



## A Hermeneutical Study of 2 Corinthians 3:3 on The Nature of Christians

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the theological meaning of the phrase “the epistle of Christ” in 2 Corinthians 3:3 in relation to the nature of Christians using a hermeneutical approach. Apart from that, this article will also discuss the application of this meaning in the lives of Christians in contemporary society. The hermeneutic approach applied includes three analyses: contextual analysis, grammatical analysis and lexical analysis. Based on the results of the excavation of 2 Corinthians 3:3, it was found that the nature of Christians is related to several things, including the calling of Christians as the epistle of Christ, their position and role, as well as their responsibility in bearing their existence as the epistle of Christ.

**Keywords:** the epistle of Christ; 2 Corinthians 3:3; the nature of Christians; hermeneutics

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### INTRODUCTION

The presence of Christianity in the world has provided a new insight for humanity, because the Christians has a special nature. The nature of Christians is not determined by ethnic background or socio-economic circumstances, but by a true understanding of who he is in Christ. Seeing this reality, every Christian should recognize his nature as a Christian. In his epistle to the Corinthians, the Holy Apostle Paul clearly explained the nature of the Christians, which he described as “the epistle of Christ” (2Cor. 3:3). This article was prepared to explore the meaning of the phrase " the epistle of Christ " according 2 Corinthians 3:3 regarding the nature of Christians, then outline the understanding of the nature of Christians and its direct application in life in contemporary society.

The author raised this title because there are various problems that occur among Christians related to immoral acts. Plante (2019) highlighted the crisis that occurred within the Roman Catholic Church regarding the behavior of a number of priests who were involved in the issue of immorality. Ogbonna, Ikenna and Ngozi (2020) argue that immoral acts are no longer exclusive to secular society, but have also spread to members of the Church, with a number of immoral acts that can be identified including sexual harassment, fornication and adultery, buying and selling positions, corruption and acts of violence. Zubairu (2024) notes the problems faced by Churches in Nigeria,

which are related to the immoral behavior of the congregation, such as sexual relations between men and men and women and women, intercourse between humans and animals, fading awareness of premarital chastity and love of worldly power and wealth. In this way, every Christian can be directed back to the original nature as stated in the Holy Scriptures.

## RESEARCH METHOD

Based on the phrase “the epistle of Christ” contained in 2 Corinthians 3:3 to explore the nature of Christians, the author will use three analyzes namely contextual, grammatical and lexical analysis (Lucas & Binar, 2024). These three analyzes are the methods used in hermeneutical studies (Grassmick, 1994). Hermeneutics is part of phenomenology, which is used to explore an event that occurred at a certain time (Sumaryono, 1993), and phenomenology is one of five approaches in qualitative research (Cresweel, 2015).

Contextual analysis is carried out by observing the immediate and broader context of 2 Corinthians 3:3. The immediate context consists of 2–3 paragraphs before and after the verse being analyzed (Saparman, 2007), while the broader context includes epistle or book that is still related to the verse being analyzed (Bloomberg & Markley, 2010). Grammatical analysis is carried out by looking at the structure and grammar of the verse under study (Schleiermacher, 1977). Lexical analysis is carried out by looking at the meaning of the word in the original language dictionary, but the meaning must be depended to the context, structure and grammar of the text involved (Osborne, 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Struggle Against Injustice and Oppression

Although in 2 Corinthians 3:3 only the phrase “the epistle of Christ” is analyzed, it is tied into the context of the entire verse. Therefore, the analysis is carried out by paying attention to the entire verse (KJV) which reads: “Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be *the epistle of Christ* ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.” In Greek, this text reads: φανερούμενοι ὅτι ἐστὲ ἐπιστολὴ Χριστοῦ διακονηθεῖσα ὑφ’ ἡμῶν, ἐγγεγραμμένη οὐ μέλανι, ἀλλὰ Πνεύματι Θεοῦ ζῶντος, οὐκ ἐν πλαξὶ λιθίναις, ἀλλὰ ἐν πλαξὶ καρδίαις σαρκίνας (*phaneroumeni hoti este epistoli Khristou diakonitheisa hyph’ imon, engegrammeni ou melani, alla Pneumati Theou zontos, ouk en plaxi lithines, alla en plaxi kardies sarkines*).

