

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 Corinthians

Paul's conception of his own ministry

April 29, 2012

Leading Questions

- After the writing of 1 Corinthians, what dealings between Paul and the church in Corinth led to the writing of 2 Corinthians?
- What was the mood of the Corinthian church and that of Paul at the time he wrote 2 Corinthians?
- What was Paul's apostolic self-image, as shown by his defense in 2 Corinthians?

Theme

More than any other epistle of Paul, 2 Corinthians allows us a glimpse into his inner feelings about himself, his apostolic ministry, and his relation to the churches he had founded and nurtured. In some respects, then, this epistle is autobiographical in tone though not in frame work or total content.

The Painful Visit

After writing 1 Corinthians from Ephesus, Paul had found it necessary to make a "painful visit" to Corinth and back – painful because of the strained relation between Paul and the Corinthians at the time. Luke does not record this visit in Acts. It is to be inferred, however, from 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1, 2, where Paul refers to his coming visit as the "third." Without the inferred painful visit Paul had visited Corinth only once before. The statement in 2 Corinthians 2:1, "For I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit" implies a past painful visit which can hardly be identified with his first coming to give them the joyful tidings of salvation through Jesus Christ.

The Lost Sorrowful Letter

Whatever the reason for Paul's making the short, painful visit, he was unsuccessful in bringing the church into line. On returning to Ephesus, therefore, he wrote a now lost "sorrowful letter" to Corinth, which at first he regretted having sent (2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8 – despite frequent attempts at identification, the descriptions of the sorrowful letter do not fit 1 Corinthians very well). This is the second lost letter to Corinth. The sorrowful letter commanded church discipline against a rebellious individual who was leading the opposition against Paul in the Corinthians church (2 Corinthians 2:5-10). Titus carried the letter to Corinth. Meanwhile, knowing that Titus would return via

Macedonia and Troas and being anxious to hear from Titus the reaction of the Corinthians, Paul left Ephesus and waited in Troas. When Titus failed to arrive quickly, Paul went on to Macedonia, where Titus finally met him and reported the good news that most of the church had repented from their rebellion against Paul and had disciplined the leader of the opposition (2 Corinthians 2:12, 13; 7:4-16).

The Occasion for 2 Corinthians

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia on his third journey then, (1) to express relief and joy at the favorable response of the majority in the Corinthians church, and in so doing described his ministry in vividly personal terms (chs. 1-7); (2) to stress the collection he wanted to gather from them for the Christians in Jerusalem (chs. 8, 9); and (3) to defend his apostolic authority to the still recalcitrant minority (chs. 10-13).

A Summary of Paul's Relationships with the Corinthians Church

- Paul evangelized Corinth during his second journey.
- Paul wrote a lost letter to Corinth, in which he commanded dissociation from professing Christians who live immorally.
- Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from Ephesus during his third journey to deal with a variety of problems in the church (Lord's Supper, meat offered to idols; singleness).
- Paul made a quick, "painful" visit from Ephesus to Corinth and back to straighten out the problems at Corinth, but failed to accomplish his purpose.
- Paul sent another lost letter, called the "sorrowful letter," in which he commanded the Corinthians to discipline his leading opponent in the church.
- Paul left Ephesus and anxiously waited for Titus first at Troas and then in Macedonia.
- Titus finally arrived with the good news that the church had disciplined Paul's opponent and that most of the Corinthians had submitted to Paul's authority.
- Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia (still on the third journey) in response to Titus's favorable report.

A Review of Past and Present Relationships

The epistle opens with a greeting and thanksgiving for comfort from God in persecutions and hardships. Paul then begins to describe his ministry as sincere and holy. He defends himself against the charge of vacillation – failure to carry out a threatened further visit – by claiming that his words are just as affirmative as the promises of God in Christ and by explaining that he has delayed his visit to give the Corinthians time for repentance, so that he may arrive under happier circumstances than otherwise. Pleased that the Corinthians church has disciplined his leading

opponent, Paul advises restoration of the man into the fellowship of the church. This would be shown especially by allowing him to participate again in the Lord's Supper.

The Ministry of the Gospel

Paul describes the superiority of the gospel over the Mosaic law. The fading of God's glory from the face of Moses when he descended from Mount Sinai represents the temporariness of the Mosaic covenant. We are now free from the law and its condemnation. But just as Moses reflected the fading glory of the old covenant, we should reflect the permanent, greater, and increasing glory of the new covenant.

Separation

In the digression of 6:11-7:1, Paul portrays the life of separation from sin as an enlarging rather than confining experience.

