Introduction: The ‘Lens’ of the Child

In her introduction to the essay collection, *The Child in the Bible*, Marcia Bunge describes the way in which contributors to that volume have sought to “‘foreground’ questions and concerns about children and childhood’ in the interpretation of biblical texts.\(^1\) The importance of this approach lies not only in the potential light cast on issues directly related to the understanding of childhood, or treatment of children. Approaching a text from a new perspective, with a new ‘lens’ also has the potential to ‘shed new light on the structure and themes of the text as a whole’, providing ‘a new angle of vision on other aspects of biblical texts’.\(^2\) The experience of preparing this short paper bears this out. I am a New Testament scholar, whose research is largely focussed on the writings of Paul, the letter of 2 Corinthians in particular. I am interested in what that text means, in its interpretation. While I am not free of my own particular set of presuppositions that inevitably shape interpretation (which one of us is?) I work hard to understand the text on its own terms, for what it seems to say rather than for what I want it to say.

It is for precisely this reason that it is necessary to intentionally read texts through another lens or, better, the lens of another. Because to the extent that presuppositions affect interpretation, there will be things that I, or any of us, cannot see until we alter the line of vision.

So when I was invited to choose a topic for this paper, I made the simple decision to re-read a text from 2 Corinthians that mentioned children: 2 Corinthians 6:13. Little was I too know at the time, that my choice, and the decision to view that text through the ‘lens’ of the child, would reframe my exegetical judgement about what that text was saying and, more broadly, what might have been at stake as Paul wrote to the Corinthians. The argument that follows has implications, to be sure, for the way that we construe the relationship between parents and children. But, it has also helped me to reconceive some basic interpretative questions about the overall meaning of this part of Scripture.

Metaphors, Paul and Us

Metaphors matter. They are key components of the human concern to interpret and understand reality.\(^3\) We use metaphors to make sense of the world, our place within it,


\(^2\) Bunge, 'Introduction', xviii.

and to construe the various forms of potential human relationship that stem from the realities of life in family, community, and society.

And metaphors mattered to Paul. They are a vital part of his rhetorical toolbox. They are used to enable deeper understanding of the nature of God’s redemptive action in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 2:14, triumphant procession; 2 Cor. 5:18–19, reconciliation of hostile parties), the role of the church within that redemptive drama (2 Cor. 3:2–3, a letter of Christ; 2 Cor. 5:20, ambassadors for Christ), and the shape of Paul’s own apostolic ministry for the sake of the churches (2 Cor. 4:7, earthenware pots). In particular, as others have noted, Paul regularly makes use of the image of the child, in relation to himself and his converts, of the metaphor of parenthood, in his descriptions of his relationship with his converts, and of the language of siblingship, to portray relationships within the community.4 There may not be many direct, explicit references to actual children in the Pauline epistles. But the language of childhood functions metaphorically to express aspects of the nature of Christian identity and community, and of the relationship between Paul the apostle and the congregations to which he writes.

But what is communicated? The reason for asking this question, and doing the necessary exegetical work to find an answer to it, relates to the fact that metaphors matter not only as conveyors of meaning. The meaning conveyed in turn shapes practice. And when it comes to the metaphorical language of parent and child, there is always the possibility that language that is drawn from the real world of familial relationship, and then is used metaphorically to say things about other forms of social relationship, serves ultimately to legitimate certain understandings of the relationship between parents and children. Brent Strawn, in an excellent essay on the use of familial language to connote the relationship between YHWH and Israel, puts the point well:

---

Does the portrayal of God as our parent make any difference when we consider our own relationship with our children? Once we have children of our own, do we parent differently and better if we believe that God is a parent both to us and to others?5

‘I Speak as to Children’ (2 Corinthians 6:13)

It is this notion, that the metaphorical use of parent-child language relates to the actual ethics of how parents and children relate to each other, that justifies the following analysis of a neglected text in 2 Corinthians. When Paul tells the Corinthians that he speaks to them ‘as to children’ (2 Cor. 6:13 ὡς τέκνοις) what does he mean? And how might Paul’s metaphorical meaning relate to our attitudes towards and treatment of children?

There is a general consensus about this text, to the effect that the address of the Corinthians as τέκνοι results from Paul’s self-understanding as the spiritual father of the Corinthian community. This idea does indeed occur elsewhere (see 1 Cor. 3:1–2; 4:14–15; 2 Cor 11:2; 12:14–15), but it is noticeable that there is no specific reference to Paul as father (πατήρ) or parent (γονεός) here. This lack of direct reference to Paul’s role as parent does not prevent commentators from proceeding to read the use of the child metaphor as if it referred to the Corinthians’ relationship with Paul as their apostle. This is, in part, determined by the fact that for much of the preceding argument, Paul has been discussing that relationship. As earlier chapters make clear, that relationship had been damaged, is now restored, but is perhaps under threat once again as others seek to undermine Paul’s authority. Thus the appeal of 6:13 ‘open wide your hearts’, reiterated in 7:2 ‘make room in your hearts’ is an appeal for the reciprocal return of affection.6 There is something other than affection at stake, however. Commentators also note that the implied relationship between apostle and congregation is one of reciprocity. It is because Paul has shown love to the Corinthians that they are obligated to return that love.7 In this way the text is read not merely as appeal, but as what Paul Barnett terms ‘an assertion of spiritual paternity’.8 Although the point cannot be developed here, the implied model of relationship suggested by this kind of understanding is largely contractual. It contains the implicit idea that, should the Corinthian’s affection not be given, then Paul might withdraw his affection for them.

