Reconciling Paul: A Contemporary Study of 2 Corinthians
Main Points and Lesson Summaries

By Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty
Suggestions for Leaders by Irene Pak

Bible Study Features

• Message from the National PW Bible Study Committee
• PW Bible Study Process Information
• Author and Suggestion for Leaders Writer Bios
• Circle of Interpreters (new for this study)
• Nine Lessons
• Suggestions for Leaders
• Notes, Bibliography, Glossary
• Order Form
• Calendar

Lesson Outline

• Opening Prayer
• Navigating This Lesson
  o Focus Text
  o Summary of Previous Lesson
  o Summary of Current Lesson
  o Invitation to Read the Focus Text and Make Notes
• Introductory Remarks
• Narrative with Vocabulary Words in Bold (Glossary, page 88)
  o Notes (indicated by double lines above and below the text)
  o Art with Captions
  o Questions
  o Reflections and Points to Ponder (additional information indicated by a screened box or page)
• Questions for Further Thought
• Suggestions for Leaders
  o Centering (leader preparation)
  o Gathering (bringing the group together; includes hymn suggestions)
  o Encountering (group learning)
  o Responding (reactions to the group learning and lesson)
  o Blessing (closing and sending)

What Does the Title Mean?

• **Reconciling Paul:** Reading 2 Corinthians afresh is an opportunity to understand Paul in his context in a way that provides relevant advice for today.
• **A Letter to the Contemporary Church**: Discovering how Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians informs twenty-first-century life.

### A Letter to the Contemporary Church (Introduction)

**Summary**
The author opens by asking whether Paul’s letters can be read in a new way, whether contemporary followers of Jesus have anything in common with the community of believers in ancient Corinth and whether a letter written to a particular group in the first century could help contemporary Christians navigate what it means to be faithful followers of Jesus today?

**Main Points**
- The contemporary context is very different from the context in which the Corinthians lived and Paul wrote.
- The PC(USA) and U.S. society are undergoing a lot of changes that are new to our experience:
  - Finding new ways to engage in ministry amid declining membership
  - Navigating the decline’s effect on the ministries of the church at all levels
  - Wrestling with questions of authority—connectional church versus local governance
  - Changing U.S. population
  - Understanding changing U.S. relationships with other countries; rethinking the effects of colonization and dealing with a new worldview
  - Understanding the global economy and our own economic reality
  - Coping with technological advances that are rapidly changing personal, home, community and world dynamics
  - Embracing complicity in overconsumption of resources
- Revisiting Paul’s writings, some of the most influential and central in Christianity, is a critical contemporary task. We must ask whether we have understood Paul’s writings clearly, and reflect on them for our time.
- Paul lived as a minority member working inside a marginalized movement within the largest empire of the ancient world. He also lived in a time of great change.
- The author invites readers to do two things:
  1. Consider your personal lens (experience, issues weighing on your mind).
  2. Read Paul afresh to deepen your understanding of the relevance of 2 Corinthians for today’s church and world.

### Lesson One: The Promise and Problem of Paul
Focus Text: 1 and 2 Corinthians

**Summary**
Paul’s letters comprise much of the New Testament. Many are believed to be written by him and many are in the “Pauline tradition.” Paul’s own lens, or social location, is a factor in his
letters. Paul’s theology in the letters has been interpreted in two ways regarding women: subordination (women are subordinate to men in every way) and shared partnership (women are counted among the leaders in the early church). There are four ways to interpret Paul’s letters. The letters are

1. Word for word, just as relevant today as when they were written
2. Irrelevant because Paul’s words have been used to exclude groups of people
3. Relevant as long as understood in their ancient context
4. Relevant for today when understood in terms of the ancient context, assumptions modern readers bring to the text are considered, and the community nature of the texts is examined; difficult questions about the text are raised and explored.

