

## The Church as Paul's Thorn: Honor & Shame Rhetoric in 2 Corinthians

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*Abstract:* Identifying Paul's thorn in the flesh from 2 Corinthians 12:7 has been a particularly curious challenge for interpreters. But reading this text with church planters in Mozambique and in light of honor-shame rhetorical strategies, a neglected option comes into view: Paul's thorn is the church in Corinth. After making a case for that reading, the paper then explores how this interpretation can be of practical and pedagogical value for training church planters and leaders today.

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*“Planting a church can be painful. There are so many ways it can hurt right from the beginning and then maintaining the relationship with the congregation over time can be hard, too. It’s challenging to even know how to talk with the church about what that’s like for me as a church planter.”*

Students at the *Instituto Teológico de Cabo Delgado* who had church planting experience often shared this sentiment in conversations about 2 Corinthians. Although opportunities for formal education were limited for many people in northern Mozambique, they brought extensive life and often impressive ministry experience to the classroom. Bringing my own church planting experience into conversation with theirs opened the door to insightful reflections on the biblical text and practical observations for all of us. Additionally, honor-shame dynamics among the Makua-Metto (or Makhuwa-Meetto) people also provided a useful lens for reading and interpreting Paul's letters. Engaging both real-life experiences and rhetorical expectations often led to fruitful observations and connections in the classroom and in the field with fellow church planters and leaders.

The Apostle Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church is notoriously complicated and difficult to unravel. What is commonly referred to as 2 Corinthians will be the focus of this paper. In that letter, Paul's communication with this controversial church addresses his change of travel plans, defends his apostolic ministry, and encourages them to generously contribute to the collection for Jerusalem.<sup>1</sup> To read it effectively, we need to remember that this is a targeted text

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<sup>1</sup> While the cohesiveness of 2 Corinthians as a letter is a matter of debate, in light of the Makua-Metto churches' assumption of its integrity as a document and the reasonable arguments made for that by different scholars, this paper will refer to 2 Corinthians as a unified whole. For our purposes, though, it would not greatly impact the point of this paper if a reader subscribes to one of the partition theories. For

to a complicated church from a church planter who is using rhetoric and style that is unfamiliar to many of us in the West. One of the sections that is mysterious to many is Paul's reference to his "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7).<sup>2</sup> Common suggestions for the meaning behind this curious phrase are: 1. that it refers to a sickness or injury, maybe a problem with Paul's eyesight (linked with Gal. 4:15 & 6:11); 2. frustration for Paul related to a recurring temptation or guilt from his past; or 3. that this is a pointed reference to ongoing opposition in Corinth. While those reasons have often been the main options for understanding the significance behind this curious phrase, my experience as a church planter and the practice of interpreting this verse in the broader context of the letter alongside African church planters in a traditional honor-shame context has led me to a different answer. Paul's thorn is them; the complicated Corinthian church is his thorn.

In this paper, we will explore how considering Paul's role as a church planter, as well as his use of honor-shame rhetoric, can help bring new light to this odd phrase. We will look first at the Apostle's background and church planting experience. Then we will look at his relationship to the church in Corinth and why the rhetoric of honor and shame is important for unpacking the discourse in 2 Corinthians. Our focus will be on chapter 12 and why most interpreters have missed seeing the phrase "thorn in the flesh" as a pointed reference to the whole Christian community in Corinth. Finally, we will explore practical applications of this interpretation and the pedagogical difference it makes for training missional practitioners today.

### **Paul as a Church Planter**

Unpacking our assumptions about the biblical authors is critical. Oftentimes personal experiences and expectations can enlighten a certain way of reading while turning our focus away from other illuminating and important perspectives.<sup>3</sup> Pastors, for example, may primarily approach Paul as a pastor, teachers may lean towards understanding Paul as a teacher, and

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an overview on this complicated question with insights from rhetorical analysis, see: Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1995) 327-339. Also, J. David Hester, "Revisiting 2 Corinthians: Rhetoric and the Case for Unity," *New Testament Studies* 46.1 (2000): 92–111. And, Ivor H. Jones, "Rhetorical Criticism and the Unity of 2 Corinthians: One 'Epilogue', or More?" *New Testament Studies* 54.4 (2008): 496–524.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful summary of the main interpretations of the section, see Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Waco, TX.: Word Books, 1986) 410-23. A shorter and more accessible summary can be found in Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, Manfred T. Brauch, and Walter C. Kaiser. *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 627-9.

