

Homiletics Analysis: 2 Corinthians 13

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Second Corinthians 13 is Paul's closing chapter to what has been the most personally anguished and apostolically assertive letter in the Pauline corpus. The chapter opens with Paul announcing his third impending visit to Corinth (v. 1), invoking the legal standard of two or three witnesses and making clear that this time he will not spare those who have continued in sin (vv. 1–2). He has been accused of weakness — his letters strong, his bodily presence weak, his speech contemptible. Paul turns that accusation on its head: the weakness they have observed is not a disqualification but a participation in the weakness of the crucified Christ, who was raised in the power of God (vv. 3–4). The real question of weakness and strength, Paul insists, should be directed not at him but at them — *examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith* (v. 5). Let them test themselves; Paul is not concerned for his own vindication but for their standing before God (vv. 5–7). He then makes a striking claim: he cannot act against the truth, only for it (v. 8); his gladness is in their strength, not his own (v. 9); he writes these things before arriving so that when present he will not need to deal severely, having authority from the Lord for building up, not tearing down (v. 10). The letter closes with a dense cluster of pastoral imperatives — rejoice, be restored, comfort one another, agree, live in peace — followed by the promise that the God of love and peace will be with them (vv. 11–12). The benediction in verse 14 is among the richest Trinitarian formulations in Scripture: *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking, through this chapter, to accomplish several convergent things at once. First, He is pressing the Corinthians toward genuine self-examination — not self-accusation or despair, but the sober, Spirit-enabled assessment of whether faith is real and producing real fruit. Second, He is displaying the paradox at the heart of apostolic — and Christian — power: that genuine strength runs through and not around weakness and suffering, because Christ Himself was crucified in weakness and raised in power. Third, He is calling the Corinthians away from factionalism, pride, and spiritual self-satisfaction and toward the unity, mutual comfort, and peace that flow from a community genuinely shaped by the gospel. And finally, the Trinitarian benediction is not ornamental — it is the capstone claim that the entire life of the community, and of every believer within it, is held within the triune life of God: grace from the Son, love from the Father, fellowship from the Spirit. God is seeking to drive the Corinthians — and every reader since — from proud self-assessment toward honest self-examination, from misplaced confidence toward Spirit-

wrought strength, and from fragmentation toward the peace that only the triune God can give.

Subject Sentence: Apostolic authority, self-examination, and Trinitarian peace close Paul's most urgent letter.

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to stop evaluating others and examine themselves — and to discover that the same crucified-and-risen Christ who defines apostolic ministry is the ground of their standing, their strength, and their peace.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “examine yourselves” imperative (v. 5) — assurance vs. anxiety:

The most significant interpretive divergence in this chapter centers on verse 5: *“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”* Arminian and Wesleyan interpreters frequently read this as an open conditional — a genuine possibility that those addressed may not be regenerate, and that ongoing self-examination is the mechanism by which one maintains standing. On this reading, the verse is a sustained warning about the fragility of faith and the need for continuous moral and spiritual vigilance to remain in grace. This reading captures something real: Paul is genuinely pressing the Corinthians toward honest self-assessment, and the verse cannot be softened into mere encouragement.

The Reformed reading, however, distinguishes carefully between the *summons* to self-examination and the *expected outcome* of that examination. Paul's rhetorical structure in verse 5 — “Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” — carries the force of an expected affirmative: yes, Christ is in you; this is what you should already know. The examination Paul calls for is not designed to create perpetual uncertainty but to expose the inconsistency of a community attacking the apostle's authenticity while failing to look at their own condition. The “unless you fail to meet the test” clause is a genuine warning — Paul does not assume all in the congregation are regenerate — but the rhetorical direction is toward confident recognition of Christ's indwelling presence, not toward ongoing existential anxiety about one's standing. Reformed theology affirms both the legitimacy and the value of self-examination (Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 171, on preparation for the Lord's Supper) while grounding its outcome in the objective work of Christ rather than in the quality of one's introspective performance. **The Reformed reading is preferred because it accounts for the rhetorical direction of Paul's argument** — he is not trying to make the Corinthians doubt their salvation; he is trying to redirect their critical scrutiny from his ministry to their own condition, expecting

that honest examination will confirm Christ's presence and thereby vindicate the gospel he preached.

