

2 Corinthians

Authorship

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia. It is intensely personal, being the culmination of several tension filled visits and letters.

Date

This letter may be dated with a fair amount of certainty as A.D. 56. This is derived by a careful reconciling of the account of Acts with historical notices in 1 & 2 Corinthians.¹

Original Readers

The church at Corinth had been established by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18). It was made up mostly of Gentiles, who, as might be expected, were deeply ingrained with the iniquity of their infamous culture. Paul spent a great deal of time and effort ministering to this group of believers, both in residence and through letter.

Occasion

Sometime toward the end of his Ephesian sojourn, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, which we possess as 1 Corinthians. In this letter he refers to a “former” letter, most surely written from Ephesus as well (1 Cor. 5:9). He expresses his intention to re-visit Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5-9) and indicates that Timothy was already headed in that direction (1 Cor. 16:10-11). As of that writing Paul had been planning on traveling to Corinth through Macedonia and perhaps spending the winter with them (1 Cor. 16:5-9). Apparently he receives a negative report from Timothy and makes an immediate trip to Corinth, which he refers to as a “sorrowful” visit (2 Cor 2:1). That this visit did indeed take place is further confirmed by Paul’s stated resolve to carry out a third visit (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1-2).

The difficult circumstances in Corinth had caused Paul to alter his plans for this third visit. Originally he had thought of sailing directly across to Corinth from Ephesus, then journeying up to Macedonia from which he would return to Corinth before departing for Judea (2 Cor. 1:15–2:11). However, things had become so tense between Paul and the Corinthian church that he delays this planned trip in the hope that the conflict might be resolved (2 Cor. 2:1). Instead of the intended visit, Paul sends Titus with a “severe” letter

¹ See John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 42-51.

with the intent that it would provoke repentance in those who needed it and spare Paul the pain of having to confront their sin in person (2 Cor. 2:3-4; 7:8-12).

At this point Paul strikes a new itinerary that will take him through Macedonia to Achaia, and then on to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21). He sends Timothy and Erastus ahead to Macedonia (Acts 19:22) and, following the riot at Ephesus, heads in that direction himself, pausing in Troas (or in the Troad region²) apparently in the hope that Titus would catch up with him bearing good news from Corinth (Acts 20:1; 2 Cor. 2:12-13). Though an open door of opportunity presents itself in northwest Asia Minor, Paul is unsettled over the Corinthian situation and moves on to Macedonia. Robinson thinks that Paul waited until winter had put an end to shipping across the Aegean at which time he concluded that Titus would be coming by land.³ In Macedonia Paul is reunited with Titus who brings him good news of the Corinthian response to his “severe” letter (2 Cor. 7:5-7). In response he pens the letter that we possess as 2 Corinthians, expressing his joy over their positive, godly, response (2 Cor. 7:7-9), exhorting them regarding the relief collection (2 Cor. 8:10-11), and defending his apostolic authority as a safeguard against any further rebellion (2 Cor. 11–12).

Special Issues

The two letters theory. Various theories have been proposed with respect to the method of compilation for both First and Second Corinthians. The most notable hypothesis involves the identification of 2 Corinthians 10–13 as the “severe” letter (mentioned in 2 Cor. 2:3-4; 7:8; 12:18). Changes of tone and subject matter are pointed to as indicating a multiple letter scenario. However, these variations may well be accounted for by the intense emotions Paul is experiencing in dealing with his “problem child.” It has also been thought that perhaps the letter was written over a period of time before finally being sent. Regardless of how the letter may have actually been composed, it certainly bears in its entirety the personality of Paul in an intensely pastoral role.⁴

Message

The message and method of apostolic ministry is divinely informed and

² Ibid., 49.

³ Ibid., 50.

⁴ For a full discussion of the theories of compilation see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* 4th edition revised (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 453-57.

empowered for bringing the believer to maturity in Christ.