<sup>3</sup> I will limit myself to suggesting two pairs of books on this topic. A set of classic books that have shaped my thinking about this are Mary Ann Tolbert and Fernando F. Segovia, *Reading from This Place. Vol. 1: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). And Mary Ann Tolbert and Fernando F. Segovia, *Reading from This Place. Vol. 2, Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). Additionally, two more recent books that are especially useful and accessible are E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2012). And E. Randolph Richards and Richard James. *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2020).

writers may focus on him primarily as a writer.<sup>4</sup> Those are all important approaches for reading the Apostle's letters, but one neglected perspective on his life and ministry is considering him as a church planter. The reasons for that may be as simple as the relatively fewer number of church planters in relation to preachers, pastors, teachers, and writers. This is also likely shaped by the fact that church planting is categorized as a practical ministry and not seen as an academic arena. These factors set the stage for why the interpretation of the thorn as the church in that city has been neglected.

Paul the Apostle planted churches as part of a team and interacted with them afterwards through letters and communication mediated by his colleagues and co-workers.<sup>5</sup> In this section we will briefly summarize eight relevant characteristics from what we know about him and ways he worked with these churches as a group. These factors combined to shape Paul as a church planter, how he was perceived by the churches, and the nature of their relationship.

The first four characteristics of Paul the Church Planter that we will mention are related to his background and his strategic advantages and approach to his work with churches. First, a key characteristic that enhanced his ministry calling, personal giftedness, and aptitude was his education. Paul was in the top 5% of society in his day in terms of literacy and education.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, his collective approach to ministry was foundational. He did not do ministry as a lone ranger or a rogue, solitary figure, instead he was a team player. His church planting was done as part of a group.<sup>7</sup> And the same could be said about his letter writing: it was also a collective process. The story in the book of Acts where he found himself working alone in Athens seems to have been the exception rather than the rule (Acts 17:16). That situation seems to be an outlier and his desire was to work alongside and form communities of collaborators to partner with. A third important characteristic is that Saul or Paul was bicultural and used his Jewish pedigree and Roman citizenship to the Gospel's advantage. We see examples of this code switching in the book of Acts, when he uses Aramaic and Greek near the Temple to both calm and rile up an angry mob (Acts 22). And we see in his letters attempts to bring people from different backgrounds (Jews and Gentiles) together in unity. Fourth, the way Paul handled financial support was shaped by the context in different churches. He followed a mode of self-financing via tent-making in some seasons and in other intense seasons of ministry Paul was a

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<sup>4</sup> It is surprising to me that even attempts at comprehensive surveys of Paul and his ministry will often fail to refer to Paul as a church planter at all. For example, Ben Witherington III, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998) never calls Paul a church planter, though certainly he refers to Paul as an Apostle and references him writing to churches that he did not "found" (p. 279).

<sup>5</sup> Paul regards Timothy and Silas (or Silvanus) as cofounders of the church in Corinth with him (2 Cor. 1:19). By popular count, Paul had some level of involvement in planting fourteen to twenty churches (although there is no definitive way to measure this).

<sup>6</sup> Ben Witherington III, *New Testament Rhetoric: An Introductory Guide to the Art of Persuasion in and of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 119.

<sup>7</sup> For a list of all of Paul's coworkers and the different ways that he refers to them in the New Testament, see E. Earle Ellis, "Paul and His Coworkers," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 185.

church sponsored missionary.<sup>8</sup> He accepted different financial models based on the availability of funds and the situation where he was serving. Under specific conditions Paul would welcome support and partnership (Phil. 4:10-19), but he resisted being pulled into patronage relationships where it may have compromised his ministry.<sup>9</sup> Paul's principle seems to have been to refuse funds from those churches that he was serving at the time, a fact that contributed in Corinth to confusion about his status and tension in his relationship with the church there (2 Cor. 11:5-15).<sup>10</sup>