Weakness and power (vv. 3–4) — cruciformity vs. triumphalism:

Pentecostal and charismatic interpreters sometimes read verse 4 (“he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God; for we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God”) as a foundation for expectation of visible, dramatic power — signs, wonders, healings — as the normal expression of resurrection power in ministry. This reading rightly resists a quietism that makes weakness an end in itself and correctly notes that Paul does appeal to miraculous signs elsewhere (2 Cor. 12:12; Rom. 15:18–19). **The reading should be qualified, however:** the controlling context of chapter 13 is Paul's defense of a ministry that *looks* weak to the Corinthians — unimpressive, physically unwell, rhetorically underwhelming. Paul's point is that this cruciform pattern is not a contradiction of resurrection power but its proper expression. The power of God runs through weakness rather than bypassing it. The Reformed and broader evangelical reading sees “power” here as primarily the power of authentic apostolic authority and gospel effectiveness, not a promise of constant miraculous display. The text does not refute miraculous gifts but subordinates all claims to power to the pattern of the cross.

The Trinitarian benediction (v. 14) — incidental or structural:

Liberal and some critical scholars read verse 14 as a liturgical formula that developed within early Christian worship and does not necessarily reflect Paul's considered theology of the Trinity. This reading should be **refuted**. The benediction is not a detached liturgical fragment — it flows from the chapter's entire argument. The *grace of Christ* corresponds to the cruciform pattern of strength through weakness that Paul has been defending throughout the letter. The *love of God* corresponds to the Father's covenant commitment beneath all of Paul's appeals. The *fellowship of the Spirit* corresponds to the community life — the mutual comfort, unity, and peace — that Paul is summoning in verses 11–12. The benediction names the triune source of everything Paul has been arguing. It is fully coherent within Paul's developing theology and anticipates what will become the Church's settled Trinitarian confession.

Key Canonical Support

- **2 Corinthians 12:9–10** — “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness... For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” The immediately preceding context establishes the theological ground for chapter 13's argument about cruciform power; the thorn in the flesh passage is the personal narrative from which the principle of 13:3–4 flows.
- **Romans 8:9–11** — “*Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him... if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you...*” Directly

illuminates the self-examination of 2 Cor. 13:5 — the indwelling Christ is the test of genuine belonging, and the resurrection power of God is available to those in whom the Spirit dwells.

- **1 Corinthians 11:28** — *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* The same Corinthian community was given an earlier call to self-examination in the eucharistic context; chapter 13’s summons is the pastoral culmination of an ongoing apostolic insistence that the Corinthians look honestly at their own condition.
- **Philippians 4:7–9** — *“The peace of God... and the God of peace will be with you.”* A close parallel to 2 Cor. 13:11’s promised presence of “the God of love and peace,” grounding communal peace and harmony not in human achievement but in the divine presence that attends covenant faithfulness.
- **Matthew 18:16** — The two-or-three witnesses principle (2 Cor. 13:1) goes back to Deuteronomy 19:15 and is invoked by Jesus in the context of church discipline; Paul’s appeal to it frames his third visit in terms of legitimate judicial authority and due covenant process — not arbitrary apostolic power.

Aim: To press readers toward honest self-examination grounded in the indwelling Christ, and to call communities away from proud spiritual self-assessment and toward the Trinitarian peace that is both God’s gift and His summons.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13:1	Paul announces his third visit; invokes the two-or-three witnesses legal standard	Deut. 19:15; prior visits: Acts 18 (first), 2 Cor. 2:1 (painful second visit)
13:2	Paul warns those who sinned previously: he will not spare them this time	“I warned... I warn again” — past and present tenses; pastoral urgency
13:3a	Paul acknowledges the Corinthians’ demand for proof of Christ speaking through him	The accusation of weakness is the occasion for vv. 3–4
13:3b–4	Christ was crucified in weakness but lives by God’s power; Paul is weak <i>in him</i>	The cruciform pattern of ministry — weakness is participation in Christ’s

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
13:5	but will live with him by God's power <i>toward them</i> Imperative: examine yourselves; test yourselves; Christ is in you — unless you fail the test	death; power is participation in His resurrection Rhetorical reversal: the scrutiny directed at Paul is redirected to the congregation
13:6	Paul expresses confidence that the Corinthians will recognize he has not failed the test	Apostolic integrity confirmed by the genuineness of their own faith
13:7	Paul prays they will do nothing wrong — not for his vindication but for their good, even if it makes him appear to have failed	Remarkable pastoral selflessness: Paul prefers to appear weak if it means their genuine flourishing
13:8	Paul can do nothing against the truth, only for it	Apostolic authority is entirely in service of truth — not a personal possession
13:9	Paul is glad when he is weak and they are strong; his prayer is for their restoration (<i>katartisis</i>)	<i>Katartisis</i> — mending, restoring to proper order; same root as v. 11
13:10	Paul writes this before arriving so that present action need not be severe; authority is for building up, not tearing down	The purpose of apostolic severity is always constructive
13:11	Final imperatives: rejoice, be restored (<i>katartizesthe</i>), comfort one another, agree, live in peace; promise: the God of love and peace will be with you	Cluster of communal imperatives; the divine presence is the basis, not the reward
13:12–13	Greet one another with a holy kiss; all the saints greet you	Communal solidarity expressed in physical gesture; inclusion of the wider church
13:14	The Trinitarian benediction: grace of Christ, love of God, fellowship of the Spirit	One of the richest Trinitarian formulations in the NT; not ornamental but structural

