have arisen about the exact time of the writing. The consensus view is that this letter was likely penned in the fall of AD 56. Several references clearly identify the region of Macedonia as the general area where Paul wrote 2 Corinthians (cf. 7:5; 8:1; 9:2–4).

In this epistle, Paul dealt with his own triumph and joy as well as with some of his disappointment and despair. As noted by Black (2012:53), the 'idea of weakness' operates as a 'central motif' here. Because Paul was so transparent in what he wrote, probably no other letter gives readers a clearer glimpse of the apostle and his cruciform theology,

Shogren); *Lexham Theological Wordbook* (D Mangum, et al., eds.); *New international dictionary of New Testament theology and exegesis* (M Silva, ed.); *The Lexham discourse Greek New Testament* (S Runge, ed.); *The new linguistic and exegetical key to the Greek New Testament* (CL Rogers); *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (G Kittel and G Friedrich, eds.); and *Theological lexicon of the New Testament* (C Spicq; JD Ernest, ed.).

¹² The scholarly literature on 2 Corinthians is extensive. Also, the majority of relevant exegetical and theological works frequently convey the same sort of information on this Pauline passage. So, for the sake of expediency, the following are the representative secondary sources that have influenced the discourse: Abernathy (2001); Balla (2007); Barnett (1997); Belleville (1996); Black (2012); Bray (2005); Bruce (1986); Collins (2013); Ellington (2012); Elliott (2004); Fitzgerald (1990); Furnish (1984); Garland (1989; 1999); Glancy (2004); Gorman (2001); Hafemann (1990; 2000a; 2000b); Harris (2005; 2008); Hubbard (2002); Hughes (1962); Keener (2005); Kistemaker (2002); Knowles (2005); Lambrecht (1996); Lenski (1961); Madsen (2007); Marshall (2004); Martin (1986); Matera (2003); Morrow (1986); Murphy-O'Connor (1991); O'Collins (1971); Pickett (1997); Plummer (1978); Sampley (2000); Schütz (1975); Tannehill (1967); Thrall (2000); Wright (2013).

especially against the backdrop of an apocalyptic understanding of reality. By allowing his readers to identify with his struggles, Paul indicated that the same comfort and strength he had received from the Saviour was available to all believers. Indeed, the apostle hoped his epistle would repair his relationship with the church at Corinth—a relationship that had been damaged by false teachers trying to discredit his apostolic authority and undermine the credibility of his ministry.¹³

While Paul never specifically identified the impostors, a portrait of them can be pieced together from 2 Corinthians. The spiritual frauds came from outside Corinth (possibly from Judea) and needed letters of recommendation (3:1). Paul complained about the pretenders invading his sphere of ministry (10:13–16). They preached a false gospel—one that may have deemphasised the Messiah’s role in the salvation of believers (11:4). If so, their human-centred soteriology was akin to a theology of glory. The deceivers apparently declared themselves to have spiritual authority that was superior to Paul’s (v. 5) and claimed to be apostles of the Saviour (v. 13). The false teachers may have been seeking to earn a living from those to whom they preached and taught

¹³ For a detailed examination of the enmity existing between Paul and the Corinthians, cf. Marshall (1987). He explores ‘Greco-Roman traditions’ (vii) to elucidate the ‘causes of the hostility’, the ‘form it takes’, and the ‘efforts’ Paul made to ‘win back the Corinthians’. Marshall deduces that ‘much of Paul’s terminology in the conflict’ (ix) mirrors ‘normal social usage’. Marshall also observes that the apostle used a ‘number of traditional techniques’ (p. 341), including ‘non-naming, comparison, self-praise, self-derision, and innuendo’, to ‘derogate his enemies’. Furthermore, Marshall (xiv) regards the nature of the ‘dispute’ as ‘primarily a socio-cultural’ altercation, one in which the evangelist was ‘discredited as a socially and intellectually inferior person’ whom the Corinthians could not trust. Against this backdrop, Marshall (p. 364) argues that Paul was ‘willing to allow his apostleship to be judged on the basis of failure and weakness’. In short, Marshall (p. 374) discerns that Paul used himself as a ‘foil’ to portray his ‘rivals’ as ‘arrogant, insolent, and shameless’ persons.

their counterfeit doctrine (vv. 7–9). The frauds were, in actuality, ministers of Satan, while masquerading as apostles of the Lord (vv. 14–15). The impostors may have been Judaizers, who placed more emphasis on their Hebrew heritage than on the grace of the Messiah (v. 22). They were also guilty of putting the Corinthians in spiritual bondage (v. 20).¹⁴

Given the above circumstance, a foremost reason for Paul's writing 2 Corinthians was to refute the accusations false teachers were making against him. Having gained the ear of the church at Corinth, these duplicitous hucksters apparently declared that Paul was untrustworthy and double-minded, and that he ministered solely for the purpose of self-elevation. The apostle's motivation in defending himself in this letter, however, did not arise from self-interest or pride, but from his desire to protect the church at Corinth. Because Paul's integrity was so closely linked to a crucicentric understanding of the gospel, a successful effort to discredit him would have inevitably led to an undermining of the faith preached in the city by the apostle and members of his missionary team.