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Argument

As the second extant letter of Paul to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians represents the culmination of an extensive and difficult ministry to this problematic assembly of believers. It reveals Paul at both his most gentle and his most severe. He wields his authority as an apostle for the sake of the truth, but also exercises the tender care of a father with his wayward child (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14-15). The flow of the book, therefore, is controlled by the goal and method of pastoral ministry rather than by the logical development of doctrine (as in Romans).

I. Introduction: Paul sets the context for his ministry to the Corinthian church (1:1-11).

As God’s special instrument of testimony to the Gentiles, Paul addresses the Corinthian church as representative of all Achaia, thanking God for the comfort that he supplies (1:3-7) and for how the church had aided Paul and his associates through prayer (1:8-11). Paul is anticipating the church’s need for comfort, perhaps in respect to some of the things that he will need to say to them.

II. Paul describes the essence of his ministry (1:12–6:10).

Because of Paul’s past experience with the church, much of it negative, and because his behavior has been criticized within the assembly, Paul feels it necessary to defend his ministry to them. As inspired Scripture, this section serves not only to correct a

wrong view of the apostle's actions, it also sets forth the essence of all acceptable ministry, regardless of context or object.

A. Summary Statement: Paul affirms the propriety of his conduct (1:12-14).

Paul affirms that he has treated the Corinthians consistently with the way in which he had conducted himself in all other churches and that it was just as God had directed him. Paul's goal in writing is that this church would come into a complete understanding of the appropriateness of his ministry to them so that at the judgment seat of Christ they and he would have the same delight. The rest of the book works toward this end.

B. Paul defends the specific discharge of his ministry to the church (1:15–2:13).

Before describing the general pattern of his ministry, Paul thinks it necessary to address some specific events in their past relationship. First, Paul explains that the change in his plans to visit them has not been due to capriciousness or insincerity but to his desire not to visit them again for the purpose of rebuke as he had before (1:15–2:2).⁵ Instead, Paul had written a letter designed to bring about repentance on their part which would also result in an altered view of him and his ministry to them (2:3-11). Apparently the contention also involves some matter of church discipline (2:6-9).⁶ Paul's concern over the church's condition is so deep that it prevents him from taking advantage of opportunity for evangelism (2:12-13).

C. Paul details the general character of his ministry in all churches (2:14–6:10).

Having moved to defuse the existing tension, Paul now gives a description of the general character of his ministry. What should have been obvious to them about his motives and methods has been obscured by their negative frame of reference. Paul hopes to renew their confidence and secure their obedience to the truth.

1. Summary Statement: God always leads in triumph in Christ (2:14-17). The imagery of triumph, based on the victory procession of Roman generals, undoubtedly springs from Paul's recollection of the news that Titus has brought concerning the Corinthian response to his "severe" letter. It also serves as an introduction to the following ministry section which develops the causes and effects of the ministry of the servant of God.

⁵ The issues of the various visits and letters of Paul to the Corinthians comes into play here. See above under "Occasion."

⁶ It is debated whether this refers to the situation mentioned in 1 Cor. 5 or a later matter that would have taken place during the "sorrowful visit" and "severe letter." Cf. Guthrie, *Introduction*, 452.

2. Paul's is a ministry of the Spirit written on the heart (3:1-11). Paul does not need letters of commendation in order to validate his ministry at Corinth. He has a far greater commendation, namely, the work that the Holy Spirit has performed in the hearts of the Corinthian believers themselves. However, despite its abiding glory, Paul will not take credit for that work since it is, in reality, the Lord's doing.

3. Paul's is a ministry of transformation by the light of the Lord (3:12-4:6). The Corinthian church has had the veil of unbelief removed and has experienced the liberating work of the Spirit. However, the intended ongoing transformation of their lives has been, at least momentarily, interrupted. For that work to progress, the Corinthian believers need to continually behold "the glory of the Lord" (3:18) rather than the abilities and accomplishments of man. Paul's detractors have been focusing on the human instrument, whereas Paul has been proclaiming Jesus Christ as the key to spiritual transformation (4:5-6).