Main Points

• Seven of the 21 letters in the New Testament are thought to be written by Paul.
• Paul’s theology has been so influential in the formation of Christian doctrine that many believe the letters are Christian doctrine.
• Many are angry with Paul because of his “exclusive” standpoints.
• Lesson One deals with Paul’s “social location.”
  o Jew living in the Jewish Diaspora (outside Judea)
  o Hellenistic culture
  o Greek-speaking
  o Minority within the Hellenistic culture (ancient Greek after Alexander the Great, 323 BC)
  o Pharisee: A Jewish sect and forerunners of the rabbinic tradition, Pharisees espoused prophetic ideals and translated them to everyday Jewish life through legislation. Beliefs according to Josephus: immortality of the soul, existence of angels, divine providence, freedom of will, resurrection of the dead, oral Torah (see Jacob Neusner, An Introduction to Judaism)
  o Scholar who traveled broadly
  o Single man
• Contrasting Theological Perspectives: The lesson identifies two contrasting theological perspectives in Paul’s writing regarding the nature of women and their involvement in the community of faith.
  o The theology of subordination
    - “Paul’s letters support, justify, and defend the subordination and control of women within the family, society, and churches” (p. 12).
  o The theology of shared partnership
    - “Women are counted among those inspired by Paul to begin churches or support his mission work. Chloe, Phoebe, Priscilla, and others are named” (p. 11).
• Identifying at Least Four Different Approaches to Paul’s Writings: The author identifies four approaches to reading Paul’s letters
  • Applying moral advice and teachings found in Paul’s letters directly to the circumstances of our contemporary lives
Paul’s letters offer relevant moral advice without regard to context.

- Dismissing the moral authority of Pauline letters because they were written for a world so vastly different from our own
  - Because Paul’s letters can and have been used to condone slavery, sexism, and homophobia, and other forms of exclusion, the letters cannot be used for our context.
- Examining the historical context in which Paul wrote his letters will reveal the meaning and message of even troublesome texts.
  - What did Paul’s letters mean at the time they were written? The letters have been used to support exclusion, but studying the historical context can help us understand what was happening in the communities that received Paul’s letters.
- Reading Paul’s letters afresh (this Bible study’s approach)
  - Understanding the historical context, how can we engage the letters in a way relevant to our twenty-first–century context.

- Reading Paul’s letters afresh means:
  - Understanding the ancient context
  - Understanding the importance of the history of interpretation in the church
  - Considering the assumptions we bring to the text
  - Examining how the letters function in community, then and now
  - Asking difficult questions about the relevance of passages in the letter for the modern reader

Lesson Two: Paul in the Context of Ancient Corinth
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 1:1–24

Summary
Lesson Two offers an outline of 2 Corinthians, provides historical background about the church Paul founded at Corinth, and gives an overview of issues facing the church in Corinth.

Main Points
- **Partition theory**: The idea that 2 Corinthians is a composite of up to five letters that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. The tone of Paul’s writing changes from positive (chapters 1–9, or the “conciliatory letter”) to negative (chapters 10–13, or the “painful letter”).
- The painful letter seems to be in response to disputes with the Corinthian church and the activities of the “super-apostles.”

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<tr>
<th>Outline of 2 Corinthians</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Reference</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1:1–11</td>
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<td>1:12–7:16</td>
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<td>8:1–9:15</td>
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### Communicating Across Cultures and Times: Letter Writing
- Only way of keeping in touch over great distances in the Hellenistic world
- Long tradition of letter writing between Jewish communities and rabbis, called responsa
- Letters in the New Testament are often called epistles

### Communicating in the First Century: Paul’s Letter Writing Style
- Paul’s letters are Greco-Roman in style (dictated to a scribe) and have three parts: greeting, body, and final greeting
- Seven of the 21 letters in the New Testament are thought to be written by Paul.
  - 1 Thessalonians
  - 1 and 2 Corinthians
  - Philippians
  - Philemon
  - Galatians
  - Romans
- All seven were written between 50 and 58 AD (Mark 65 AD).
- Paul’s letters emphasize authority; they address opposition.

### Charlotte Johnstone
- Longtime columnist for *Horizons* magazine and creator of Forbearance Church, devoted one of her columns to a letter written, Paul-style, by the women of the church to the men of the church. Visit [http://horizons.pcusa.org](http://horizons.pcusa.org) to download a PDF of the letter.