¹⁴ For a consideration of the secular underpinnings of Paul's critique of his opponents at Corinth, including the first-century AD Greco-Roman social setting, cf. Savage (2004). He explains that 'self-appreciation' (p. 19) was the 'goal' and 'self-glorification' was the 'reward'. Also, within 'Roman society rank was a prized possession' (p. 20). Moreover, flaunting one's 'status' (p. 22) in society was crucial. For a comprehensive inquiry into the identity of Paul's opponents in 2 Corinthians, the claims they made about themselves, and the assertions they made against Paul, cf. Georgi (1986). He describes the rivals as 'migrant preachers of Jewish origin' (p. 315) who obtained 'great prestige' among the believers at Corinth. Georgi thinks the 'intruders' leveraged their celebrity status to 'further their own work and to dismantle Paul's influence'. Georgi surmises that Paul saw his 'very existence threatened' (p. 316) by the antagonists, especially since they assailed his 'function as a missionary'. In the view of Georgi, Paul's 'criticism' of his enemies was 'motivated by the presence of the crucified and exalted Lord'.

Undoubtedly, Paul had several other purposes in addressing this letter to the Corinthians. For instance, Titus had brought the apostle the welcome news of the favourable response to his most recent letter, as well as possibly disturbing news concerning the church, and Paul wanted to reply to the report he had received. He also wanted to encourage the Christians at Corinth to complete their collection for the believers at Jerusalem before his forthcoming visit. Moreover, because the false teachers had apparently pointed to his change of itinerary as evidence of his being undependable, the apostle wanted to explain why he had modified his plans. Finally, he called on his readers to distinguish between true and false teaching (especially a theology of the cross vs. a theology of glory), to separate themselves from all idolatrous associations, and to pray for him and his evangelistic outreach.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul created a list of the sufferings he had endured as part of his ministry.¹⁵ Garland (1989:378) considers these adversities as a ‘kind of parody of the boasts’ made by the apostle’s opponents, which in turn he used to deride their ‘exalted claims’. Sampley (2000:157–8) refers to this ‘hardship catalog’ as ‘Paul’s badge of honor’. At the conclusion of the list, he stated in verse 28 that his oversight of the churches under his pastoral care was a burden he shouldered day-to-day. Perhaps no other church took a greater toll on

¹⁵ For a detailed examination of the ancient literary convention of compiling lists of hardships (technically referred to as *peristaseis* catalogues) and how they compare with what is found in the Pauline corpus, especially the Corinthian letters, cf. Fitzgerald (1988). He explains that in the ‘ancient world’ (p. 203) it was ‘axiomatic’ that ‘adversity’ was a ‘litmus test of character’. Also, a ‘person’s virtuous attitude and action while under duress’ offered ‘proof’ that this individual was of ‘genuine worth’. Fitzgerald surmises that ‘placing Paul’s catalogues within the literary traditions of antiquity’ (p. 2) confirms that the missionary’s enumerations ‘legitimate his claim to be an apostle of Christ’. In brief, Paul wanted his readers to recognize him as a ‘person of integrity’ (p. 206) whom they could trust.

the apostle than did the one at Corinth. In addition to the above reasons mentioned, he wrote this heartfelt and candid letter to urge his readers to depend on God rather than themselves (i.e. to live as theologians of the cross, not theologians of glory). Within this cruciform context, Paul had found God's comfort and strength to be more than adequate to meet the afflictions and challenges associated with his own ministry, and he knew that God offered to all believers this same encouragement and energy.

Earlier, in 11:1, Paul said he was going to use discourse characterised by 'foolishness', in which the underlying Greek noun, *aphrosynēs* (genitive, singular, feminine), implies what seems to be thoughtless or senseless, especially by conventional standards of human wisdom. Belleville (1996:284) clarifies that Paul did not have in mind 'someone who is stupid or witless'; instead, the apostle targeted those whose 'self-perceptions are blown all out of proportion'. Next, in verse 16, Paul assured his readers that he was not really a fool (*aphrona*, adjective, accusative, singular; 'foolish'), even though they might conclude he was behaving imprudently. The apostle was referring to his decision to momentarily engage in 'boasting' (verb, aorist, middle, subjective, *kauchēsōmai*; 'may boast') about himself. In drawing attention to his own achievements, his purpose was to expose the hubris of his antagonists and discredit anyone who embraced their anthropocentric views. Barnett (1997:529–31) elucidates that the apostle's 'rhetorical exercise' in 'parody', known in that day as the 'Fool's Speech' (or 'Fools Discourse'; extending from 11:1–12:13),¹⁶ was a 'daring

¹⁶ Matera (2003:237) draws attention to the debate among scholars concerning where the literary section beginning in 2 Corinthians 11:1 ends. He notes that some favour 12:10 as the concluding verse, whereas others opt for either verse 13 or 18. The reasons for or against any particular view notwithstanding, this treatise has made 11:16–12:10 the principal focus of investigation.

countercultural exercise’, since it was common for people to brag about their ‘achievements,’ not ‘weaknesses’.¹⁷

Keener (2005:231) explains that Paul composed a ‘caricature that assails his opponents rather than himself’. The apostle’s ostentatious assertions (*hypostasei kauchēseōs*, in which the second noun is understood to be an attributive genitive, ‘boastful confidence’; 11:17) were motivated by a pastoral concern for the wellbeing of the church at Corinth, as well as for the preservation of the gospel. Though he disfavoured speaking proudly about his ministerial work, he regarded doing so as necessary for the cause of Christ. With that in mind, Paul requested the Corinthians’ forbearance as he recited what he experienced as he obeyed the Lord. Paul explained that he was not following Jesus’ example when the apostle bragged about what God had done through him. In one sense, Paul caricatured the intruders’ example. They had commended themselves to the Corinthians, and apparently some of the Corinthians attentively listened to them.