The next four of the eight characteristics describe Paul's communication strategies with the churches. Fifth, Paul used a variety of metaphors and images to describe his missionary work. To the church in Thessalonica, for example, he talked about himself as an apostle, as a mother to that church plant, as a father and as a worker (1 Thess. 2:6-12, 2 Thess. 3:8-10). Those modes are consistent with how he framed his work and functioned to serve the church in Corinth. Sixth, due to the missionary situation of the New Testament. Paul was not writing generalized musings from air-conditioned offices or theological libraries. Bosch emphasizes how "the New Testament writers were not scholars who had the leisure to research the evidence before they put pen to paper. Rather, they wrote in the context of an 'emergency situation,' of a church which, because of its missionary encounter with the world, was forced to theologize."<sup>11</sup> The high stakes of assisting new communities of faith to survive and thrive in challenging circumstances is what led to the letters of Paul that have been so formative.<sup>12</sup> The Corinthian correspondence is a great example of how Paul's theology flowed from addressing practical issues and problems in the church.<sup>13</sup>

Seventh, Paul's letters had a collective focus; they were intended for the formation of communities more than merely targeting individual transformation. One example that is often

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<sup>8</sup> For more on Paul's leather working (tent-making) and his letter writing see Alan Howell, "Romans, Reconciliation, and Role-Playing in Mozambique: Benefiting from the 'New Perspective on Paul'" *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 9.1 (Winter-Spring 2018).

<sup>9</sup> For more on Paul, patronage, and the church in Corinth, see Joshua Rice, *Paul and Patronage: The Dynamics of Power in 1 Corinthians* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Frank Viola, *Finding Organic Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities*. 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 101. For more on the impact of the patron-client system in the Makua-Metto context and how that brought new light to biblical interpretation and inter-religious engagement, see Alan Howell and Robert Andrew Montgomery, "God as Patron and Proprietor: God the Father and the Gospel of Matthew in an African Folk Islamic Context," *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 36.3 (2019), 129–36.

<sup>11</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) 16.

<sup>12</sup> Thankfully, there are "contemporary New Testament scholars are thus affirming what the systematic theologian Martin Kahler said... decades ago: Mission is 'the mother of theology.'" David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) 16.

<sup>13</sup> In talking about difficulties facing churches in Mozambique, church planters and leaders helped me understand four main categories that they recognized for why some churches flourish, while others do not: sin problems, vision or direction problems, lack of good leadership, and a difficult context. One of the things that stands out regarding the church in Corinth is that all four of these seem to be impacting their health and development.

obscured to English readers is just how many of the second person pronouns ('you's') are written as plural.<sup>14</sup> He wanted to connect Christians collectively in congregations and for those churches to be connected to one another in a wider community with this as one way of phrasing his overall goal: "Christ formed in y'all."<sup>15</sup> And that leads us to our eighth and final observation: how Paul leveraged his authority in person and in his letters. Since his approach as an apostolic worker was more entrepreneurial and pioneering than one focused on founding and settling, he would typically work in a place and move on but continue to communicate with them from a distance. He needed to stay in contact and continue to empower them, helping without being heavy handed. One way of thinking about this tension is that planting a church, then, is like "holding a dove in one's hand. If the church planter holds it too tightly, he will kill it. But if he holds it too loosely, it will fly away and be lost."<sup>16</sup> Paul's interactions with churches display a complicated dance, navigating between being authoritative without being authoritarian.<sup>17</sup> We see him playing a complicated game as he attempts to respect agency and empower Christians to follow the way of Christ. But there were times when his actions may be perceived as authoritarian, especially in situations of significant cultural differences.

Seeing the Apostle Paul as a church planter in light of these eight observations can help us appreciate and be challenged by the ways that he is serving, working, and counseling the church in Corinth. Unfortunately, there is relatively little written about this important perspective on Paul and how approaching his writings from that angle can be enlightening.<sup>18</sup> As we will see, this can help us appreciate the methods and goals in his argumentation and rhetoric.

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<sup>14</sup> For an interesting and accessible exploration of this topic, see, E. Randolph Richards and Richard James. 2020. *Misreading Scripture with Individualist Eyes: Patronage, Honor, and Shame in the Biblical World*. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press. While there is appropriate critique of the excesses of this argument, it still is worth noting, especially in primarily individualistic contexts. Gerald W. Peterman, "Plural You: On the Use and Abuse of the Second Person." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 20.2 (2010): 201–14.

<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1 Corinthians, Paul suggests different metaphors for what it means to be the church: God's field, building, and temple, and in each case the you is plural (3:9,16). Also, in 2 Cor. 11:20, we find the plural you as Paul talks about his fears and hopes for the church.