### Corinth: More Than a Center for Trade
- Large, prosperous city south of Thessalonica
- Major trade center served by two ports
- Culturally and religiously diverse
- Greeks and Romans
- Colonized minorities, including Jews
- Polytheism (Jews and Jewish followers of Jesus were monotheists)

### Members of the Corinthian Church
- Blended congregation
  - Gentiles
  - Wealthy people (Chloe, Gaius, Crispus, Priscilla, and Aquilla)
  - Lower classes
  - Status inversion: those who renounced their status and became minorities
- Range of socioeconomic groups caused disputes.
- Paul was a minority as a Jew.

### What Paul Preached and Taught the Corinthians
- Letter was written from Macedonia, mid to late 50s AD.
- Summary of Jesus’ sayings and institution of the Lord’s Supper
Focus on Jesus as the crucified Christ (1 Cor. 2:2–5)
• Particulars for the Corinthian community
• Stewardship
• Defense of himself and his ministry

Lesson Three: Covenants and God’s Enduring Faithfulness
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6

Summary
Lesson Three explores the meaning of Paul’s reference to old and new covenants in 2 Corinthians and considers how these ideas relate to our contemporary understanding of Christian relationships with people of different faith traditions.

Main Points
• Paul mentions old and new covenants three times in his undisputed letters.
• Paul’s writings have been used to defend and support anti-Judaism because some Christians continue to use Paul’s language of old and new to argue that Christianity replaces the older Jewish faith.
• In Romans 3:1–4, Paul affirms God’s enduring faithfulness even to Jews who were not faithful in keeping the original covenant.
• Paul, himself a Jew, derived his ethical system from his Jewish value system. His writing in the ancient world was Jewish sectarian literature, not Christian doctrine.
• Paul’s Contrasting Claims: Paul uses “contrasting claims” throughout this section to show the nature of his ministry compared to false ministry.
  o A deeper understanding of Israel’s covenants and the Judaism/s of Paul’s time can help us understand the nature of Paul’s contrasting claims.
  o “The key to understanding the contrasting claims Paul made in this passage regarding ‘old’ and ‘new’ covenants is found in 2 Cor. 3:18: ‘And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit’” (pp. 30–31).
    □ The veiled face refers to Moses’ veiling his face when he meets with the Hebrews after being with God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 34:34) to shield them from the radiance emanating from him.
    □ The author emphasizes “all” in this passage to indicate those of the old and new covenants, everyone. She also emphasizes “being transformed,” as everyone is on a path to glory because of the Spirit of the Lord.
• Paul’s Jewishness and the Consistency of God’s Covenant: Paul seemingly supported the idea of plural covenants: perpetual and conditional.
  o Perpetual: unconditional, rests solely on God’s own faithfulness and the consistency of God’s care (covenant with Abraham)
  o Conditional: granted by a superior (like God) on the condition of engaging in certain practices (Deut. 12:1)
• Contemporary Faith and Religious Pluralism
  o People of faith should be informed by life in a post-holocaust world. An unclear perspective on Paul's use of old and new covenants rendered Jewish people, as well as many others, less than human, which led to genocide. This type of action is not supported by Paul's ministry or writings.

Lesson Four: Carrying in Our Bodies Jesus’ Acts of Healing, Reconciliation and Love
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 4:7–5:10

Summary
This lesson focuses on Paul's understanding of how the community of faith, the “body of believers,” carries Jesus’ death within it by continuing acts of healing, reconciliation, and love.