Paul wanted to prevent the Corinthians from drawing superficial inferences about his ministry based only on what the false teachers said. So, the apostle decided to follow their lead by discoursing in a foolish manner (*aphrosynē*, verb, dative, singular, feminine; ‘foolishness’; v. 17). In essence, Paul gave the Corinthians a detailed description of his ministry for the sake of comparison. His hesitancy to boast was mitigated by the recognition that his readers were at ease with such self-commendation. As theologians of glory, Paul’s adversaries in Corinth

¹⁷ For a survey of ancient rhetorical discourse used in Greco-Roman culture, along with a corresponding stylistic analysis of 2 Corinthians, cf. Long 2004. At the end of his examination of 11:16–12:10, he concludes that ‘there can be little doubt Paul followed the apologetic tradition of self-adulation, even though he seasoned it with parody by appealing to his weaknesses’ (p. 190).

operated in the 'flesh' (v. 18), in which the underlying Greek noun, *sarka* (accusative, singular, feminine), theologically referred to the sinful state of human beings. In this context, the emphasis was on the pagan standards the frauds used to rationalise gloating over their alleged achievements (cf. Jas 3:13–16).

Even worse for Paul was that some of the Corinthians delighted (*hēdeōs*; adverb of manner, in the emphatic position; 'gladly'; 2 Cor 11:19) in putting up with (*anechesthe*; verb, present, either middle or passive, indicative) these self-absorbed braggarts (*aphronōn*; adjective, genitive, plural; 'fools'). The apostle, by sarcastically calling his readers 'wise' (*phronimoi*; adjective, nominative, plural), intended to rebuke their willingness to endure the presence of such morally deficient persons as the charlatans in their midst (cf. 1 Cor 4:10). As it turned out, the Corinthians' tolerance of the false apostles led to the acceptance of their tyrannical behaviour. Specifically, the Corinthians were welcoming (*anechesthe*; verb, present, either middle or passive, indicative; 'bear with'; 2 Cor 11:20) these interlopers, even while being manhandled by them.

For instance, the false apostles, as theologians of glory, tried to strip the Corinthians of their liberty in union with the Messiah and shackle (*katadouloō*; verb, present, active, indicative; 'enslaves') them to the Mosaic Law. In all likelihood, these intruders taught a combination of Christianity and Judaism, in which they emphasised legalistic righteousness as a prerequisite for salvation. Even though they affirmed Jesus as the Messiah, they stressed obedience to the Law of Moses as the way to gain and retain God's acceptance. In addition, the charlatans were guilty of the following offences, which Matera (2003:257) indicates amplify one another: preying upon the Corinthians (*katesthie*; verb, present, active, indicative; 'devours', 'consumes'); exploiting them by using deception (*lambanei*; verb, present, active indicative;

‘takes advantage of’); engaging them in an egotistical, presumptuous manner (*epairetai*; verb, present, middle, indicative; ‘exalt oneself’); and maltreating them (*derei*; verb, present, active, indicative; ‘strikes’).

Throughout verses 16–20, Paul used sarcasm to call attention to the irony of the Corinthians’ acceptance of those who harmed them. The apostle’s derision reached its rhetorical peak in verse 21, where he confessed that, to his disgrace (*atimian*; noun, accusative, singular, feminine; ‘shame’), he was too cowardly (*ēsthenēkamen*; verb, perfect, active, indicative; ‘have been weak’) to exploit his converts. This was a biting comment for those who had criticised him for being timid while he was in Corinth. Did the believers really want an apostle who was cruel to them? There were occasions in the first century AD for those holding religious authority to strike others in the face for displaying impiety or disrespect. By way of example, Jesus was slapped in the face because of an answer he gave during his questioning before the high priest, Annas (cf. John 18:22). Another high priest, Ananias, ordered that Paul be struck on the mouth because of the words he spoke before the Sanhedrin (cf. Acts 23:2). The Corinthians, too, were enduring this type of abuse from the false apostles, who had invaded the church with their counterfeit teaching (2 Cor 11:20).

While Paul refused to emulate the charlatans’ harsh treatment of his readers, he would match their brazenness in exaggerated self-praise (cf. the use in v. 21 of *toima*–verb, present, active, subjunctive, third person, singular; ‘dares [to boast]’–with *toimo*–verb, present, active, indicative, first person, singular; ‘dare [to boast]’). The apostle admitted that in defending the legitimacy of his apostleship, he again was talking like a fool (*aphrosynē*; noun, dative, singular, feminine; ‘in foolishness’). He discerned he could do so, since he had more to brag about than his rivals. In particular, none of them had experienced all that he had for

the sake of the gospel; and now he was now prepared, in a crucicentric manner, to list those hardships substantiating his devotion to the Messiah. Keener (2005:233) observes that 'contrary to those who claim Paul's adventures in Acts must be Luke's fiction', the apostle's catalogue of sufferings 'reveals that Luke omits far more than he includes'.