### Contextual Analysis

According to Saparman (2007) and Bloomberg & Markley (2010), the immediate context is drawn from 2 Corinthians 2:5–4:6, while the broader context encompasses the entirety of the epistle of 2 Corinthians.

### Immediate Context

In chapter two, the apostle Paul advises the congregation to demonstrate love (v. 8) directed toward the one who caused sorrow (v. 5). He also commands the congregation to rebuke (v. 6), forgive, and comfort that person (v. 7). The command given to the congregation serves as a test of obedience (v. 9), and specifically, it is a command to forgive (v. 10). In the following verses, the apostle bears testimony to the congregation about how the ministry he performs becomes the fragrance of life in Christ before those who are saved and the stench of death to those who

are perishing (vv. 15–16). Furthermore, the apostle asserts that his ministry is not motivated by the pursuit of gain, but that he has spoken as he has been commanded by God (v. 17).

In chapter three, the apostle praises the congregation as a "letter of commendation" written on their hearts, which is known and read by all people (v. 2). He then explains that the congregation is the "letter of Christ," written through his ministry, inscribed on human hearts by the Spirit of the living God (v. 3). The terms "letter of commendation" and "letter of Christ" are used interchangeably and appear to be synonymous, both linked to the Spirit of the living God, whose nature is to "give life" (v. 6). The apostle makes a comparison with the stone tablets given through Moses. He elaborates that if the stone tablets, which brought death, were regarded as glorious, then the ministry of the Spirit is far more glorious (vv. 7–11). Moses, who received the tablets, had to cover his face, and when the Jews read the book of Moses, their hearts remained veiled until Christ, who could remove that veil (vv. 12–14). At the end of chapter three, the apostle declares that those who believe in Christ reflect the glory of the Lord and are transformed into His image, with ever-increasing glory (v. 18).

In chapter four, the apostle Paul describes his ministry with specific criteria: he serves without losing heart (v. 1), he rejects shameful hidden deeds, does not act deceitfully, nor falsify the word of God (v. 2), but instead, he proclaims the truth (v. 3). In his ministry, the apostle preaches Christ, and in Christ is the light of the glory of God, which will shine in the hearts of all believers, so that they may gain knowledge of the glory of God (vv. 4–6).

### ***Conclusion of the Immediate Context***

After elaborating on the scriptural passages that form the immediate context of the verse under analysis, the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 3:3 can be concluded as follows: Paul provides counsel to the congregation regarding the importance of love, forgiveness, and sincerity in ministry, emphasizing that all actions must reflect Christ, thereby becoming the fragrance of life to those who are saved and the stench of death to those who are perishing. The apostle also depicts the congregation as the letter of Christ, written on the hearts of believers through the Spirit of God, which is far more glorious than the Law given to Moses. Furthermore, the apostle teaches the significance of responsibility in ministry, rejecting deceitful behavior, and faithfully proclaiming the truth of God's word. The overall teaching points to the understanding that true ministry is grounded in love and truth, with the purpose of glorifying God, manifesting His glory, and leading people to a deeper knowledge of Christ.

### ***Broader Context***

In the first chapter, the apostle Paul explains God as the compassionate Father who comforts His people in all their afflictions. The comfort that comes from God is not to be enjoyed for oneself, but rather so that God's people can also comfort others who are suffering. Through the afflictions experienced, as Paul himself has experienced, one may receive comfort from God and subsequently extend that comfort to others.

In the fourth chapter, the apostle Paul revisits the theme of suffering (vv. 7–18). Despite facing severe afflictions and difficulties, Paul and his co-workers remain steadfast in strength and hope because the Gospel is an invaluable treasure. The suffering they endure does not hinder them, as strength remains available from God. Suffering has become part of their being, just as Christ's suffering leads to life granted by God. Paul reminds the congregation not to lose heart, despite the adverse circumstances, because God's power continually renews them. Paul also teaches that the present earthly suffering is incomparable to the glory that will be revealed later, encouraging the congregation to focus on the unseen rather than the afflictions they are currently enduring.

In the fifth chapter, the apostle Paul elaborates on the hope believers have for an eternal body, a hope that is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit, serving as the assurance of salvation and eternal life (vv. 1–5). He further invites believers to reconcile others to God through Christ, as Christ has reconciled humanity to God (vv. 11–21).