Main Points
• Several themes emerge in this section of Paul’s letter that focus attention on the body as a metaphor to describe the ministry of the community of believers:
  o Clay jars as a metaphor for the nature of Christ’s ministry
  o How bodies are used to mark and define difference
  o Views of male and female bodies in Paul’s culture
  o How a body of believers carries around Jesus’ death in acts of healing, reconciliation, and love
• Several concepts are held in tension in these passages:
  o Clay jars, essential to Paul’s culture, were fragile but they held substances essential to peoples’ survival, health, and well-being.
  o Paul manifests divine power in his frail, weak, human (earthen) body.
  o Believers in Corinth were called to live in tension with the culture around them.
  o “The realization of God’s redemptive future will be embodied, realized in fragile bodies, even if in an imperfect way” (p. 37).
  o “Both Paul and the Corinthian church were living within the boundaries established by Greco-Roman culture, but they were growing beyond the limitations that their culture imposed upon them” (p. 37).
• The tensions Paul expresses in 2 Corinthians 4:7–12 can be charted like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragile Humans</th>
<th>God’s Power</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We have this treasure in clay jars.</td>
<td>Power comes from God, not from us.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are afflicted in every way</td>
<td>but not crushed;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perplexed</td>
<td>but not driven to despair;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>persecuted</td>
<td>but not forsaken;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>struck down</td>
<td>but not destroyed;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are carrying in the body the death of Jesus</td>
<td>so that the life of Jesus may be visible in our bodies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are always being given up to death for</td>
<td>so that the life of Jesus may be made</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• These tensions have spoken to believers and the community of faith throughout history. “The community of faith was being pressed into a tight place, pressed hard, with little or no room to breathe, but was not entirely crushed” (p. 37).

• **Our bodies are used to mark and define difference**—gender, skin color, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, shape, social norms for beauty.

• Paul’s world was rigidly stratified according to these differences. The ideal was a fit Greek male. Minorities were considered weak.

• **Views of Male and Female Bodies in Greco-Roman Culture:** There was a clear distinction between female bodies, perceived as weak, and male bodies, perceived as strong. “The strong, muscular male body was seen as the ultimate ideal and epitome of human perfection and the weak, flesher female body was at the other end of the spectrum” (p. 38). These ideas, supported by Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, informed attitudes about women. The body was viewed as a continuum from female to male, rather than two genders.

• **Making the Weak Strong and the Strong Weak:** Paul’s teaching about the God-given strength in weak, clay vessels supports the idea that God’s power could be manifest in those considered weaker in the culture—women and minorities. The strong are weak, and the weak are strong.
  o Further, God’s power can be realized in the imperfect community of faith, the **body of Christ**.
  o The crucified body of the Jewish Jesus best exemplifies this idea. Through the power of God, Jesus overcame defeat suffered at the hands of the most powerful empire of the time.

• **We carry around death by resisting fragmentation and division.** The author uses apartheid laws in South Africa to demonstrate how Christians carry around death by resisting fragmentation and division. The church played a key role in challenging apartheid, which was established by law, and what many considered to be God’s law. Many were injured and killed in the protests. “As coffins were carried through a sea of people, the people carried with them the death of Jesus, and they proclaimed that death would not be the end of this story” (p. 41).
  o “To carry in the body the death of Jesus today is to resist the forces all around us that try to divide us according to physical and other differences and disrupt our life lived in relationship” (p. 41).
  o Christians wrote the Belhar Confession in response to the use of scripture to justify apartheid. You can find the confession on the PC(USA) website at [www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/theologyandworship/pdfs/belhar.pdf](http://oga.pcusa.org/section/ga/special-committee-belhar). If these links are down, search for the Belhar Confession at [www.pcusa.org](http://oga.pcusa.org). Suggests writer Irene Pak recommends reading the confession as a litany.
Lesson Five: Reconciliation and the Whole of Creation
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:10

Summary
Lesson Five focuses attention on 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:10 and invites the reader to expand her understanding of reconciliation, healing, and transformation to a much broader context while thinking about the concept of new creation.

Main Points
- **New Creation**: Paul makes a confession in 1 Corinthians 8:6 that is similar to the Jewish shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4.
- “New creation is being birthed not only within individuals, but within the whole cosmos” (p. 46).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4)</th>
<th>1 Corinthians 8:6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.</td>
<td>... for us there is one God ... from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things and through whom we exist.</td>
</tr>
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- 2 Corinthians 5:11–6:10 has two unique features.
  - It is one of two times Paul uses a Greek phrase meaning “new creation” in his letters (2 Cor. 5:17 and Gal. 6:15).
  - This is the only time in his letters that Paul says the work of reconciliation is to be done by humans (2 Cor. 5:20).
- His use of new creation shows his loyalty to the Hebrew Bible. The term is generally believed to relate to “the new heaven and the new earth” in Isaiah 65:17–25 and 66:22.
- Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that “if anyone is in Christ—new creation!” (original Greek). This subtle difference from the translated “there is a new creation” adds a more personal and immediate sense to the scripture.
- “New creation is one of Paul’s fundamental convictions and foundational concerns. For Paul, the term ‘new creation’ summarizes God’s activity. God’s saving act in Christ brings forth new creation, inspires the faith of believers, and calls the faithful to labor, even in pain and anguish, to give birth, to co-travail, in the work of reconciliation” (p. 46).
- Paul is concerned with all of creation being renewed, not just human.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2 Corinthians 5:17</th>
<th>Romans 8: 19–23</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself</td>
<td>For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, but not of its own will but by the will of the</td>
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through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now . . .