Before Paul detailed his individual afflictions, he first recounted his ancestral claims. Perhaps his opponents derided him for supposedly being less than a purebred Jew. After all, he was originally from the Roman province of Asia Minor (specifically, the city of Tarsus), rather than the Jewish homeland of Palestine (especially Jerusalem). That being the case, Paul wanted to establish that his spiritual heritage as a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, as a bona fide member of the nation of Israel, and as a circumcised descendant of Abraham, was equal to that of the intruders (v. 22; cf. Phil 3:5–6). The upshot, as expressed by Murphy-O'Connor (1991:115), is that 'culturally, racially, and religiously' Paul was in no way 'inferior to his opponents'. This emphasis is brought out with rhetorical potency by the apostle's threefold usage of *kagō* (2 Cor 11:22). It is as if, for each claim the antagonists made about themselves, he forcefully countered with the declarative, 'So am I!'

Next, Paul used an autobiographical sketch to indicate that his achievements were superior to his rivals. Still, he conceded that, at least on one level, his manner of speaking seemed irrational (*paraphronōn*; verb, present, active, participle; 'as beside myself'; v. 23). On another level, though, it was far more ludicrous for the interlopers to claim to be 'servants' (*diakonoi*; noun, nominative, plural, masculine) whom the Messiah had chosen and commissioned (in which the noun *Christou* is understood to be a qualitative genitive). Paul again tersely maintained that his apostolic call and authorisation was even greater. In this regard,

the phrase *hyper egō*, which Furnish (1984:514) considers a ‘rhetorical heightening’ of the triple appearance of the pronoun *kagō* in verse 22, could be rendered ‘I am more so!’

In the remainder of verses 23 through 29, Paul recounted his personal experiences and concerns (cf. Gal 6:17; 1 Cor 4:9–13; 2 Cor 6:4–5). As he did so, his readers could discern that while he ministered as a theologian of the cross, the charlatans misbehaved as theologians of glory. Paul’s intent was to demonstrate that God, in his grace, met all his bondservant’s needs, even in the midst of unimaginable adversities. Specifically, compared to the religious frauds, Paul had laboured more arduously, been jailed more frequently, been beaten more cruelly, and faced the spectre of death more often (2 Cor 11:23; cf. the fourfold use of *en* as a preposition of means).

Paul did not exaggerate the nature of the life-threatening circumstances he repeatedly endured for the sake of the Cross. Verses 24 and 25 list four kinds of those exposures to death, as well as the number of times each kind had so far occurred in the apostle’s life. First, on five different occasions, Jewish leaders ordered Paul to be lashed 39 times with a whip (cf. Deut 25:1–3). Hafemann (2000b:439) identifies ‘doctrinal heresy, blasphemy, and serious offences against Jewish customs’ as the ‘three most probable crimes’ to trigger this punishment. Especially likely is Paul violating ‘food and ritual purity regulations’ due to his ‘ministry among the Gentiles’. Though the Bible does not describe any of these incidents, they undoubtedly resulted from the apostle angering his religious peers for proclaiming the truth about the crucified and risen Messiah. Second, Paul recalled three episodes in which a Gentile mob beat him with wooden rods, perhaps for ‘disturbing the peace’ (p. 440). This had happened despite the fact that

it was illegal for a Roman citizen—such as Paul—to be forced to endure this cruel punishment (cf. Acts 16:22).

Third, Paul had once been stoned (2 Cor 11:25). This was a prevalent form of execution used by the Jews and other peoples in the first century AD. Perhaps the apostle was recalling his experience in Lystra, a city of central Asia Minor (cf. Acts 14:19–20). Though angry citizens thought they had killed him, he miraculously got up and walked away. Fourth, Paul had been shipwrecked (2 Cor 11:25). On the one hand, undergoing this experience was not technically a punishment, but a hazard of travel; on the other hand, it had happened three times to Paul, a frequent traveller. The Bible does not describe any of these three mishaps. (The shipwreck recorded in Acts 27:39–44 occurred after the apostle wrote 2 Cor) It was due to one of these shipwrecks that he spent a night and day afloat on the open sea before being rescued.

In 11:26, Paul listed eight more kinds of danger he encountered that pointed to the crucicentric nature of his evangelistic outreach (with each subordinate clause being preceded by the noun, *kindynois*, a dative of manner; ‘in dangers’). During his numerous, long excursions, he was in peril when he tried to ford swift rivers, and his life was threatened when he encountered robbers while travelling on isolated stretches of road. The apostle braved the menace posed by Jews and Gentiles who were hostile to the gospel. He put his life at risk when he ministered in urban centres, as well as when he made his way through remote wilderness areas. Paul withstood the hazard of voyages on the seas and the brutality of people who only pretended to be Christians.

Besides the dangers of travelling, voluntary privations for the sake of the Cross made Paul's life difficult (v. 27; cf. the fourfold use of *en* as a preposition of means). These hardships were in such basic areas as rest, nourishment, and clothing. For example, in the apostle's efforts to

evangelise and teach, he often deprived himself of sleep, even labouring to the point of exhaustion long into the night. Also, whether as part of a religious fast or because his work made it impossible for him to eat properly, he often went without food and drink. Moreover, because of his poverty or due to his generosity to others, Paul frequently did not have enough garments to keep him warm in cold weather. In addition to the preceding external deprivations (which was only a partial, representative list), doctrinal and moral problems that besieged the churches under Paul's care placed a continual internal burden on him (v. 28). Indeed, his concern extended to the individual members of the church (v. 29). When they felt weak, the apostle also shared in their feelings of weakness. Oppositely, when believers spiritually strayed (*skandalizetai*; verb, present, active, indicative; 'made to stumble'), he became intensely upset (*pyroumai*; verb, present, passive, indicative; 'burn [with indignation]').