4. Paul's is a ministry of God's power at work in the body (4:7-5:10). In contrast to those who have been boasting in their own abilities (cf. 10:12-13) Paul recognizes that God's servants are but earthen vessels, and therefore vulnerable in the life of this mortal body (4:7-12). As a result, any spiritual work that is accomplished will be seen to have been done by the power of God (4:7). This is why affliction and physical deterioration do not concern Paul (4:16-18). The true goal for the Christian in life is not man's approval, but pleasing God, a pleasure that will be expressed finally and fully at the judgment seat of Christ (5:1-10).

5. Paul's is a ministry of the constraint of God's love (5:11-6:2). Paul is so vitally aware of the goal and outcome of the Christian life that he is compelled to a ministry of persuasion to the end that Christians would live for Christ and not themselves (5:11-6:16). This is what newness in Christ is all about (5:17). Paul had originally come to Corinth as an ambassador of reconciliation, not a self-promoting philosopher (5:18-21). This perspective explains why the Corinthians ought to be more serious about living unto the full potential of the grace of God (6:1-2).

6. Paul's is a ministry commended by his works (6:3-10). Paul's motives are so faithfully matched by his activities that he can honestly claim blamelessness with respect to any responsibility for the Corinthians' failures.

III. Paul discusses his expectations for a response to his ministry (6:11-9:15).

Now that Paul has explained himself with regard to his actions toward the church

(1:15–2:13) and set forth the character of his ministry (2:14–6:10), he is ready to discuss some of the things upon which the church should act. His “O Corinthians!” marks this turn in the letter and is followed by a series of pastoral directives.

A. Paul appeals for a positive response on the part of the Corinthians (6:11-13).

If the church responds to what he has just written, they will cease to be closed toward him and will open themselves up to his advice and admonition.

B. Paul desires that the Corinthians be in fellowship with God (6:11–7:1).

Characteristically, Paul directs them to the chief matter of importance, their fellowship with God. He sees two main threats to that fellowship: (1) unequal partnership with unbelievers, such as would occur in trade guilds and other formalized relationships and (2) personal defilement, such as sexual immorality, which was so prominent in Corinthian culture.

C. Paul desires that the Corinthians be in fellowship with him (7:2-16).

In 6:13 Paul encourages the church to “be open,” an exhortation that introduces his appeal for separation unto the Lord. In 7:2 he says “open *your hearts* to us.” Though fellowship with God is of utmost importance, this is not to say that fellowship between him and the church is of no consequence. If the Corinthian believers are to progress in the faith, they once again need to become responsive to Paul’s spiritual input and direction. The fact that they have responded to Titus’s visit (with Paul’s letter) in genuine repentance, means that they are on the road to a more harmonious relationship. Paul’s work of making them properly “sorrowful” has achieved its intended effect, with the result that both they and he have been comforted. It is on this basis that Paul can now speak with them at length about the ministry of giving.

D. Paul details the Corinthians’ duty in the collection for Judea (8:1–9:15).

The Corinthians had promised to participate in a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1). The intervening problems seem to have sidetracked completion of that gift. Now that Paul has effected a positive response on their part, he is able to instruct and exhort them in the matter of giving. Though the Macedonian church is held up as a positive example of grace giving, it is the gracious gift of Christ himself that serves as their real motivation (8:9; 9:15). Once again we see Paul drawing the focus away from human achievement and back to the Lord himself. This has been a constant problem for the Corinthian church. In addition, the principles and procedures for collecting and administering

the gift were consistent with Paul's pattern of upright and god honoring service, a pattern that has already been clearly displayed.