‘I Will Be Your Father’ (2 Corinthians 6:18)

It is at this point that we note that this is not the only place where familial imagery is used in this section of the letter. For, in between the two appeals to the Corinthians, Paul includes material that constitutes a substantive articulation of the way in which

---


7 Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids / Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 491–492

the Corinthians’ affection is to be shown. And at the heart of the exhortations of 6:14–7:1 lies a repeated reference to ‘sons and daughters’ with this time an explicit mention of a ‘father’:

**16b** I will live in them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be your father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.

**17**

**18**

In no commentary known to me is the connection between the familial language of 6:13 and 6:18 established. It may therefore be possible that I am straining to hard to connect them. After all, many scholars are convinced that 6:14–7:1 do not belong in this letter at all, because the verses are seen to fit uneasily into the surrounding argument, and draw on language and patterns of thought that appear to be un-Pauline. However even if integrity is assumed, the relationship between the language of ‘children’ with the language of ‘father, sons and daughters’ is not the focus of attention.

In 6:16b–18 Paul is, of course, citing Old Testament texts in support of his view that the Corinthians should not engage in partnership with ‘unbelievers’ (6:14–15). Through a series of rhetorical questions, Paul makes it clear that allegiance to God involves the refusal of koinônia with idols. ‘What does a believer share with an unbeliever?’ (ἡ τίς μερίς πιστοῦ μετὰ ὑπόστου). The implied answer is ‘nothing’. This is clearly a negative argument, intended to strengthen the relationship between the Corinthians and Paul. But it is not the only argument. The rhetorical questions give way to a fundamental statement about the shared identity of Paul and the Corinthians: ‘For we are the temple of the living God’. That shared identity is

---


10 The majority view is that Paul is talking here about the relationship between the ‘church’ and the ‘world’. I am increasingly drawn to the view that the term ἄνθρωπος in 6:14–15 refers in highly polemical fashion to Paul’s opponents in Corinth. On this see Goulder, ‘2 Cor. 6:14–7:1 as an Integral Part of 2 Corinthians’, and the arguments presented there.

11 With the majority of commentators I read ἡμᾶς γὰρ ναὸς θεοῦ ἐσμέν rather than the ὑμᾶς … ἐστε of P46 (82) C D2 F G Ψ (0209) M lat sy; Tert.
profundely *covenantal* in shape. It is generally agreed that the following Old Testament text has been deployed at this point in the argument:

**Leviticus 26:11–12**

11 And I will place my tent among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. 12 And I will walk about among you and will be your God, and you shall be for me a nation.

From this text Paul derives the three key affirmations about God’s presence with the community: ‘I will live among them’; ‘I will walk (among them)’; ‘I will be their God and they shall be my people’.

The final phrase is, of course, one version of Israel’s ‘covenant formula’. It is then re-iterated in explicitly familial language in 6:18. This verse seems to derive from two texts:

**2 Samuel 7:14**

I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.

**Isaiah 43:6**

bring my sons from a land far away and my daughters from the ends of the earth

Paul has engaged in some crafty hermeneutical work here. The 2 Samuel 7:14 is a reformulation of the initial covenant formula directed towards an individual in what is know as an adoption formula; the reference is to the Davidic king. Paul changes the initial singular pronouns back into plurals in order to incorporate the Corinthians within the messianic promise and combines this with elements of an Isaianic text that looks towards the eschatological restoration of the people of God by means of a new exodus. Thus, this text is an affirmation of Paul’s wider theology of restoration and affirms that he, together with the Corinthians, are the ‘temple of the living God’ because in the new covenant God is ‘father’ and Paul and the Corinthians are ‘sons and daughters’.

**Conclusions**

By pointing out the connection between the two forms of familial imagery used in this section of 2 Corinthians we are invited to consider the possibility that the more fundamental framework for interpreting such language in Paul is not some form of reciprocal contract between apostle and congregation whereby the relationship is

---


13 This is to compress a good deal of necessary exegesis into a few sentences. See the discussions in G. K. Beale, 'The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5–7 and its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1', *NTS* 35 (1989), 550–581 and Scott, 'The Use of Scripture in 2 Corinthians 6.16c–18 and Paul's Restoration Theology'.
sustained by the mutual obligations of affection, or the hierarchically structured give and take of instruction/example and obedience. Theologically prior to any such construal of Paul’s relationship to the Corinthians is a *shared identity through participation in the new covenant.*

In her important essay ‘Finding a Place for Children in the Letters of Paul’, Beverley Gaventa notes that when Paul talks about children, in either the literal or metaphorical sense, he connects his children-talk to God-talk.\(^{14}\) Noting the contrast between the Pauline location of the family within the household of God and accounts of children that construe them in instrumental terms (as existing for the sake of the *polis*, or the well-being of society), Gaventa describes with care the ways in which attention to the connection between children-talk and God-talk serves as a reminder of the innate value of children to God.

This brief consideration of 2 Corinthians 6:11–7:1 bears this observation out. But in addition to providing biblical resources to the instrumental use (and abuse) of children within society, the comments made above offer us a vision of relationships between parents and children (physical or spiritual) that must never collapse into contractual structures and practices. Love and affection, instruction, obedience, and discipline are the outworking of an identity that parents and children share: as those who are loved by God who calls us children, sons and daughters. Within the home, and within the household of faith, our relationships with one another will be constantly sustained by our common orientation to, and participation in, the unconditional love of God.

---


---, *'Paul as a Child: Children and Childhood in the Letters of the Apostle', JBL* 126 (2007), 129-159.


\(^{14}\) Gaventa, 'Finding a Place', 247.