The Offering

Pleading for a generous offering for the church in Jerusalem, Paul presents the liberality of the Macedonian Christians as worthy of imitation; and even more so is the self-sacrifice of Christ. Sometime you may need help, Paul argues. Furthermore, you eagerly seized on the idea of such an offering when I first mentioned it some time ago. Do not prove that my bragging to the Macedonians about your zeal was unfounded.

Defense

The opponents of Paul had accused him of boldness when absent, cowardice when present. He therefore reminds his readers that meekness is a virtue of Christ; but like Christ he can be bold in their presence if he wants, and will be if necessary, though in the Lord, not in himself. In these chapters Paul presents the credentials of his apostolic ministry: his sincerity as a preacher (he did not even accept wages from the Corinthians), his extensive sufferings, special revelations from God, and miracle-working powers. But Paul carefully guards against boastful pride by repeatedly insisting that his enemies are forcing him to write in this vein and also by mentioning his weakness, particularly his "thorn in the flesh" (12:7-10). Among the suggested identifications of Paul's thorn in the flesh are epilepsy, eye disease, malaria, leprosy, migraine headaches, depression, stammering, and false teachers. The epistle closes with an appeal that his next visit may not have to be an occasion for rebuking the Corinthians again.

CONTENTS OF 2 CORINTHIANS

I. Greeting and Thanksgiving (1:1-11)

After the usual greeting in which Timothy's name is linked with his own, Paul expresses his thankfulness for all the comfort he had received throughout his recent afflictions and the readers are urged to share in his ministry by their prayers.

II. The Apostle's Ministry (1:12-7:16)

a. His plans (1:12-2:17)

He seems to have been charged with fickleness on the grounds that he had changed his plans, but he defends himself by showing that the change was due to the Corinthians themselves (1:15-2:1). His relationship with them had been severely strained, but the delay in his coming had allowed time for the repentance of the man who had caused particular offence and who now needed sympathy, which the readers are urged to give (2:2-17).

b. The character of the ministry (3:1-7:16)

The apostle next dwells upon the credentials for preaching the gospel, having been prompted to do so because his own had been challenged.

(1) The ministry is in the service of a new covenant (ch. 3). This makes it superior to the old, and since the old was so glorious that Moses, its chief minister, had to veil his face, how much more glorious is the ministry of the new. This glory is, moreover, guaranteed by the lordship of the spirit.

(2) The ministry imposes tremendous responsibilities (4:1-15). Although it is of divine origin, its ministers are compared to earthen vessels. Yet the life of Jesus is manifested in these.

(3) The ministry must be carried out in the light of the judgment seat of Christ (4:16-6:2). It involves both hope, focusing on an eternal weight of glory, and fear, resulting in the persuasion of men. The minister of Christ is an ambassador of reconciliation between man and God.

(4) Paul's own ministry has involved much hardship and suffering (6:3-13). Yet his heart is enlarged towards them and he exhorts them to enlarge their hearts towards him.

(5) A digression occurs (6:14-7:1) in which the readers are urged to cleanse themselves from all uncleanness since righteousness and iniquity can have no fellowship together.

(6) An account then follows of Titus' meeting with Paul in Macedonia and the apostle expresses the peculiar joy with which the tidings brought by Titus were received (7:2-16). He is greatly comforted on hearing of their grief unto repentance.

III. The Collection Scheme (8:1-9:15)

The Corinthians had already shown themselves willing to share in the collection scheme for the poor at Jerusalem, but their resolve had apparently not been implemented and Paul explains what he expects of them. He uses the poverty of Christ and the extraordinary liberality of the Macedonians to spur them on to greater effort. The section closes with a homily on Christian giving.

IV. Paul's Vindication of His Apostleship (10:1-13:10)

(1) In the first part of this section, the apostle is concerned to defend himself against those who were questioning his credentials. He seems to be dealing mainly with personal enemies. They may disparage his appearance, but he tenaciously resists any attempt to detract from his authority. Being the first to preach the gospel to them, he claims the right to boast of his authority over them (ch. 10).

(2) He next denounces his opponents (super apostles, 11:5) and answers the misrepresentations they have brought against him. His apostleship is not in the least inferior, but on the contrary impressive, for he challenges anyone to produce a list of sufferings for Christ comparable with his own. Moreover, he can boast of having received some inexpressible revelations. These credentials are more than adequate to establish his authority (11:1-12:13).

(3) He proposes soon to visit Corinth, but he anticipates the visit with some misgivings, although he hopes he will not have to use severity against those who are still disputing his authority (12:14-13:10).

V. Conclusion (13:11-14)

These closing words are calmer, though even here Paul makes a parting appeal to them to mend their ways, but the final blessing is similar to those familiar from his other letters.

Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1981)

Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1990)