Ironically, while setting out to counter the self-commendations of the interlopers, Paul ended up boasting (cf. the twofold use of the verb, *kauchaomai*; v. 30) about circumstances in his life that showcased his feebleness (*astheneias*; noun, genitive, singular, feminine; 'weakness').¹⁸ For pastoral reasons, the apostle felt it was necessary to do so (cf. the use of the verb, *dei*; present, active, indicative). Specifically, he prided himself on his vulnerability, because it furnished opportunities for God's supernatural power to show itself in Paul's cruciform life experiences. The fact that the Lord was able to do so much through the apostle's ministry, despite his hardships, proved the

¹⁸ For an examination of every occurrence of *astheneia* and its cognates in the Pauline letters, cf. Black (2012). He determines that the concept of weakness is foundational to Paul's anthropology, Christology, and ethics (p. 151). Black also discerns that 'through weakness, the power of the resurrection finds its fullest expression in the apostle, in his apostolic mission, and in the communities he founded' (p. 165).

authenticity of his calling. Because his catalogue of sufferings appeared far-fetched, he invoked the Creator's affirming witness. So, while referring to him as the 'God and Father' (v. 31) of the 'Lord Jesus', as well as the one deserving eternal praise, Paul declared that the Creator knew his bondservant was telling the truth.

Paul set the record straight by noting that fierce opposition to his preaching had begun in the earliest days of his ministry. He recounted that while he was in Damascus (about 20 years earlier), the governor of the region (*ethnarchēs*; noun, nominative, singular; 'ruler of the people'), whom the Nabatean king, Aretas IV Philoptris (9 BC–AD 40), appointed, had ordered the apostle's arrest due to his evangelistic activity in the synagogues (v. 32).¹⁹ To help him escape certain death, some local believers lowered him in a large, woven rope-basket (*sarganē*; noun, dative, singular, feminine) through the window of a house built along the city wall (v. 33; cp. Josh 2:15; 1 Sam 9:12; Acts 9:23–25). So, Paul emphasised that from the beginning of his ministry, God had worked through the apostle's frailties and humiliations, just as God had done for the decades following the above incident. In short, as Barnett (1997:553–5) notes, the Lord sustained his bondservant—no matter how low he was brought—so that God could raise up his emissary to herald the truth of the Cross.

¹⁹ In an attempt to correlate the parallel accounts concerning Paul in Acts 8, Galatians 1, and 2 Corinthians 11, Harris (2005:826) offers the following reconstruction: (1) Paul's conversion on the road heading to Damascus (Acts 9:1–8); (2) Paul's temporary residence in Damascus (vv. 9–24); (3) Paul's preaching in the synagogues of Damascus (vv. 20–22); (4) Paul's time in the Nabatean kingdom of Arabia (Gal 1:17); (5) Paul's return to Damascus (v. 17); (6) Paul's escape from Damascus (Acts 9:25; 2 Cor 11:32–33); and (8) Paul's first visit to Jerusalem after his conversion (Acts 9:26–29; Gal 1:18–24).

Despite Paul's reluctance to continue boasting (*kauchasthai*; verb, present, either middle or passive, infinitive; 2 Cor 12:1), there remained one more area where the apostle felt that it was necessary (*dei*; verb, present, active, indicative) to counter the assertions of his opponents in Corinth. Because of his crucicentric perspective, Paul admitted that boasting did not edify him spiritually (cf. the use of the participle, *sympheron*; 'profitable, beneficial, advantageous'); nonetheless, if his rivals could brag about their 'visions' (*optasias*; noun, accusative, plural, feminine; often experienced in dreams) and 'revelations' (*apokalypseis*; noun, accusative, plural, feminine), so could he (12:1). Though Paul's encounter with the risen and glorious Saviour was beyond anything the self-stylised 'super apostles' (11:5; 12:11) of his day (or anyone else) could imagine, the missionary noted it was counterbalanced by a painful ailment God used to keep his bondservant humble (cf. the reference to 'thorn in the flesh' in 12:7).²⁰

So, with biting irony, Paul turned to visions he received from the Lord (cf. the plural nouns used in vv. 2 and 7). As Murphy-O'Connor (1991:118) points out, a 'journey to another world' was a 'common theme in apocalyptic literature' of Second Temple Judaism (involving such persons as Enoch, Levi, Moses, Ezra, and Baruch; cf. Collins 2013:236). The apostle's reticence to talk about what he saw is evident by his oblique reference to himself in the third person, as though he were speaking about someone else (v. 2). Garland (1989:388) surmises that Paul refused to directly 'claim this private religious experience as an apostolic credential'. These visions occurred fourteen years earlier (about AD 45), perhaps a decade after the apostle's conversion (about AD 35), but before his first missionary journey (AD 46–48). It is

²⁰ The information in the following two paragraphs is a revision of material in Lioy (2011:71–2).

possible that he had these experiences around the time he spent ministering in Antioch (cf. Acts 11:25–26).