<sup>16</sup> Frank Viola, *Finding Organic Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities*. 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 123. That example regarding the level of authority that a church planter may or may not safely use, has proven effective in my teaching about the Corinthian correspondence in both Africa and the United States.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Viola, *Finding Organic Church: A Comprehensive Guide to Starting and Sustaining Authentic Christian Communities*. 1st ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2009), 101. For an exploration of how Paul uses his authority and power in the churches, see Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles*. 1st ed. (Fortress Press ed. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the material that does exist on this topic tends to be more practical in nature in looking for patterns, for example, see Joseph Olufemi Asha, 2012. "Apostle Paul's Church Planting Method: A Model for Contemporary Church Planters." *Practical Theology* 5 (2012): 230–38. And David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 42-59.

## Paul as Communicator: Honor-Shame Rhetoric in 2 Corinthians

Since we have noted the lack of church planting perspective in interpretations of Paul, I will briefly share an experience from Mozambique that impacted my reading and teaching of the Corinthian correspondence. There was a church in the district of Mirate that was deeply troubled and caused me a lot of trouble. The way I most often describe that relationship is that they ‘made me want to pull my hair out.’ While that phrase is not necessarily academic or quantifiable, it is the best descriptor for my own experience with that church. I had been involved in rebooting that congregation, the leadership at the re-start was a mess, and my interactions with them were complicated. In describing this experience to undergraduate students, they resonated with labeling the church in that village as a “hot mess.”<sup>19</sup> While Paul, obviously, does not use that phrase, it is a helpful picture for what he was dealing with. The church in Corinth was also a “hot mess” and if he had to come up with a label for his relationship status with them on social media, a variation of “it’s complicated” would be appropriate (and generous).

Paul’s own correspondence with this complicated church also fits with that label: “it’s complicated.” Fee and Stewart note that “First Corinthians is the most difficult of the New Testament letters to summarize, because Paul deals in turn with no less than eleven different issues, sometimes in a length similar to some of his shorter letters (2 Thessalonians, Titus).”<sup>20</sup> The way that Paul frames his solutions to those complications and challenges centers on Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Hays states that “it is no accident that Paul’s teaching on the cross (1:18-2:16) and resurrection (15:1-58) stand like bookends – or sentinels – at the beginning and the end of the body of his letter to the Corinthians. These are fundamental themes of the gospel story. All our theology and practice must come and find its place within the world framed by these truths.”<sup>21</sup> In summary, Paul writes 1 Corinthians as a letter of correction to a church where sin and controversies have infected both personal lives and the church community and places all of his instructions between the bookends (or sentinels!) of Christ’s crucifixion and Christ’s resurrection. He follows that up in 2 Corinthians, where his letter to this controversial church addresses his change of travel plans, defends his apostolic ministry and encourages them to generously contribute to the collection for Jerusalem.

I began this paper with a comment about the challenge for a church planter to express their full emotional range with a church. Paul’s Corinthian correspondence is a good example of that. When exploring these letters with American audiences, I have found it useful to use an image for each book. For 1 Corinthians, it is helpful to see it as a paramedic’s bag overflowing with supplies that Paul brings in to deal with all the problems that they are facing. Then the image for 2 Corinthians that has been helpful is to think of it as a “mixtape” to explore how Paul is pouring

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<sup>19</sup> That often opened the door to conversations about churches they know of in the United States, as well, that could fit that description.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart. *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002) 324.

<sup>21</sup> Richard B. Hays, Richard B. *First Corinthians*. Interpretation Series (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1997) 278.

out his heart to them, hoping they will love him back. This mixtape includes his full emotional range put on display for them to hear, experience and hopefully respond well to.<sup>22</sup>

Another complicating factor has to do with the way Westerners often read (or misread) Paul's letters, not realizing that he is playing a different rhetorical game than we may expect.<sup>23</sup> Categories of honor and shame play a crucial role in his communication and missing those can cause us to miss deep significance in the text.<sup>24</sup> deSilva notes that "investigation of honor discourse in the Corinthian letters takes the investigator to the central issues of the correspondence. Honor discourse is particularly important in these letters because Paul finds himself having to teach anew about the redefinition and recognition of honor in the new community."<sup>25</sup> There are certainly other examples in the New Testament of how honor-shame shapes Paul's rhetorical strategy. One important example is the book of Philemon where Paul is playing a high stakes game to secure freedom for a runaway slave named Onesimus.<sup>26</sup> In what could seem to us like a passive aggressive approach, Paul communicates the way he does because he is trying to set up a win-win scenario. Insights like this from Game Theory can help us read Paul in 2 Corinthians as well.<sup>27</sup> We find in Paul's letters that when he is in a tight spot, he sometimes leverages rhetorical tools that we are unfamiliar with in order to communicate with churches enmeshed in complicated circumstances.