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	13:1–4	Apostolic Warning: Cruciform Authority Is Real Authority
2	13:5–9	Pastoral Reversal: Examine Yourself, Not My Credentials
3	13:10	Pastoral Purpose: Authority Is for Building, Not Breaking
4	13:11–13	Community Imperatives: The Shape of a Gospel-Ordered Life
5	13:14	Trinitarian Benediction: The Triune Source of Everything Paul Has Argued

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Apostolic authority, self-examination, and Trinitarian peace close Paul’s most urgent letter.

Primary Claim: God is calling every reader to stop evaluating others and examine themselves — and to discover that the same crucified-and-risen Christ who defines apostolic ministry is the ground of their standing, their strength, and their peace.

Applications (Five)

1. The strength you have been waiting for is already present in the weakness you have been resenting. (*Affections/Worship*) Paul’s argument in verses 3–4 is not a piece of abstract theology — it is a direct confrontation with how we evaluate our own lives and ministries. If Christ was crucified in weakness and raised in power, then the pattern of your life — the chronic limitation, the unanswered prayer, the ministry that looks nothing like what you imagined — is not a deviation from the Christian life but may be its truest expression. Stop resenting the weakness and start looking for the resurrection power that moves through it. The congregation that keeps waiting for strength to arrive before it will serve, give, or trust has fundamentally misunderstood what strength looks like in a cruciform gospel.

2. Before you evaluate anyone else's spiritual condition, examine your own.

(Mind/Belief) The Corinthians were busy scrutinizing Paul's apostolic credentials while failing to apply any scrutiny to themselves. This is a structural temptation in every generation of Christian — it is always easier to diagnose another's spiritual deficiency than to submit to honest self-examination. Paul's question in verse 5 — “do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?” — is not designed to generate anxiety but to redirect attention. The question to bring to your own life is not “am I performing adequately?” but “is Christ actually in me, and does the evidence of my daily life, affections, and relationships confirm it?” This is not morbid introspection; it is the clarity that produces genuine confidence.

3. Seek your community's genuine flourishing even when their flourishing makes you look weak. *(Will/Behavior)* Verse 7 is one of the most striking pastoral statements in Paul's letters: he prays that the Corinthians will do no wrong, not so that his own faithfulness will be vindicated, but because their genuine good matters more to him than his own reputation. The application cuts directly against the instinct — in ministry, in leadership, in marriage, in friendship — to frame our interventions in ways that position us favorably. The pastor who preaches for the congregation's transformation, even at the cost of appearing less impressive; the parent who disciplines for the child's genuine formation rather than their own emotional relief; the friend who speaks the hard truth that costs the relationship — these are cruciform postures that flow from verse 7.

4. Take the final benediction personally — you are held within the triune life of God.

(Affections/Worship) Verse 14 is not a farewell formula. It is a declaration about the structure of reality for everyone in Christ. The *grace of the Lord Jesus Christ* means that all you need has already been supplied through His death and resurrection — you are not earning your way; you are living within a gift already given. The *love of God* means that beneath every circumstance, the Father's covenant commitment holds; nothing can move you outside His love (cf. Rom. 8:38–39). The *fellowship of the Holy Spirit* means you are not alone — the Spirit who raised Christ from the dead dwells in you and has placed you within the body of Christ. Receive this as God's address to you personally, not as liturgical background noise.