In the revelatory episodes, Paul was snatched away (*harpagenta*; verb, aorist, passive, participle; ‘caught up’; 2 Cor 12:2) to the ‘third heaven’ (*tritou ouranou*) or ‘paradise’ (*paradeison*; noun, accusative, singular, masculine; a ‘walled enclosure’, such as a garden or park; v. 4). Jewish writings of the day subdivided the heavens into three or more layers.²¹ It remains unclear how much of this thinking Paul accepted, though his wording in 2 Corinthians 12:2 and 4 suggests he embraced the prevailing Jewish cosmology of a plurality of the heavens. If it is assumed that the first heaven is the sky and the second heaven the more distant stars and planets, the third heaven refers to the place where God dwells. Paradise is the abode of blessedness for the righteous dead. For believers, it also signifies dwelling in fellowship with the exalted Redeemer in unending glory.

Though Paul was clear about what he saw (i.e. supernatural revelations from and about the Lord Jesus; v. 1), the apostle was ambiguous about whether he remained in his body or drifted out of it during these experiences. He wrote that only God knew for sure what really happened to his bondservant (v. 2). The fact that Paul was suddenly taken up into ‘paradise’ (v. 4) may account for his uncertainty regarding his state during this time (v. 3). Apparently, he entered the throne room of God. In turn, the apostle saw things so sacred and mysterious that he could not express them and heard words that he was not allowed (*exon*;

²¹ Cf. Deut 10:14; 1 Kgs 8:27; 2 Chron 2:6; 6:18; Neh 9:6; Ps 68:33; Apoc Abraham 19:5–6; Apoc Moses 35:2; 37:5; 40:2; Ascen Isa 3:13, 18; 4:14, 16; 6:13; 7:8, 13, 17–28, 32–37; 8:1, 7–9, 12, 15–16, 19, 21, 25; 9:1, 4, 6, 18–19, 23; 10:1, 5, 8–9, 11–12, 14, 17, 19–27; 11:24–32, 40; 3 Bar 11:1–2; 2 En 8:1; 20:1; 31:1–2; 3 En 17:1; 48:1; Test Levi 2:7; 3:1; 18:5–6; Luke 21:26; Eph 4:10; Col 1:16, 20; 2 Pet 3:5, 7, 10, 12–13.

verb, present, active, participle; ‘authorised, permitted’) to repeat. Most likely, these ineffable experiences were given to Paul to strengthen him for all the persecution he was to endure in the coming years. Surely, these visions served as a constant reminder to him of the glory awaiting him after all his days of affliction on earth (cf. Acts 9:15–16; Rom 8:17–18).

Paul did not want his readers to form their opinion about him solely on the basis of his ecstatic visions. That God had granted the apostle a glimpse into glory did not add to his personal status or importance. His boasting was not in receiving spectacular revelations or in being a flamboyant orator (cf. 1 Cor 2:4; 2 Cor 10:10), but in what God could accomplish through his bondservant despite his infirmities (*astheneiais*; noun, dative, plural, feminine; ‘weaknesses’; 2 Cor 12:5). Paul would not be exercising poor judgment (*aphrōn*; adjective, nominative, singular, masculine; ‘foolish’; v. 6) for stating what he actually experienced (*alētheian*; noun, accusative, singular, feminine; ‘truth’); and even though the apostle’s visions were real, he held himself back (*phedomai*; verb, either middle or passive, indicative; ‘I am refraining’) from boasting any more about his supranormal experiences.

Paul did not want his readers to settle on an opinion of him (*logisētai*; verb, aorist, middle, subjunctive; ‘credit, regard’; v. 6) based on whatever he did, said, or experienced (including fantastic revelatory encounters); instead, the apostle wanted the Corinthians to remember something they could see for themselves, namely, how God had worked openly and repeatedly through his bondservant’s limitations. Paul’s intent here may also have been to caution the Corinthians against gullibly accepting the false apostles’ claims to have had visions. Unlike the theologians of glory, who sang their praises to the Corinthians, Paul sought to remain a humble theologian of the cross from start to finish.

It was possible that Paul could have been overtaken with pride (*hyperairōmai*; verb, present, subjunctive; 'over-exalted'; v. 7), especially after his remarkable (*hyperbolē*; noun, dative, singular, feminine; 'extraordinary degree or character') visions of the glorious Messiah. So, in order to (cf. the triple use of the *hina* adverbial conjunction to denote purpose) keep his missionary from succumbing to such an enticement, Jesus allowed the apostle to be tormented by a 'thorn in the flesh', in which the noun *skolops* refers to a small, pointed stake, or as Hughes (1962:447) explains, a 'sharpened wooden shaft'. The referent is clarified further by the appositional phrase 'a messenger of Satan' (in which the noun *Satana* is understood to be a qualitative genitive). The divine purpose was to cause Paul harm (*kolaphizē*; verb, present, active, subjunctive; 'torment, trouble, harass'). The result was (as stated above) that he would shun all forms of hubris (cf. the use of *hyperairōmai* twice in v. 7).