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<sup>22</sup> A different analogy or image that I have found useful from the recipient's perspective is that 1 Corinthians is surgery and 2 Corinthians is physical therapy.

<sup>23</sup> See Alan Howell and Sam Pflederer, "The Last Word in Rhetoric: Ithele Traditional Singers/Storytellers, Meaningful Communication, and a Reading of 2 Timothy in Mozambique" *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 10.2 (Summer–Fall 2019), as well as Alan Howell and Jessica Markwood, "Loaded Language: Missiological Considerations for Appropriating Political Rhetoric" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 36.2 (Summer 2019): 77-83.

<sup>24</sup> One explicit example from this section is 2 Cor. 11:21 where the word shame or dishonor appears.

<sup>25</sup> David A. deSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation*. (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2009), 139. For an interesting exploration of how shame helps unpack an earlier scene in 2 Corinthians, see Peter Marshall, "A Metaphor of Social Shame: Thriambeuein in 2 Cor 2:14." *Novum Testamentum* 25.4 (Oct. 1983): 302–17. For more on honor-shame in the Corinthian Correspondence, see Arthur J. Dewey, "A Matter of Honor: A Social-Historical Analysis of 2 Corinthians 10." *Harvard Theological Review* 78.1–2 (Jan. 1985): 209–17. And Evertt Huffard, "How Glory Veiled the Honor of God (2 Corinthians 2:1-4:6)" *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 11 (2020). Also, David Im Seok Kang, "Meaning of Remembrance of Me in 1 Corinthians 11:23-27 in Light of Bakgolnanmang: A Korean Concept of Honor." *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 21.1 (February 2018): 49–65. As well as, David A. DeSilva and David Arthur. "'Let the One Who Claims Honor Establish That Claim in the Lord': Honor Discourse in the Corinthian Correspondence." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28.2 (Sum 1998): 61–74.

<sup>26</sup> See Alan Howell, "'Old Man' as Cipher: Humor and Honor-Shame Rhetoric for Reading Philemon in Mozambique" *Missio Dei: A Journal of Missional Theology and Practice* 11 (2020). In that article I also cover some of the ways that honor-shame rhetoric plays out in the African context of Mozambique.

<sup>27</sup> Joel White, "Philemon, Game Theory and the Reconfiguration of Household Relationships," *European Journal of Theology* 26.1 (2017): 32–42.

## Unpacking Paul's Pointed Reference: Church as Thorn

With this brief overview of the situation and an awareness of Paul's honor-shame rhetoric, we can turn our focus towards the curious interpretive issue in 2 Corinthians of Paul's "Thorn in the Flesh." Leading up to that section Paul is fed up with the comparison game that is happening where people assume that others are super apostles and he is weak. He is willing to embrace that label of "weak," but only on his terms. In chapters 10 and 11, one major theme is that the comparison game they are playing to contrast him with others is ridiculous. He wrestles with the need to display his credentials because that would feel like a power play to assert his authority, but they have left him no choice. He names not only his victories but also his hardships, employing irony as a rhetorical tool.<sup>28</sup> In 11:28-30, we read how Paul, the church planter, feels the pressure of concern for the churches and about his reluctance to be forced by them to go down this admittedly ridiculous path. He relents and begins to boast, but pivots to boasting about his weaknesses. Paul's tone shifts here as he talks about the cross-pressures that he is under and then in 11:32-33, the Apostle seems to laugh at himself as he offers his own 'basket case' study (where he was lowered over a wall). This is the type of ministry case study 'proof' that he really wants to share – boasting about God's strength. Paul's qualifications as a messenger have been discounted and it sets up the next chapter where we learn about heavenly messages he participated in and demonic messengers that kept him humble.

