

The Corinthian Letters

The second letter of Paul to the Corinthians is a very personal letter, and though the letters to Timothy and Titus are classed as pastoral letters, 2 Corinthians is a pastoral letter *par excellence*. In this letter, we come to see much of the inner mind of Paul. He wrote from the heart as he did always, but much more here. It is also a profound autobiography and some of the passages deal with very sensitive matters. He wrote as:

1. A spiritual shepherd, tender and sensitive to the needs of his flock (1:24; 2:6,7; 6:1; 10:2; 13:5,10).
2. A spiritual father, pleading for his children's purity and unity (6:11-13; 11:2-3; 12:14).

Some of the discussion in theology includes:

1. The theology of Christian suffering (1:3-11; 4:7-18; 6:3-10; 12:1-10).
2. The role of the minister of the new covenant (2:14-17; 4:1-5; 5:16-21; 11:28-29; 12:14-15).
3. The relation between the old and new covenants (3:7-18).
4. The theology of death and resurrection (4:7- 5:10).
5. The principles and practice of Christian stewardship (8-9).

I. Paul's Relations with the Corinthian Church and the Corinthian Letters

Before we begin, we need to look at the Corinthian church and Paul's relationship with the church there. Corinth was a prosperous sea port in New Testament times. From the writings of the New Testament, the Corinthian church came into being as a result of Paul's ministry during his second missionary journey. We have evidence of four letters, but two may be completely lost. The following facts are gathered from the narrative in Acts and from the information in the Corinthian epistles.

1. Paul arrived at Corinth from Athens on the second missionary journey (Acts 18:1ff), and lived with Aquila and Priscilla, refugees from Italy. Silas and Timothy joined him a little later (Acts 18:5). There was opposition to his ministry. He was there for one and a half years (Acts 18:11). He went to Ephesus after the riot (Acts 18:19), and later to Jerusalem (Acts 18:22). Apollos continued the work at Corinth (Acts 19:1). Read Acts 18:1-17, 19:1.
2. Later, on the third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus (Acts 19:1). He stayed for 3 months (Acts 19:8) plus two years (Acts 19:10), and Acts 20:31 gives a round number of 3 years. Meanwhile other teachers who were hostile to Paul had arrived at Corinth, and Apollos left Corinth. The Corinthian letters were written from Ephesus, AD 52-54.
3. Because of the disquieting news he received, Paul wrote warning the Corinthians against associating with immoral persons. This was the 'first' letter. Paul mentioned this in 1 Corinthians.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. (1 Cor. 5:9-11)

There was a letter of Paul before 1 Corinthians. He says, 'I wrote to you in my letter' (1 Cor. 5:9). This was probably in response to information he received from friends of the state of affairs at Corinth, which troubled him. Many think that 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 is a fragment from the letter referred to. He amended what he has written in 1 Cor. 5:10ff.

4. Before sending a reply, Paul instructed Timothy to go to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10), and to try

to remedy the scandals. Paul wrote a second letter (our 1 Corinthians) in reply to those practical and doctrinal questions and announced his own intention of going to Corinth (1 Cor. 16:5).

5. After Paul had written 1 Corinthians, Timothy returned from Corinth and announced that the situation was worse. Paul himself then hurried to Corinth (2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1). He says in 2 Cor. 12:14 and 13:1 that his intended visit is the 'third time' that he is coming to Corinth and he refers to his second visit as already past (2 Cor. 13:2); but in Acts only two visits in all are recorded. He also says that one of his visits was paid 'in sorrow' (2 Cor. 2:1). His visit was a failure (2 Cor. 10:10).

6. Back in Ephesus, Paul wrote another letter - 'a third letter' (2 Cor. 2:3ff) - between our 1 and 2 Corinthians, warning the Corinthians that he intended to come again and that this time he would not spare them.

³ And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴ For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you. (2 Cor. 2:3-4)

He says he wrote 'with many tears' and 'out of much distress and anguish of heart' (2 Cor. 2:4) and that his epistles made them 'sorry' (2 Cor. 7:8). These words do not apply to our 1 Corinthians. Some believed that this letter is contained in 2 Cor. 10-13. This was probably sent by Titus.

7. Paul, waiting for news, went on to Macedonia. There Titus met him, with news of the complete success of his letter.

8. Paul wrote a final (fourth) letter (our 2 Corinthians) and sent it by Titus.

II. The Unity of 2 Corinthians

It will be seen that two of Paul's letters have been lost - one written before 1 Cor. and the other between 1 and 2 Cor. It has been suggested that fragments of these are to be found in our 2 Corinthians, though this is by no means certain.

1. Many scholars think that 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 is a fragment from the very first (previous) letter. Two circumstances have led to this identification.

a. The passage begins sharply: 'Do not be mismatched with unbelievers' and Paul in stern words says that the Christians should dissociate themselves from 'darkness, wickedness, Beliar, heathen idols, the unclean, from all that defiles'. This is the subject of the 'previous letter' referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9: 'I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons'.

b. At 2 Cor. 6:14 the tone suddenly changes. 6:13 says, 'In return - ... - open wide your hearts also' and the same tone is resumed in 7:2, 'Make room in your hearts for us'. We will be looking at this in a later study.