In the sixth chapter, the apostle Paul stresses the importance of living in accordance with God's calling and not neglecting the grace given by God. He also affirms that, despite facing various difficulties, sufferings, and challenges in ministry, the servants of God must remain faithful. Paul advises the congregation to avoid fellowship with unrighteousness and urges them to live separately from a corrupt world in order to reflect God's holiness and glory. As children of God, the congregation has the responsibility to live in truth and holiness, glorifying God in all aspects of their lives.

In the seventh chapter, the apostle Paul expresses his joy over the repentance of the Corinthian congregation, who have received the rebuke and counsel well. He emphasizes that the suffering the congregation experienced as a result of the rebuke was not in vain, as it led to repentance and the restoration of their relationship with God. Paul stresses that godly sorrow leads to repentance that brings salvation, whereas worldly sorrow leads only to death. He also expresses gratitude and joy over the success of the ministry and praises the sincere attitude and positive response of the congregation to the letter sent, which, as Brill (2003) explains, refers to 1 Corinthians, dealing with various issues faced by the congregation. Paul further emphasizes the importance of maintaining healthy relationships within the body of Christ, with a sincere intention to restore broken relationships and live in true repentance.

In the eighth chapter, the apostle Paul recounts the example of the Macedonian congregation, who, despite facing various sufferings and living in poverty, did not become weakened. Rather, Paul describes them as a congregation full of joy and rich in generosity. As proof of this, the Macedonian congregations gave beyond their means. Using the Macedonian congregations as an example, Paul advises the Corinthian congregation to be rich in all things: in faith, speech, knowledge, eagerness to help, and love. In this advice, Paul again highlights Christ, who became poor so that the congregation might become rich.

In the ninth chapter, the apostle Paul encourages the Corinthian congregation to continue their plans to donate to Jerusalem with joy and generosity. Paul emphasizes that giving should be done willingly and not under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. He explains that God will provide everything needed to give abundantly, and such giving will produce much spiritual fruit. Through this giving, people will glorify God and give thanks for the goodness and generosity of the congregation. Paul underscores that their contributions will not only meet the needs of the poor but also serve to strengthen the bonds among the congregation.

### ***Conclusion of the Broader Context***

After elaborating on the scriptural passages that form the broader context of the verse, the broader context of 2 Corinthians 3:3 can be concluded as follows:

The apostle Paul presents profound teachings on how to live through suffering, ministry, and relationships within the congregation. Paul emphasizes the importance of comfort that comes from God, which must be shared with others, and reminds the congregation to remain steadfast and hopeful in the face of challenges, with confidence in the eternal life promised by God. Paul further affirms that the present sufferings of this world are incomparable to the glory that will be revealed. He encourages the congregation to live according to God's calling, to restore broken relationships, and to avoid fellowship with unrighteousness. Moreover, using the example of the Macedonian

congregations, Paul teaches the importance of generosity in giving with joy, as such giving not only meets the needs of the poor but also strengthens the bonds among the congregation and glorifies God.

### ***Conclusion of the Contextual Analysis***

Based on the analysis of the immediate and broader contexts, a comprehensive conclusion can be drawn regarding the context of 2 Corinthians 3:3 as follows:

First, the nature of Christians as “the epistle of Christ” is linked to a calling similar to that of Christ. Christ died on the cross, and His death was for the salvation of humanity. In His death, Christ reconciled humanity with God. In the same way, every believer is called to be a reconciler of unbelievers, so that they may come to know Christ, be reconciled to God, and be saved.

Second, the nature of Christians involves a readiness to endure suffering in all circumstances, even in the most difficult situations. The apostle Paul provides an example through his own ministry and also cites the example of the congregations in Macedonia, who lived in extreme suffering. However, that suffering did not weaken their ministry and faith, for God granted them the strength to endure. Third, the nature of Christians is characterized by obedience to God's commands, demonstrated through a willingness to forgive those who have wronged others, to give selflessly to those in need, and to show spiritual richness even when possessing nothing in material terms.

### **Grammatical Analysis**

In this analysis, the meaning of each word contained in 2 Corinthians 3:3 will be examined, followed by the connection of these words to interpret the meaning of the phrase “the epistle of Christ” in accordance with the understanding of the original language.