Chapter 12:1-10 can be divided into two units that both deal with boasting: the first has to do with Paul's description of an experience of rapture (vision - v. 1-6), which is then followed by detailing an experience of rapture (thorn - v. 7-10).<sup>29</sup> He cryptically refers to mystical experiences of being taken to a heavenly throne room and connects those to the painful thorn that is tormenting him.<sup>30</sup> Here's how Garland summarizes what occurs:

"The audition in paradise resulted in the stake [thorn] that led to his pleading petition. We might expect, then, that a miracle would occur for one so divinely connected. The stake miraculously would be taken away, and Paul could live triumphantly, free from any nagging afflictions. The answer he received, however, was quite different from what he expected. 'Request denied,' the stake would remain. There would be no quick fix miracle, but the prayer does not go unanswered. The answer is simply different from what Paul wished. The Lord's response was... far greater and more profound than anything Paul knew to ask from the Lord. God gives his pride a knockout blow that makes him completely dependent on divine power, not his own."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For more on Paul's use of irony, see Johannes A. Loubser, "A New Look at Paradox and Irony in 2 Corinthians 10-13." *Neotestamentica* 26.2 (1992): 507–21.

<sup>29</sup> Jan Lambrecht, *Second Corinthians*. Ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 204.

<sup>30</sup> See C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate." *Harvard Theological Review* 86.2 (Apr. 1993): 177–217. And C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate - Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance" *Harvard Theological Review* 86.3 (July 1993): 265–92. Also see, Robert M. Price, "Punished in Paradise (An Exegetical Theory on 2 Corinthians 12:1-10)" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2.7 (January 1980): 33–40.

<sup>31</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 1999) 523.



How can our interpretation hold room for both the thorn and the throne room in Paul's communication with Corinth? What if these are more linked than we have assumed?

Traditionally it has been assumed that the thorn is referring to either: 1. a sickness or injury, maybe a problem with Paul's eyesight (linked with Gal. 4:15 & 6:11); 2. a frustration for Paul related to a recurring temptation or guilt from his past; or 3. ongoing external opposition in Corinth.<sup>32</sup> However I believe that when we consider the complicated state of the church, what we have observed about honor-shame rhetoric, and the emotional extremes Paul has already expressed about his frustrations with the church, it makes sense to consider the church in Corinth as his thorn. Hagel comes close to taking this position and points to Chrysostom as being in favor of a version of this reading, but focuses instead on whether it is outsiders or insiders in the church that are causing problems.<sup>33</sup> Rhetorically I think that misses how Paul is speaking to them collectively as a church: he is deeply pained not by inside or outside trouble-makers, but by the whole congregation.

Admittedly, the church-as-thorn in this text is a minority view, and while I arrived there via a church planter's perspective, McCant is another who shares this conviction, having discerned that from thoughtful rhetorical analysis.<sup>34</sup> His hypothesis is also that the "'thorn in the flesh' was the Corinthian church" and their rejection of Paul's apostleship.<sup>35</sup> McCant notes that, "the ambiguity surrounding σκόλοψ for centuries since, may be a clue that it was meant for the Corinthians. There is no good reason to suppose its meaning was lost on them. The letter was written to the Corinthians, not to trouble-making intruders."<sup>36</sup> The ambiguity in the text about the thorn is a clue that they are actually the referent,<sup>37</sup> and that Paul's use of irony and parody throughout the letter reveal that this small, pointed reference is really pointing to them.<sup>38</sup> Paul's communication is a powerful alchemy of irony and sincerity combined together. Sincerity was named as a key idea at the beginning of the letter (1:12, 2:17) and in these final chapters he sincerely shares the pain he experiences because of them. The church in Corinth had a radical aversion to sincerity and weakness and Paul is leaning into this weakness for their strengthening. The Apostle's ironic boasting is a surprising path for sincerity as Paul describes

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<sup>32</sup> For examples of early interpreters referring to the "thorn in the flesh" as a physical ailment, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.3.1; Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 5.12; Tertullian, *On Modesty* 13.6. John Chrysostom, *Homily 26* (on 2 Corinthians), though, disagrees with that assessment, instead suggesting that it refers to an enemy of Paul like Alexander the coppersmith, Hymenaeus, and Philetus (1 Tim. 1:20, 2 Tim. 2:17). For a useful summary of the early interpreters on this topic, the background on this phrase, and a look at why some 20th Century interpreters assumed it was a physical ailment, see Terence Y. Mullins, "Paul's Thorn in the Flesh" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 76.4 (December 1957): 299–303. Mullins follows Chrysostom's argument about the thorn as a reference to Paul's enemies.

<sup>33</sup> Lukas Hagel, "The Angel of Satan: 2 Corinthians 12:7: Within a Social-Scientific Framework." *Svensk Exegetisk Årsbok* 84 (2019): 193–207. This article also does a great job of surveying the different approaches to this verse.