The Greek phrase rendered 'thorn in the flesh' could indicate something mental or physical, as well as huge or tiny, in nature. The obscurity of the apostle's language makes any identification of his vexation impossible; but that has not kept interpreters since the earliest days of the Church from drawing upon biblical and extrabiblical sources in order to venture a guess. One suggestion is that Paul's affliction may have been Jewish persecution that hindered his work and proved to be an embarrassment in his effort to reach the Gentiles. A second theory is that the apostle's problem could have been impure thoughts or some other type of temptation. A third conjecture relates Paul's aggravation to some sort of physical ailment. In this regard, one view holds that severe nearsightedness was the problem. Another option is that it might have been epilepsy, a speech impediment, or a recurring illness, such as malaria. In any case, how could this adversity (regardless of its nature) be both from Jesus and Satan at the same time? One possibility is that

the devil actually harassed Paul, while the Saviour permitted as well as set limits on the extent of the tormenting he would allow.

Paul implored (*parekalesa*; verb, aorist, active, indicative; ‘entreated, appealed’; v. 8) the Lord Jesus three times to remove (*apostē*; verb, aorist, active, subjunctive; ‘would depart, go away’) this affliction (cf. Acts 7:59–60; 1 Cor 1:2; 16:22; 1 Thess 3:11–13). Keener (2005:240) points out that ‘Paul’s threefold prayer recalls’ the Messiah’s ‘own threefold prayer at Gethsemane, with an analogous result’ (cf. Matt 26:36–46; Mark 14:32–42; Luke 22:40–46). Though Paul’s request was legitimate, he did not receive the answer he wanted from the Saviour; rather, in the midst of the apostle’s excruciating suffering, Jesus revealed a profound truth, one that is at the heart of cruciform theology. Murphy-O’Connor (1991:119) clarifies that the perfect, active, indicative tense of *eirēken* (‘he has said’) denotes a ‘permanently valid decision’, one in which there would be ‘no more prayers for release’.

Specifically, the Redeemer declared that his enablement (*charis*; noun, nominative, singular, feminine; ‘grace’; 2 Cor 12:9) was all his bondservant needed (*arkei*; verb, present, active, indicative; ‘sufficient, enough’). The reason (cf. the use of the explanatory conjunction, *gar*) was that Jesus’ ‘power’ (*dynamis*; noun, nominative, singular, feminine) was brought to completion or fulfilment (*teleitai*; verb, present, passive, indicative; ‘perfected’) in the believer’s feebleness (*astheneia*; noun, dative, singular, feminine; ‘weakness’). Harris (2005:863) points out that in this verse *charis* and *dynamis* are ‘essentially synonymous’ in their usage. Schütz (1975:187) describes the interplay between human ‘weakness’ and divine ‘power’ as having a ‘thoroughly dialectical texture’.

In the present context, the Saviour used the afflictions Christians experienced to manifest his life-giving potency. This seemingly

illogical truth, which possibly is the capstone of Paul's argument in 2 Corinthians, summed up his crucicentric approach to ministry. Pickett (1997:166) mentions that the apostle's opponents considered his infirmities to be an indication of a 'low social status with respect to the cultural values of Greco-Roman society'; yet, according to Gorman (2001:30), Paul still let the stigma of his cruciform existence define the entire narrative of his 'life and ministry'. Ultimately, then, his distress was a case where Jesus, through his grace, brought eternal good out of temporal anguish. It was also a situation in which, as Lenski (1961:1286) explains, 'when we are reduced to nothing, God is allowed to be our everything'. Concerning Paul, it was his 'weakness that made him so excellent a tool for the Lord' (p. 1306).

Given Jesus' response, Paul discerned that instead of his avoiding tribulation, Jesus' mighty presence (*dynamis*; v. 9) would establish its tent-like abode (*episkēnōsē*; verb, aorist, active, subjective; 'may reside, rest') over the apostle's life (cf. 1 Pet 4:14). Thrall (2000:828) agrees with other interpreters that Paul had the 'concept of the *Shekinah* in mind', with Exodus 40:34–35 forming the Old Testament backdrop for such a literary connection. In support of this view is 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul conveys his 'close familiarity with the Exodus theme of the divine glory reflected on the face of Moses' (cf. Exod 25:8; Ezek 37:27; Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34; John 1:14; 2 Cor 6:16; Rev 21:3).

As Matera (2003:286) explains, Paul's 'weakness becomes the place or the occasion' for Jesus to 'manifest power'. Hafemann (2000a:24) adds that it also is 'part of the divine plan for the spread of the gospel'. Marshall (2004:297) equates the Saviour's 'strength' with the 'experience' of God's 'grace'. In turn, he 'enables' bondservants such as Paul to deal with adversities, including 'weariness, injury, disease, and death', as well as 'poverty and lack of esteem'. Because of their 'inner experiences of communion with God', his children are acutely

aware of his love. They also receive from him the fortitude they need to ‘communicate the gospel effectively’ and invite others to experience new life in baptismal union with the Redeemer.

Concerning Paul, personal suffering was an opportunity for his enthusiastic (*hēdistā*; adjective, used with a superlative emphasis; 2 Cor 12:9) boasting in the Lord. For this reason (cf. the use of the inferential conjunction, *dio*; v. 10), and in order to benefit (*hyper*; preposition of advantage) the Saviour’s redemptive cause, Paul took delight (*eudokō*; verb, present, active, indicative) in his afflictions (cf. the fourfold use of *en* as a preposition of circumstance). The latter included infirmities (*astheneiais*; noun, dative, plural, feminine; ‘weaknesses’), verbal and physical abuses (*hybresin*; noun, dative, plural, feminine; ‘insults’), dire circumstances (*anankais*; noun, dative, plural, feminine; ‘distresses’), maltreatment (*diōgmois*; noun, dative, plural, masculine; ‘persecutions’), and predicaments (*stenochōriais*; noun, dative, plural, feminine; ‘difficulties’). The apostle endured all of these troubles because (cf. the use of the adverbial causal conjunction, *gar*) the Saviour was glorified in his bondservant being weak. It also became the occasion for him being filled with the Lord’s power (*dynatos*; adjective, nominative, singular; ‘strong’).