There is no MS evidence for separating this section but it is possible a papyrus sheet of this length was inserted by mistake between two other sheets when an early codex was made.

2. Some have believed that the third letter is contained in 2 Cor. 10-13. It is full of passionate phrases in which Paul defends himself against his opponents. It suggests the offenders are still hard and unrepentant. This is quite different from the friendly tone of 1-9, where the crisis had evidently been resolved. He says he had written 'out of much distress and anguish of heart' (2:4), his letter 'made you sorry' (7:8). 2 Cor. 10-13 may be part of this 'severe letter'. He says there that he is about to visit Corinth 'a third time' (12:14) and will 'not be lenient' (13:2). If these words were written before the final letter (chapters 1-9), we can see from the reference in 1:23 that he did not pay this visit: 'it was to spare you that I did not come again to Corinth'.

3. The end of ch. 9 - 'Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift', seems to conclude the final letter to Corinth.
4. Thus 2 Corinthians may be made up of 3 letters,
 - a. the first (previous) letter (6:14-7:1);
 - b. the third (severe) letter (ch. 10-13);
 - c. the last letter (ch. 1-9, except for 6:14-7:1).

The above is speculative and does have some basis. However, others have argued for the unity of 2 Corinthians.

III. Paul's Opponents in 2 Corinthians

In 1 Cor. the trouble was local in origin due to their misunderstanding of the gospel and the nature of the church. In 2 Cor. the false teachers come from outside (11:4). They are probably Hellenistic wandering preachers. Most of our information about Paul's opponent in 2 Corinthians comes from the severe letter, ch. 10-13. There can be no doubt that their primary aim is to undermine and destroy Paul's apostolic authority. Should they succeed then they can establish themselves as the servants of Christ. Their claims are:

- a. Paul has no eloquence (10:1, 10),
- b. he has insufficient miraculous powers (12:12), or visionary experiences (12:1ff),
- c. they boast of their own Jewish background (11:22),
- d. they claim, falsely, to be apostles (11:5, 12f; 12:11),
- e. they came from outside (11:4).

There is no direct indication in 2 Cor. 10-13 of any doctrinal position that we can label. Various suggestions have been put forth as to the identity of Paul's opponents here.

- a. They may be Judaisers. However, there is no reference to the demand of circumcision as a prerequisite to salvation in the letter. There is reference to their Jewish background (11:22) and imposition of Jewish practices on the church.
- b. They may be gnostics, but there are insufficient indications. The letter is not so much concerned with wisdom and knowledge as in the first.
- c. They may be Hellenistic 'divine men', who display their divine nature by their spectacular gifts, ecstatic speech, miracles and visions (10:4).

Resume

For the apostle Paul, 'besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches' (11:28). There were problems of heresies and sectarian groups, as well as personal opponents. On many occasions, Paul had to balance between making the harsh judgment which was necessary, and showing the care and love for the churches as he approached these problems. These two aspects are often looked upon as separate entities but in reality, they are not. One is often fearful in making the hard decisions, but 'perfect love casts out fear' (1 John 4:18) when one has to confront these problems directly. In fact, this second letter to the Corinthians shows how the apostle Paul balanced these seemingly contradictory approaches in a masterly fashion.

The Mind of Paul

Having considered the Corinthian correspondence, it would seem appropriate to leap into the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians. However, the letter seems disjointed as Paul writes with various issues in his

mind. It would be more appropriate to reflect on what has shaped the mind of Paul before going into the text of the letter. This will be more helpful as we will need to go into these issues when we look at the text. I will make a brief summary here so that we can come back to this and point out what was in Paul's mind as he wrote.

As we know, Paul wrote the Corinthian correspondence during his third missionary journey while in Ephesus. He was addressing the problems in the city as reports of the issues came to him. 2 Corinthians is not a straight forward letter as Paul wrote from his heart with changing moods and feelings. It appears to be full of contradictions. Jewett commented on the letter this way.

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians is perhaps the most characteristic of the apostle's mind ... Glorifying and humiliation; life and death; a vision of angels strengthening him, the 'thorn in the flesh' rebuking him; the greatest tenderness, not without sternness; sorrow above measure, consolation above measure; are some of the contradictions which were reconciled in the same man.¹

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus', (Phil. 2:5), he was urging them to develop a certain framework of thinking. The theological mind is not developed in the armchair or the study room. Neither is it developed out of power or affluence. A Chinese evangelist once urged a group of young people to go into mission. He pointed out that at present the Asian church has the intellectual capacity and the financial means to bring the gospel to the world. His theology was developed out of the emerging economic powers of Asia, and not from the power of the gospel. The theological mindset comes out of lament and prayer. It comes out of a sense of inadequacy. It comes out of the engagement with the real world and real people. It comes from the struggles with those issues and Paul had all that.

G Bingham told us that it was during the internment as a POW in Changi that the truth of the gospel was formed in him. In the story of the three rice cakes, G. Bingham tells of his shock when he saw the extent of human depravity. He struggled with the dilemma of which rice cake to take - the largest for self-preservation or the smallest for fear of criticism. Ultimately, he cried out to God for help.