- **God's redemptive activity includes the whole creation.** Theologians, including John Calvin, agree that all of creation is included in God’s plan for redemption and that humans are responsible partners in this process. Calvin writes: “even inanimate creatures—even trees and stones—conscious of the emptiness of their existence, long for the final day of resurrection, to be released from emptiness with the children of God” (p. 48).

- **The Whole Creation Working Together to Give Birth to New Creation:** Paul says reconciliation is to be done by human beings. People in the US use the majority of the world’s resources, which is not a sustainable model. Human interdependence, stressed by Paul, informs US citizens that we must be part of the work of reconciliation where “new creation” includes the whole world and the people in it.

- The PC(USA) provides resources and links to resources on environmental conditions: [www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment](http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/environment). See page 49 for more information.

**Lesson Six: The Aroma of God Among Us**

**Focus Text:** 2 Corinthians 2:14–17 and 6:14–7:1

**Summary**

This lesson examines the connection between 2 Corinthians 2:14–17 and 6:14–7:1 in light of the ancient practice of epiphany processions. Paul uses processions or parades as metaphor to clarify his authority and to emphasize the idea that all followers of Christ are called to show their faith in action.

**Main Points**

- The author recommends viewing (on Youtube) a flash mob performance of “Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord” from the musical Godspell that happened in Times Square: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtaAi5TGleo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtaAi5TGleo).

- **Epiphany Processions in the Ancient World:** Paul may be referencing two types of procession in these scriptures:
  1. Triumphal—Paul and others are “conquered captives” in God’s triumphal parade.
  2. Epiphany—2 Corinthians 2:14–15 references the “scent of the knowledge of God” and the “aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved.” Fragrant substances were used in epiphany processions in the ancient world, “preparing the way, and announcing the approach of gods or goddesses” (p. 55). A herald led these parades. Paul is the herald in this parade, announcing the approach of God.
2 Corinthians tells us “We are the aroma of God among those who are perishing” (2:15).
- Paul’s body is “the temple of the living God” (6:16).
- Paul and the community of faith are “carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (4:10). This idea ties into Lesson Four.

**The Aroma of God on Our Very Bodies:** Consider how we are heralds like Paul, announcing God’s presence in the world, and how our bodies are temples of the living God.

- “Being the aroma of God and becoming a temple of the living God means drawing closer to others as we embody God’s presence through acts of reconciliation and love” (p. 56).
- The author uses a story of personally crossing boundaries into an unknown culture and community of believers, and experiencing a Guatemalan Catholic community that celebrates the saint Ma Ximón being brought via parade to the church. The effigy of the saint appears to be smoking, bringing the aroma of God to the people.
- This passage requires us to think beyond understood boundaries of holiness. “The metaphor of the procession that Paul uses to claim his own authority and write about the ministry of his community of faith invites new ways of proclaiming, announcing and carrying the aroma of God in the world” (p. 57).

**Lesson Seven: Economy of Grace**

**Focus Text:** 2 Corinthians 8:1–15

**Summary**

This lesson explores the meaning of 2 Corinthians 8:1–15 and Paul’s understanding of fair balance and an economy of grace.

**Main Points**

- **Second Corinthians 8:9–15 Within the Larger Context of Paul’s Letter:** While in the region of Macedonia, Paul mentions a collection received from the Corinthian community that inspires the Macedonian communities to collect a “matching” gift. Some Macedonians are considering going to Corinth to pool resources before taking them to Jerusalem. In the meantime, Paul falls out with the Corinthian community, so he does not want the Macedonians to go and become disillusioned. These verses are part of a second letter written by Paul to smooth over the dispute with the Corinthians and encourage them to follow along the lines of the Macedonians.