The word φανερούμενοι is a nominative plural masculine passive participle of the root word φανερόω, which can be translated as: *they are being revealed or manifested*. The apostle indicates that this act of revealing or manifesting occurs simultaneously with other actions in the sentence. This emphasizes that the Corinthian church as the epistle of Christ is being manifested through the work of the Holy Spirit as reflected in Paul's ministry. Thus, the church is urged by Paul to live in accordance with their nature, that is, to be a blessing through the way they live. The word ὅτι is a subordinating conjunction that can be translated as “that” or “for.” This conjunction serves to introduce or explain the idea associated with φανερούμενοι, indicating that something is being revealed or manifested.

The word ἐστὲ is the present indicative form of the verb εἶμι in the second person plural, which can be translated as “*you are*.” This word points to the collective the nature of Corinthian church, not just specific individuals within the congregation. The word ἐπιστολή is a nominative singular feminine noun from the root ἐπιστολή, meaning *letter or epistle*. This term is used metaphorically by the apostle to describe the Corinthian church as *letter that is being revealed*.

The word Χριστοῦ is the genitive singular masculine noun meaning “of Christ,” “from Christ,” “of Messiah” or “from Messiah.” Both Christ and Messiah have same meaning: The Anointed One. The use of the genitive case indicates that the letter referred to by Paul in this text belongs to Christ, meaning that the church, as the epistle of Christ, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work through Paul's ministry. This emphasizes that the Corinthian church must live for Christ and follow Christ's example.

The word διακονηθεῖσα is a passive aorist participle in the nominative singular feminine form from the verb διακονέω, meaning *having been served*. This explains that the Corinthian church, as the epistle of Christ, is the result of Paul's ministry, further emphasized by the phrase ὑφ' ἡμῶν, meaning "by us" or "through us." The phrase ὑφ' ἡμῶν reinforces διακονηθεῖσα, indicating that the epistle of Christ is a product of the ministry of Paul and his companions, thereby underscoring that the apostle is an instrument used by God to make the Corinthian church as the epistle of Christ.

The word ἐγγεγραμμένη is a perfect passive participle in the nominative singular feminine form from the verb ἐγγράφω, meaning *having been written*. This participle emphasizes that the church, as Christ's letter, has been completed or written at that time. Here, Paul is explaining to the Corinthian church that, as the epistle of Christ, they must demonstrate the impact of their nature by living in love, forgiveness, and sincerity in ministry, ensuring that all actions reflect Christ and thereby become the fragrance of life to the saved and the fragrance of death to the perishing.

***The word οὐ is an adverb indicating prohibition, meaning not.***

The word μέλανι is a singular neuter dative adjective meaning *ink*. This word is reinforced by οὐ, explaining the epistle of Christ is not written with ink, which is contrasted with the word πνεύματι as the instrument used to write the epistle of Christ, introduced by the contrasting conjunction ἀλλὰ, meaning *but*. In this text, ἀλλὰ contrasts μέλανι with πνεύματι. The word πνεύματι is a dative neuter noun meaning *Spirit*. Paul uses this term to explain that the epistle of Christ is not written with ink but by the Spirit of God, further emphasized by the word θεοῦ, a genitive singular noun meaning *of God*. The genitive case used with θεοῦ clarifies that the Spirit writing the epistle of Christ is Spirit of God.

The word ζῶντος is a present active participle in the genitive singular masculine form, meaning *living*. This emphasizes that the Spirit of God, writing the epistle of Christ, is a living, active, and powerful Spirit.

The word οὐκ is an adverb of negation or rejection, meaning *not*, introducing the next concept, ἐν πλαξίν. The word ἐν is a dative preposition meaning *in*. The word πλαξίν is a dative plural feminine noun meaning *tablets*, clarifying that the medium or place where the epistle of Christ is written is not on tablets, which here refers to λιθίνας πλαξίν, meaning *stone tablets*. The use of the dative case emphasizes that these tablets are the stone tablets received by Moses, specifically referring to the Ten Commandments. The dative case here highlights that the tablets mentioned in the text are those made of stone. The word ἀλλ' is a coordinating conjunction meaning *but*, used to indicate contrast. This conjunction contrasts πλαξίν λιθίνας with πλαξίν καρδίαις σαρκίνας.

The word ἐν is a preposition meaning *in*. In this verse, it is used to explain the following noun. The word πλαξίν is a dative plural feminine noun meaning *tablets* and is further emphasized by ἐν, explaining that the epistle of Christ is written on tablets.

The word καρδίαις is a dative plural feminine noun meaning *hearts*. This explains that the tablets mentioned are hearts. σαρκίνας is a regular dative plural adjective meaning *flesh* or *human*. This explains that the church has become the epistle of Christ, written in the tablets of human hearts.