IV. Paul defends the exercise of his apostolic authority (10:1–13:10).

At this point the mood of the letter seems to change, leading some to hypothesize that chapters 10-13 were originally a separate letter, perhaps even the “severe” letter (mentioned in 2:3-4; 7:8-12). Textual evidence does not support the two letter theory.⁷ A better explanation is that, while the first part of the letter (chs. 1-9) reveals a positive attitude with respect to Titus's news of the church's response to Paul, there are still many indications that all is not as it should be. It is clear in the earlier chapters that Paul still has his detractors in Corinth and that he is going to have to deal with that situation (cf. 1:15–2:2; 2:9;3:1). Basically, Paul finds it necessary to defend his apostolic authority as it had been exercised in his past dealings with the Corinthian church since it is on that basis that he will address them in the future.

A. The Challenge: The pattern of Paul's ministry has resulted in the charge of fleshly dissimulation (10:1-2).

In Paul's visits to the church he has demonstrated the meekness and gentleness of Christ. However, in his letters he has given stern rebuke. This had led to a charge of dissimulation, whereas in reality it had simply been Paul's method of giving time for repentance and growth. This has been judged by some to be cowardly and inconsistent, being used as a reason to question his right to direct them in the faith. The ways of Christ are always misunderstood when evaluated according to the ways of the world.

B. The Case: Paul defends the expression of his authority (10:3–12:13).

Paul defends his actions from a number of perspectives. First, he notes that his first procedure in dealing with error is to wield the weapon of truth with a view to effecting obedience. The time for punishment will come soon enough (10:3-6). Secondly, Paul simply avows that he is fully capable of exercising power when present, not just in letters, though his main concern is edification rather than destruction (10:7-11).

Next, Paul says that God has set the limits of his boasting, which thereby prevents him from the self-exaltation that results from fleshly comparison. Paul is allowed to boast only in what the Lord has been able to accomplish in the lives of the Corinthian believers

⁷ See Guthrie, *Introduction*, 443-53 for a discussion of the “sorrowful letter.”

through his efforts (10:12-18). Since the objective of Paul's ministry is to present the Corinthian church to Christ as a chaste virgin (11:2) it would be improper for him to boast in efforts that might yet turn out to be inadequate (11:3). What he will boast in is the self-sacrificing efforts made on behalf of the gospel ministry in Corinth to the degree that his example serves to expose false apostles as what they really are, ministers of Satan (11:5-15).

If Paul must be forced to boast it will not be in the things that are impressive from a human standpoint. Rather, he will boast in those things that put him in such a vulnerable situation that he has to depend utterly upon God, such as the time he had had to flee Damascus (11:16-33). Of his experience of being caught up into heaven to receive revelations he will boast since it was something that he had absolutely no control over (12:1-5a). However, as the man who willed and chose he will not boast. In fact, Paul's efforts and the abundance of revelations that he received had been so great that God had chosen to afflict him with some debilitating infirmity whereby he might be reminded continually of the power and presence of God's sustaining grace (12:7-10).

What should have been acknowledged from the very beginning is that Paul had powerfully manifested the signs of an apostle to the Corinthians; so much so, in fact, that they should have been boasting about him all along (12:11-13).

C. The Conclusion: Paul will exercise his authority when needed, as appropriate (12:14–13:10).

Having sufficiently established his apostolic authority, Paul avows that it will in no way change his basic orientation to them as one who is willing to expend himself totally for their spiritual edification (12:14-19). However, he is not completely confident that there will be no need for admonition and discipline (12:20-21). Since this will be the third time he comes to them, he will exercise his god-given authority in discipline and purification (13:1-6), and, if need be, his presence will be manifested in the sharpness required for their edification (13:7-10). Thus, Paul sets forth the full range of his apostolic mandate for the Corinthian church's establishment and growth in the faith.

V. Conclusion: Paul blesses the Corinthian church (13:11-14).

Paul's characteristic conclusion betrays none of the negatives of the body of the letter. It reveals his heart-felt concern and his positive desires for them and their faith and recognizes their solidarity with the rest of the body of Christ.

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