I said silently as I sat with others at that table, 'God, if You exist, then give me the moral power to take the smallest cake without seeking the men's praise, or fearing their dislike, or myself wanting to be someone. If You do not give that power now, then I will not believe You have created the law. I will not believe in You'.

I know that God gave me the power to gladly take the smallest one, and not to regret having to do it. I knew, then, that He does exist and that in a very ordinary way one can lay down one's life for one's friends. I have since come to believe that no one can be an atheist, and I have also realised in my most dreadful moments of that year's crisis of faith He must have been present. ²

In similar manner, Paul struggled with the care of the churches and the believers. He was attacked on three fronts – his person, his teaching and his character.³ These issues will be looked at as we come to those passages.

The Community of Love

The event on the Damascus Road was life changing for Paul. The new life in Christ must start with a real confrontation with the Lord and Saviour. This life changing encounter of Paul led him to take the gospel to the world as he knew it then. There the truth of giving and receiving came to him in a tangible way.

²⁹ The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; ³⁰ this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:29-30)

¹ B Jewett. Quoted in R V G Tasker, *2 Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1963), 5-6.

² G Bingham, *The Story of the Three Rice Cakes*, (Blackwood: NCPI, 2002), 20

³ R Martin, *2 Corinthians*, World Biblical Commentary, (Texas: Word Books Publisher, 1986), lxii.

¹⁶ For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸ I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. (Phil. 4:16-18)

The Council of Acts 15

During the engagement with the gentile world, Paul had to work out the place of the Jewish law and the reality and the power of the gospel that he was proclaiming. Romans and Galatians sum up his teaching on this – the law and the Spirit. He was way ahead of the other apostles in Jerusalem. The Council in Jerusalem (Acts 15) was the first of those recorded confrontations in the church.

The question of circumcision was raised. Tradition and ritual are always the back stop for those who do not know the reality of the Spirit. And Paul's answer is 'For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!' (Gal. 6:15). It is the reality of the work of God – the new creation – that counts.

Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians⁴

Paul's knowledge of the scriptures is evident in the letter. Paul saw that the Old Testament rituals have been fulfilled by Christ. He was able to hold on to the old and gave that a new spiritual interpretation, just in the same way Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal in the context of the new covenant. Below are some of the themes taken up by Paul.

- First exodus and its covenant (3:14)
- Prophetic promise of a 'second exodus' (2:14-15)
- Redemption and new covenant or new creation (5:17)
- Suffering of the righteous (1:3-8, 4:7-18)

The Theological Heart of 2 Corinthians

It has been recognised that 2:14-3:18 is the theological heart of the epistle.⁵ It provides the framework for understanding his discussion. We will deal with this in a later study.

A Theocentric Mind

When Paul urged the Philippians to have the mind of Christ, that theocentric or Christocentric mind has already been formed in him. The following examples from 1 Corinthians make it clear.

When dealing with divisions in the church, he asked, 'Has Christ been divided?' (1 Cor. 1:13).

In confronting the wisdom of the Greeks, Paul asserted that 'Christ (is) the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:24).

In proclamation, Paul 'decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2).

In ministry he is aware that 'no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ' (1 Cor. 3:11).

⁴ S Hafemann, 'Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians', *Interpretation*, Jul 1998; 52, 3, 246-257.

⁵ S Hafemann, 'Paul's Use of the OT', 246.

Even when he speaks to them as a father, he is aware that it is only 'in Christ Jesus (that) I became your father through the gospel' (1 Cor. 4:15).

In dealing with sexual immorality, he told them to 'Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed.' (1 Cor. 5:7). And further, 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?' (1 Cor. 6:15).

In their seeking compensation and justification, Paul urged that '... (they) were washed, ... were sanctified, ... were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God' (1 Cor. 6:11).

Concerning food offered to idols, Paul has this to say, 'yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8:6). The idols are no gods.

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (1 Cor. 10:31)

2 Corinthians - Resume

1. Ministry to a turbulent world.
2. The theological heart of ministry (2:14-3:18).
 - 2.1 'Who is sufficient for these things?' (2:16)
 - 2.2 '... written on the hearts by the Spirit of the living God ...' (3:2-3)
3. '... by the mercies of God ...' (4:1) – our encouragement.
4. 'For the love of Christ urges us on ...' (5:27).
5. A ministry of reconciliation (5:17-20) – the work of the Triune God.
6. '... room in the heart ...' (6:11-13).
7. The great Pauline paradox (12:10).
8. The 'you' of ministry (12:14)

Studies in 2 Corinthians:

1. The Corinthian letters and the mind of Paul
2. God of all comfort and forgiveness – 1:1-2:13
3. The theological heart of Paul (the new covenant) – 2:14-3:18
4. Ministry in weakness – 4:1-5:10
5. The ministry of reconciliation – 5:11-6:13
6. Holiness and repentance – 6:14-7:16
7. Generosity 8-9
8. The struggle in ministry 10:1-11:15
9. A minister of the cross 11:16-12:10
10. Concluding remarks 12:11-13:13