***Conclusion of the Grammatical Analysis***

Based on the analysis of 2 Corinthians 3:3, the meaning of the phrase "the epistle of Christ" refers to those (the church) who have been saved through the work of the Holy Spirit in the ministry of the Apostle Paul and his

companions. The Corinthian church, as the epistle of Christ, is depicted as an open epistle that can be read by everyone, both Christians and non-Christians alike. Therefore, the church is called to reflect or manifest Christ within themselves through acts of love, forgiveness, sincerity in service and ensuring that every action they take mirrors Christ Himself. This makes the church the fragrance of life to the saved and the fragrance of death to the perishing. The Corinthian church is urged to distinguish itself from those who do not believe in Jesus, living merely according to the law written on tablets of stone, as the epistle of Christ is written in human hearts, emphasizing that all actions must be driven by hearts enlightened by the Holy Spirit, rather than merely following commands.

### **Lexical Analysis**

In lexical analysis, the focus of the investigation is placed on the word “epistle” or ἐπιστολή (epistoli). This word can literally be understood as epistle or letter in the common sense, but it can also mean anything sent through a messenger, whether in the form of a message or an order, in either oral or written form (Liddell, Scott, Jones & McKenzie, 1940). The noun ἐπιστολή derives from the verb ἐπιστέλλω (epistello), meaning *to send a message*.

In general, an epistle serves as a medium or means by which an individual or a group can convey their intentions or thoughts to another person or party. Epistles possess two main characteristics: they can be either official or informal (Blake & Bly, 1993). In the Greek-Roman world, epistles were not only used as a means of communication or daily conversation, but also as tools for documenting legal agreements, conveying news, or demonstrating the dominance of government power. Furthermore, they served as a means of maintaining relationships between the sender and the recipient, especially for those located in distant places. When an epistle was sent, the recipient had the option to reject the epistle if there were objections, such as the delivery of the letter being conducted in an unethical manner or the epistle was received in broken condition (Stowers, 1986).

### ***Conclusion of the Lexical Analysis***

Based on the lexical analysis, taking into account the context of the entire text of 2 Corinthians 3:3, the nature of Christians as “the epistle of Christ” in this text can be outlined as follows: This phrase reflects that every Christian is a tool or medium for Christ, so that everyone, both Christians and non-Christians, can see that Christ is the message conveyed by the congregation, and that Christ is present in the life of the congregation. By being the epistle of Christ, it is hoped that the existence of the congregation will not be rejected by those who observe or read it, whether they are Christians or non-Christians. The nature of Christians is to convey Christ in all their actions and behaviors, so that others may see that Christ has sent the congregation, and through it, people may read and understand who Christ is, leading non-believers to come to faith in Christ.

### **CONCLUSION**

Based on the contextual, grammatical and lexical analysis that has been conducted, the nature of Christians as the epistle of Christ according to 2 Corinthians 3:3 carries several meanings, including:

First, all Christians are instruments or means commissioned by Christ Himself to proclaim Him to the world, both to Christians and non-Christians, with three primary objectives: to glorify God, to declare His glory, and to bring others to the knowledge of Christ. Specifically, the content of this message centers on Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Through His death, Christ reconciled humanity to God. Similarly, every believer is called to serve as a

reconciler to unbelievers, enabling them to come to know Christ, be reconciled to God, and ultimately attain salvation.

Second, as the epistle of Christ, every Christian is called to live in harmony and accordance with Christ, who has sent them. Christ suffered, and His suffering serves as an example to be followed and imitated by all Christians. Through His suffering, Christians have received power from God, enabling them to endure various trials and difficulties. Whatever happens should not serve as an obstacle or cause the Christian faith to weaken, for God's help remains available to His people.

Third, the fact that the congregation can become the epistle of Christ is through the power of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the apostles. Therefore, as the epistle of Christ, every Christian bears the apostolic commission and the power of the Holy Spirit. This reality does not allow Christians to live carelessly or according to their own desires. Christians must demonstrate their nature as individuals whose way of life is distinct from those who do not know Christ. A Christian must be one who is obedient to God's commands and consistently live in a manner that is pleasing in God's presence, even though this may indeed be difficult to accomplish. Let it not be the case that due to the actions of Christians themselves, which do not reflect Christ, people despise and mock Christ.

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