- **Fair Balance and an Economy of Grace:** Paul uses the word charis (translated “grace,” “privilege,” “generous undertaking,” “generous act,” “thanks to God,” and “blessing”) extensively to underscore his belief that “grace extends to all and is understood as radical inclusivity” (p. 63).
  - “I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so
that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a **fair balance**” (2 Cor. 8:13–15).

- In chapter eight, “Paul employs theological language to describe money, and economic language to talk about God’s generosity,” which is a twist on perceptions of God’s generosity being theological and money economical (p. 63).
- In 8:9 Paul speaks of Jesus’ life within the economic categories of wealth and poverty. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.” Here Paul explains his “understanding of the grace of Jesus, the only verse that carries with it an explanatory statement” (p. 63).

**Poverty and Sharing in the Economy of Grace:** What does becoming poor really mean?

- Some have taken this literally, renouncing worldly goods in an attempt to imitate Christ (some theologians say Christ can never be imitated, but Christians should not stop trying).
- Christians are to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5).
- Christians should see justice, identify with those who have been pushed to the margins, adopt similar lifestyles, eliminate the social distance between those who are wealthy and those who are economically impoverished.
- “An awareness of God’s overflowing grace is expressed by sharing—both wealth and food—with others” (p. 64).

**Charis and Eucharist:** *Charis* is the root of the word *eucharist*.

- “In Reformed thought, Communion is a visible sign of God’s invisible grace—a grace that is experienced in sharing the resources of God’s economy” (p. 64).
- Communion symbolizes our experience of God’s grace through “mutuality, sharing, reciprocity, love and just distribution of resources” (p. 64).
- We share so that others can be fed.

**An Economy of Grace and Our Time:** Statistics show that the the world is economically out of balance and the majority of people are impoverished.

- Six out of ten of the world’s poorest people are women.
- Environment and climate change are critical factors in poverty.
- Presbyterian Women is committed to economic justice and alleviating poverty.
- The Accra Confession of the World Council of Reformed Churches, of which the PC(USA) is a member, speaks to the unbalanced use and distribution of resources (for more on this, see Margaret Aymer’s *Horizons* Bible study, *Confessing the Beatitudes, 2012–13*).
- The World Council of Churches has issued statements based on 2 Corinthians 8:9.
- “Jesus identified himself with the marginalized and excluded people not only out of compassion, but because their lives testified to the sinfulness of the systems and structures” (p. 66).
- Christian faith “compels us to seek justice and be part of the lives and struggles of those who are marginalized and made vulnerable by systems and structures” (p.66).
Lesson Eight: Power, Authority, and Honor Are Not Always What We Might Expect
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 11:1–32

Summary
2 Corinthians 11:1–32 invites you to reconsider Paul’s understanding of apostolic power, authority, and honor, and to redefine your own.

Main Points
• Confronting Rival Preachers: Chapter 11 deals with “super-apostles” and “false apostles” who are vying for the Corinthians loyalty. Paul encourages the Corinthians to stay committed to the ministries he has built with them and to stay true to his interpretation of Jesus’ teachings.
• Pure Bride and Deceived Eve: Paul uses the tactics of his opponents and “acts like a fool” (11:1). He compares the Corinthian congregation to a daughter a father has promised in marriage to one husband who is now flirting with someone else. Christ is the bridegroom here, and Paul wants the Corinthians to “seal the deal” in marriage.
  o Eve emerges as an example of how people can be deceived into making bad choices.
  o The imagery is less about women being deceived as it is about “a particular concern about false apostles who are seducing the community of faith” (p. 70).
  o Paul’s writings are more of a guilt trip than a command that would have been the right of the father in that culture. The Corinthian community is free to act as it will, while Paul hopes they will make decisions for loyalty to him and their shared ministries.
• Redefining Apostolic Authority, Honor, and Power: Paul is being questioned by the super-apostles and false apostles, so he dedicates this part of the letter to separating himself from their teachings and practices and boasting about “how the power of God is authentically at work in him” (p. 71).
  o Paul boasts about his credentials in suffering to show the integrity of his ministry and mission, over against the work of his rivals.
  o Self-promotion of boasting was a typical way of providing one’s résumé in those days.
  o Paul’s escape from Damascus in a basket lowered by his friends “introduces irony that opens up the door for him to create a world that does not associate power with violence and destruction” (p. 71). This is in contrast to the violent language he uses when confronting the rivals.
  o In the basket incident, Paul does the opposite of a hero who is first to scale a wall during a battle. He is lowered down the wall to safety. This shows that Paul is honored by God as a nontraditional hero.
  o “For Paul, apostolic authority, honor, and power is of God and not judged by human standards or shaped by social attitudes or human institutions” (p. 72).
Power is known in weakness; the weak are made strong and the strong weak (reminiscent of Lesson Four, p. 72).