4. Conclusion

In Lioy (2015), I used a case study analysis of Ephesians 1:15–23 to validate that Paul’s apocalyptic interpretation of reality exercised a controlling influence on his writings. The present journal article builds on the preceding work by undertaking a case study analysis of 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10 through the prism of his crucicentric thinking (especially in dialogue with a confessional Lutheran perspective). The major claim is that the apostle’s theology of the cross helps to clarify

his apocalyptic view of reality. For instance, one of Paul's eschatological convictions was that the Father has triumphed over the malevolent forces of darkness (i.e. Satan, sin, and death) through the Son's redemptive work at Calvary. Even more to the point, the Cross is the central historical event and narrative feature of Paul's end-time view of existence.

In my discourse, I noted that God's present and future reign is cruciform in character. The Cross is the basis for Jesus' followers experiencing the blessing of his presence and provision through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Jesus' redemptive work at Calvary also provides the incentive believers need to live as members of God's family and citizens of his eternal kingdom. Metaphorically speaking, they are a foretaste of the righteousness, peace, and holiness to be established by the Creator throughout the cosmos at the consummation of the present age. The Church's role, however, is only possible whenever it conforms itself to the Cross.

Given the above observations, it is appropriate to explore through a representative Pauline passage how the apostle's *theologia crucis* functioned as a heuristic device. Put differently, there are various prisms through which to view and interpret Paul's writings, including crucicentricity. So, before engaging 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10 in earnest, a synopsis was provided of the apostle's theology of the cross; yet, because of the extensive secondary literature and the lack of consensus within the academic guild concerning the meaning and significance of Paul's cruciform outlook, it seemed expedient to approach the latter endeavour from a confessional Lutheran perspective. Historically speaking, this frame of reference has been a major interlocutor (of sorts) for specialists from other philosophical and theological traditions.

In stepping back from the synopsis provided, it is clear that secular human culture, whether in the first-century AD or in the twenty-first century, has an aversion to suffering; in contrast, Luther understood the theology of the cross as the heartbeat of Pauline theology. On the one hand, a theology of glory insists that people have the ability to justify themselves before a holy God; on the other hand, the apostle taught that because of the depravity of people and the bondage of their will to sin (cf. Rom 3:9–20; 7:18), the cross of Christ is the only true source of spiritual knowledge concerning who God is and how he saves the lost (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–31). More specifically, it is only at the foot of the cross that fallen persons can receive from the indwelling Spirit genuine insight and understanding concerning the triune God (cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Rom 8:9; Eph 1:13–14).

The preceding observations establish the context for a consideration of Paul's crucicentricity in 2 Corinthians 11:16–12:10. An examination of 10–13 indicates that his opponents believed that genuine apostles did not suffer; instead, they allegedly experienced the glory of God's powerful presence by performing signs and wonders. In contrast, though Paul performed miracles, he was convinced that strength in weakness was even more distinctive of a genuine apostolic ministry. Indeed, while setting out to counter the self-commendations of the false apostles, Paul ended up boasting about his weaknesses (11:30). The apostle prided himself on his vulnerability because it furnished opportunities for Jesus' power to show itself in his bondservant's life. The fact that the Saviour was able to do so much through Paul's ministry despite his hardships proved the authenticity of his calling. The Redeemer declared that his all-sufficient grace was brought to completion in Paul's weakness (12:9). Expressed another way, the fullness of the Son's strength was most evident in the frailty and limitations of human weakness.

Although Jesus would not remove Paul's affliction (described in vv. 7–8), Jesus promised the apostle that he would never lack divine grace to endure the weakness brought about by any hardship he experienced, particularly for the sake of the Cross. So, instead of being able to avoid tribulation in his life, Paul would be given strength to triumph over it. In turn, this became the focus of his boasting in the Lord. The apostle made general reference to his afflictions, which included infirmities, verbal and physical abuses, dire circumstances, persecutions, and calamities. All of these things he endured for the cause of Christ because the Saviour was glorified in Paul being weak. In short, he was quite content with his infirmities so that he could be filled with the power of the Lord (v. 10).

What is striking about the early followers of Jesus, including Paul, is that they endured indignities voluntarily so that the gospel could be proclaimed to the lost. The effectiveness of the message of the cross is evacuated if the messengers are hucksters and cheats. In contrast, heralding the good news in the midst of suffering commends the gospel to the hearers. So, for example, in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul countered proponents of a theology of glory by emphasising the theology of the cross. The apostle saw the latter as an effective antidote to the conceit that boasts in ministers rather than in God. Paul's emphasis on crucicentrism reminds believers that salvation is accomplished through the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus. He did not bring salvation by coming to earth as a powerful monarch, but by taking upon himself the degradation of Calvary. In turn, Jesus' atoning sacrifice at the cross is the means by which salvation is accomplished for all who repent and believe.

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