<sup>34</sup> Jerry W. McCant, "Paul's Thorn of Rejected Apostleship." *New Testament Studies* 34.4 (Oct. 1988): 550-72.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 568, 572.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 555, 569.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 569.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 568.

how he is feeling and how he hopes they will make sense of this mess.<sup>39</sup> All this mess is painful for Paul and he keeps asking God to take this mess away. But instead God promises to sustain the Apostle as he perseveres through pain.

To close this section, we will return to the idea of Paul making room for the thorn as well as the throne room in his rhetoric. Since Paul has already veiled himself as the one who experienced the visions, it seems that in a similar way he is also veiling the identity of the thorn as well as a clue to help them lean in and listen to his heart. After naming the constant daily pressures he experiences because of all the churches in his network (11:29), we hear him use the number three multiple times. He was caught up to the third heaven in the vision (12:2), he asks three times to have the thorn removed (12:8), and then follows those stories with three references to his upcoming third visit (12:14, 13:1) where he is afraid that he will be humbled again (12:21) and is certain that this matter will be established by a second or third witness (13:1). These observations and others we have noted paint a picture of Paul pulling out all the rhetorical stops in order to repair the relationship with this church. He wants to leverage his authority for building all of them up as the body of Christ (13:10) and is displaying strength in weakness by opening up his wounded heart to them.

### **Practical Applications and Pedagogical Advantages for seeing the Church as Thorn Today**

In this section, I will briefly explore some practical insights that viewing the church as Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' in 2 Corinthians 12:7 can bring. We have widened our perspective to include the experience of church planting as an important reading for this text and if we also read it as formational for church planters as well, we may discover some relevant gifts for helping them with intentionality and creativity. Teachers and trainers of church planters will need to bring a variety of resources to bear in order to form contemporary workers well. One way to do that would be to encourage readings of scripture that rightly assume that the authors themselves were involved in church planting, passionate about church planting, and writing to church planters and church plants to encourage them to thrive in challenging contexts. Here are three ways that shifting our interpretation of this specific text and seeing the Corinthian church as Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' can aid in the development of resiliency and endurance in church planters today:

1. *Shifting from Idealism to Realism* - Paul deeply struggled with the challenges that the church was facing and modern-day church planters should expect that as well. There will be difficulties, pain, and opposition in congregations they help establish. Preparing

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<sup>39</sup> Consider this overview and analysis from McCant about the interweaving of boasting, foolishness, parody, and irony in this section: "Paul's boasting is 'in foolishness' and is thus ironical (11. 21). With bold foolishness he parodies the boast περί εύγενείας, engaging even in synkrisis (11. 22 f., κάώ) and declares himself a superior servant of Christ (11. 23, υπέρ έγω). The υπέρ έγω controls in the περιστάσεις (11. 23—27) and is thus a parody of weakness in which he ironically claims superiority. Boasting continues to be 'in weakness' (11. 30) and is illustrated with a parody of escaping over the wall (11. 32), and two parodical aretologies: a heavenly revelation (12.1-5) and a healing story (12. 7-10)." Ibid., 560.

kingdom workers for obstacles along the journey and building in an expectation of deep challenges will help church planters move from naivete to a sense of preparedness and perseverance as they face opportunities and navigate setbacks.<sup>40</sup>

2. *Shifting from Strength to Weakness* - We see in Paul's story a willingness to depend on God. The pain of the thorn, being wounded by the church, was truly humbling to him. Church planters must embrace humility and rely on God's power and presence to see them through. Relying on one's own strength is the pattern that the 'super apostles' practiced and that Paul himself pushed back against. Instead, sustained ministry in the face of adversity can only happen through deep connection to Christ.<sup>41</sup> This shift can reframe challenges as we lean into the realization that God's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9) and live in light of that reality. It can deepen our reservoirs of trust in God as the source for real success and real growth for ourselves and for the congregation.
3. *Shifting from Closed to Open* - Paul's willingness to open his heart and share the full range of his emotional experience may seem uncomfortable and look like oversharing to us. But, that seemingly last-ditch effort of opening up about just how wounded he was may have been the best move in this case. The thorn was part of his journey towards spiritual maturity and it was linked to his experiences with them. That made it a high-stakes story worth sharing.<sup>42</sup> Church planters need to know when to really open up to those they serve and share how setbacks and heartaches are impactful and painful. They need to be able to share about both amazing experiences like Paul's in the throne room, while also having room to talk about the painful thorns of ministry. Being appropriately open could cultivate empathy and compassion in church planters and in the congregation which then could help all involved to embrace a more supportive and empathetic approach to church leadership and pastoral care.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> The process of narrating one's experience of trauma as Paul does here, can help us see how God has been involved in our story. Naming both the good and bad can contribute to healing from thorny experiences. For more on the perspective of Paul, trauma and the thorn, see Sandra Hack Polaski, "2 Corinthians 12:1-10: Paul's Trauma." *Review & Expositor* 105.2 (Spr 2008): 279–84.