**Contemporary Relevance:** Nonviolent resistance is a recurrent theme in social action—wielding a very different kind of power to achieve critical ends. Some examples:
- Gandhi’s salt march to Dandi, India
- Le Chambon sur Lignon, France, harboring Jews during World War II
- César Chavez and the United Farm Workers
- Leymah Gbowee stopping civil war in Liberia with a nonviolent women’s movement; the documentary *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* is available at http://video.pbs.org/video/2155873888 and distributed by Passion River Films.

**Lesson Nine: A Call to Apostleship in the Twenty-first Century**
Focus Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1–13:13

**Summary**
This lesson looks at 2 Corinthians 12:1–13:13 and considers the relevance of apostleship for our contemporary situation.

**Main Points**
- Older scholarship deals with establishing Paul’s apostolic authority in the church.
- The Greek root of the word *apostleship* means “to send out.” *Apostolos* means “one who is sent, a messenger.”
- How do we understand apostleship for today?
- **A Vision of the Third Heaven:** In 12:4, Paul writes of being “caught up in Paradise,” which in the ancient world validated God’s approval of the person involved. He does not clearly identify himself as the person who is caught up.
  - Heaven was frequently described in terms of layers. Paradise and heavenly layering are found in Jewish writings as well in other books in the New Testament (Luke, Revelation, 2 Peter).
  - “The historical accuracy of Paul’s vision can’t be verified, but that doesn’t impact the intended meaning. Paul’s vision is used to draw a sharp contrast between the authenticity and the integrity of his faithful witness among the Corinthians and the false witness and deception of the super-apostles” (p. 79).
- **A Thorn in the Flesh:** Paul follows the story of the trip to the third heaven with the story of “the thorn that was given me in the flesh” (12:7).
  - *Skolops* is the Greek word used in the passage that is translated to “thorn.” A skolops is a sharp or pointed object.
  - There are several theories about the thorn:
    - Beatings Paul received
    - Physical ailment
    - Emotional trauma
    - False prophets themselves
• **The Sufficiency of God’s Grace:** The author believes emotional trauma is the most likely candidate for the thorn—the challenges Paul has because of his relationships with people. Though he appealed to God three times to have the thorn removed, it remained.
  o God’s message to Paul in regard to his appeals was, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9).
  o This ties in with the earlier ideas that the weak are made strong, and the strong weak.
  o The author believes this is one of the most powerful messages for Paul and for the contemporary reader, as we think about apostleship today.

• **Being Sent:** The author identifies three theological threads that can be drawn from God’s response to Paul:
  1. Human accomplishments are manifestations of God’s grace and cannot be credited to the individual alone.
  2. Hardships are not part of God’s intended purpose but part of human failure.
  3. “God’s grace does not allow people of faith to remain content to rest easily as long as the creation, God’s people and the planet earth groan from the burden of suffering, injustice, and exploitation caused by human hands” (p. 80).
  o These theological perspectives are at the heart of Reformed theology.
  o Reformers in the 16th century laid the groundwork for a new idea that “no human should claim superiority over others or dominate and subvert the life-giving power of the creation as a whole” (p. 81).
  o This is our role today—to promote power in weakness. “God is still sending us out to explore and engage the sharp and broken places in our world” (p. 81).
  o Paul’s final appeal: “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (13:11–13).