5. Stop fracturing your community and start doing the concrete work of reconciliation.

(Will/Behavior) The imperatives of verses 11–12 — *be restored, comfort one another, agree, live in peace* — are not sentiment; they are commands with teeth. The Corinthian community had been fractured by factions, spiritual pride, and the controversy over Paul's authority for the better part of this entire letter. Paul closes with a call to do the specific, uncomfortable, non-glamorous work that reconciliation actually requires: pursue the person you have been avoiding; stop nursing the grievance; lower the defenses; agree. The promise that the God of love and peace will be with them (v. 11) is the motivation, not the reward — it is because God is present that reconciliation is possible, not the other way around.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: This chapter makes a decisive claim about the nature of divine power: it does not bypass weakness but works through it, because Christ Himself was crucified in weakness before being raised by the power of God. This is not a theology of resignation but of cruciform confidence — the power available in ministry and in Christian life is resurrection power, which means it is always and only available on the other side of the cross-pattern. The chapter also makes a clear claim about the nature of apostolic authority: it exists entirely in service of truth and for the building up of the community, not as a personal possession or a tool of domination. And the Trinitarian benediction of verse 14 makes the structurally foundational claim that the entire Christian life — grace, love, and fellowship — flows from and returns to the triune God. These are not three separate blessings from three separate sources; they are the unified gift of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Second Corinthians 13 is a sustained display of the Reformed insistence that the gospel does not conform to human notions of strength, success, or impressiveness. The passage's cruciform theology of power directly supports the Reformation's recovery of *theologia crucis* over *theologia gloriae* — the theology of the cross over the theology of glory. The self-examination call of verse 5, read within the Reformed framework of perseverance and assurance, guards against both antinomian presumption (examining nothing) and anxious works-righteousness (examining everything to generate assurance through performance). Assurance is real, grounded in Christ's indwelling presence — but it is confirmed, not created, by examination. The Trinitarian benediction is theologically load-bearing for Reformed trinitarianism: it presents the three Persons as distinct agents with distinct relations to the believer (grace, love, fellowship) while assuming the unity of their action. Calvin's commentary on this verse is among his richest, and the benediction has been incorporated into Reformed liturgy precisely because it names what Reformed worship is structured around: the triune God who gives, loves, and indwells His people.

Main Takeaway

Stop spending your energy evaluating other people's faith and credentials, and do what Paul asked the Corinthians to do: look at your own life and ask whether Jesus Christ is actually in you. He is — if you are His — and that means the same power that raised Him from the dead is available to you right now, in whatever weakness you are living through. The grace of Christ has already provided what you need. The love of God already holds you. The fellowship of the Spirit has already placed you within a community you are called to

reconcile with, not walk away from. This is not a description of where you might arrive. This is the present reality you are invited to live inside of.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing verse 5 to a salvation-doubt generator.** “Examine yourselves” is frequently preached in a way that leaves congregants in chronic uncertainty about whether they are truly saved. This inverts Paul’s rhetorical purpose. Paul expects the examination to confirm Christ’s presence — and he expects the Corinthians to recognize this. Preaching that uses verse 5 to press people toward perpetual anxiety about their standing has replaced Paul’s confident pastoral summons with a different and more destructive message. The examination is real, the stakes are real, but the expected outcome for a congregation of genuine believers is confidence, not paralysis.
- **Treating the Trinitarian benediction as liturgical wallpaper.** Verse 14 is frequently read at the close of worship services with so little emphasis that it functions as a dismissal formula rather than a theological declaration. Preachers who treat it this way miss that it is the capstone of the entire letter — naming the triune source of grace, love, and fellowship that Paul has been arguing for throughout. The benediction deserves exegetical attention, not just devotional fondness.
- **Preaching cruciform weakness as an excuse for passivity or poor preparation.** The theology of verses 3–4 can be misread as a spiritualization of mediocrity — “I’m weak, so God must be working; strong preparation or effective communication is worldly confidence.” Paul is not commending weakness as an aesthetic or excusing lack of faithfulness. He is insisting that genuine power runs through the cruciform pattern — which requires actual death to self, not the convenient appearance of humility. The weakness Paul commends is costly, not comfortable.
- **Missing the pastoral selflessness of verse 7.** This verse is among the most demanding in the chapter and is often skipped in favor of the better-known material in verses 5 and 14. Paul’s willingness to appear to have failed — to be unrecognized as genuine — if it serves the Corinthians’ genuine good is a model of ministry and of all Christian relationship that cuts against every instinct toward self-promotion and reputation management. Do not pass over it.
- **Domesticating the closing imperatives (vv. 11–12) into general niceness.** “Rejoice, be restored, comfort one another, agree, live in peace” addressed a community in serious conflict that had been flirting with false teaching and factionalism throughout this letter. These imperatives are not casual encouragements to be pleasant — they are demanding calls to do the specific work of reconciliation in a broken community. Preach them with the weight the situation requires.

- **Separating the weakness-power theology of vv. 3–4 from the self-examination of v. 5.** These two movements are connected: the Corinthians are demanding proof of Christ's power through Paul, and Paul redirects — if Christ is truly in *them*, they are the proof. The examination is not disconnected from the power theology; it is its application. Preaching that treats these as separate units will miss the rhetorical force of the reversal Paul is executing.