<sup>41</sup> Illness is certainly one type of adversity that kingdom workers regularly face. Reading the thorn in the flesh that way has been an asset for finding perseverance through difficulty. See Neil G. Smith, "Thorn That Stayed: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 12:7-9." *Interpretation* 13.4 (October 1959): 409–16. While I don't agree with Smith's assumption that Paul's thorn was an infirmity, I do think his classic pastoral reflection of God's presence in the midst of pain and difficulty is appropriate. For more on the infirmity approach from a medical and therapeutic perspective, see Justin Glessner, "Ethnomedical Anthropology and Paul's 'Thorn' (2 Corinthians 12:7)." *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 47.1 (2017): 15–46.

<sup>42</sup> For a strong comparison between Paul and Jesus' own journeys with the thorn in view, see Daniel L. Akin, "Triumphalism, Suffering, and Spiritual Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 in Its Literary, Theological, and Historical Context." *Criswell Theological Review* 4 (Fall 1989): 119–44.

<sup>43</sup> One resource that has shaped my thinking on the power of autobiography when done appropriately as part of Christian proclamation and communication is David Fleer and Dave Bland, *Preaching Autobiography* (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2001).

Overall, seeing the complicated church in Corinth as Paul's thorn in the flesh can provide valuable lessons and insights for church planters today, helping them navigate challenges with faith, humility, and reliance on God. This reading also allows church planters the freedom to express the full emotional range of their experience and not to expect to have a perfect relationship with churches. While we have focused on the neglected experience of church planters, these insights could certainly be useful and important for all kinds of ministry and service to the church today, as well.

## Conclusion

Modern interpreters of Scripture need to be careful not to let our own experiences overshadow other possible perspectives on the biblical text and the forces at play in those contexts. I am certainly aware that the perspective proposed in this paper has the potential to do that, as well. But reading Paul the church planter through the lens of honor-shame opens up interpretations that fit with the Corinthian correspondence as a whole, and I believe it is useful practically in the training of kingdom workers today. My goal in this paper is not to suggest that this new reading should obliterate other possible interpretations. Instead, I believe that it is helpful to hold it alongside other interpretive options and in conversation with them. Since words and phrases can have multiple meanings, Paul may be including multiple layers and types of thorny pain that are radiating in his experience in different ways. We would be wise to engage the text's ambiguity and its history of interpretation in conversations about this passage and explore different meanings and the reasons for our own hermeneutical approaches and assumptions.

Coming to this interpretation in conversation with my Mozambican friends has been one of many gifts that long-term cross-cultural service has brought to my understanding of Paul.<sup>44</sup> Encouraging readers today to hear interpretations from the global church can help them move away from misreading scripture with western eyes. It can also allow readings that unpack the complex pathos that ministers feel towards the churches they serve. We also noted that there is pedagogical value found here, too, for training church planters to expect conflict and complications and to find inspiration in Paul's honest wrestling with the costs of his commitment. Giving room for both the thorn as well as the throne room in the experience of church leaders and church planters today can be good not only for them as individuals but also for the church as a whole.

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<sup>44</sup> For an example of how my reading and teaching of Colossians has been shaped, see Alan Howell, "Embodying the Seven Movements of Christ: Postures and Pathways for Participation in Mission" in *Journal of the Evangelical Missiological Society* 4.1 (2024), 48-62. For ways that reading the book of Ephesians has been shaped, see Alan Howell and Robert Andrew Montgomery, "'A place without peace is no place at all': Violence, fear, and the Paz do Senhor in Mozambique," *Missiology: An International Review* 49.3 (2021): 263-275; and Alan Howell, "Swapping Drinking Songs for Spiritual Songs: Skolia and Possession in Ephesians 5 and Mozambique" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 37.3-4 (Fall/Winter 2020): 161-169.