

Introduction to 2 Corinthians

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Introduction

Before beginning a serious study of any passage of Scripture, whether a verse, a chapter, or an entire book, it is extremely beneficial (and often essential) to know something of the context of that passage. As this study of Paul's second epistle to the Corinthian church is introduced, therefore, it is highly appropriate to notice several historical, social, and doctrinal factors which had a definite bearing on it.

The city of Corinth was undoubtedly influenced greatly by its strategic position in the ancient world. Located just south of the isthmus of Corinth, the city had a powerful influence over both land traffic (from Macedonia to Achaia) and sea traffic (from the Ionian Sea overland to the Aegean Sea) across the isthmus. After being destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C., Corinth was rebuilt as a Roman colony (by Julius Caesar) in about 46–44 B.C. In 27 B.C. it became the seat of Roman government in Achaia, and at the time of Paul's work there it became a senatorial province with a developing judicial system.¹

Corinth was a major center of banking, manufacturing, mining, and craftsmanship. It was famous for such things as its wealth and its architecture, but it was infamous for its flagrant immorality. For example, in ancient Greek drama a "Corinthian" was typically portrayed as a drunkard or a prostitute.² Furthermore, prostitution in the city in Paul's day was not only tolerated, but was viewed as a great benefit to the economy.³ This pagan atmosphere must have had a profound effect on the new converts at Corinth, as evidenced by some of the problems which Paul addressed in the letter known as 1 Corinthians (e.g., incest among Christians, false doctrines relating to marriage and divorce, and questions concerning meats offered to idols). For a more detailed discussion of the city of Corinth the reader is referred to *Studies in 1 Corinthians*.⁴

Authorship and Historical Background

The authorship of the second letter to the Corinthians is perhaps one of the most reliable pieces of information which may be ascertained about any New Testament book. There is widespread agreement among reputable scholars that the apostle Paul, in fact, was the author. Unlike that of some of Paul's other letters, the authenticity of 2 Corinthians has rarely been questioned, even by extreme skeptics.⁵ As Philip E. Hughes has noted:

The evidence, both external and internal, for the Pauline authorship of this letter is so strong as to be irrefragable. Indeed, of all the epistles in the New Testament none is, in style and temperament, more characteristic of the great Apostle. In no other letter do we find so much autobiographical information, and none is more tantalizing by reason of unexplained references to persons, situations, and events with which the writer and his readers were obviously so familiar that precise definition ... was unnecessary.⁶

Second Corinthians has been recognized as a genuine epistle of Paul by numerous uninspired (yet reliable) writers dating back as far as the beginning of the second century. It is even quoted by such men as Polycarp (circa A.D. 105), Irenaeus (circa A.D. 185), and Clement of Alexandria (circa A.D. 210). Within the letter itself, Paul identified himself twice as the author (2 Cor. 1:1; 10:1). Furthermore, many commentators have correctly observed that it is highly improbable that an impostor would portray Paul as an apostle whose authority was under fire at Corinth or an apostle fighting to keep the Corinthian church from apostatizing.⁷ From Acts 18 we learn that Paul spent approximately 18 months in Corinth during his second missionary journey. It was during this time (A.D. 50–52) that he established the church there. After leaving Corinth, Paul centered his activity around Ephesus for about the next three years (cf. Acts 20:31, circa A.D. 52–55). Sometime during this period Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning fornicators in the church (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9). This “former” letter (so-called because it precedes our 1 Corinthians) has apparently not survived. The writing of 1 Corinthians would also have to be placed in this time period. In approximately A.D. 55 Paul received word (from the household of Chloe, 1 Cor. 1:11) of several serious problems in the Corinthian church. At about the same time he also received a letter from the brethren in Corinth, which contained several questions. The letter we know as 1 Corinthians was written both to correct these problems and to answer these questions. It was evidently sent to Corinth by the same messengers who brought the questions to Paul (i.e., Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, cf. 16:15–18), but Titus also accompanied the group as Paul’s messenger (cf. 1 Cor. 16:1–2; 2 Cor. 8:6).

Because of the seriousness of the problems and the sternness with which he had had to write, Paul was understandably anxious about the way in which this letter would be received by those whom he considered his “children” (cf. 1 Cor. 4:14) at Corinth. For this reason, Paul had arranged for Titus to meet him in Troas with a report on the Corinthian church. In Acts 19 we read of the riot in Ephesus which caused Paul to depart for Macedonia (Acts 20:1). He came first to Troas, hoping to find Titus there. For some reason, however, Titus did not arrive when Paul was expecting him. So eager was Paul to learn of the current situation in Corinth that he could not wait for Titus to arrive, even though there was an “open door” for evangelism in

Troas (2 Cor. 2:12–13). Leaving Troas, Paul traveled on into Macedonia where, still very anxious in spirit, he met Titus and received the news from Corinth (7:67).

Date and Place

The time of the beginning of the Corinthian church is generally regarded as among the “best attested chronological data in the history of early Christianity.”⁸ In Acts 18, Paul’s evangelistic efforts in that city (from which the church sprang) are clearly connected with the proconsulship of a man named Gallio. An inscription which has been discovered at Delphi (dated early A.D. 52) mentions Gallio as the proconsul of Achaia. Since the account in Acts suggests that the church was established before Gallio took office (cf. Acts 18:8–12), its inception may be confidently dated in A.D. 50–51.

It is more difficult, however, to determine with certainty how much time elapsed between the beginning of the Corinthian church and the writing of the two extant epistles to that church. Most reputable commentators date the writing of 1 Corinthians in the period from A.D. 54 to 57,⁹ based on the assumption that Paul left Corinth (after founding the church there) in A.D. 52 or 53 (cf. Acts 18:11) and the fact that he next spent from 2 to 3 years working in Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10; 20:31). Allowing time for certain necessary events between the two epistles,¹⁰ 2 Corinthians would be dated somewhere in the period from A.D. 55 to 57. It should be remembered, though, that a definite conclusion about this matter is improbable at best.

As to where Paul was when he wrote 2 Corinthians, a number of references within the epistle itself suggest Macedonia (cf. 2 Cor. 7:5; 8:1; 9:2–4). This location seems reasonable, since it was here that Paul found Titus and received the report on the present condition of the church in Corinth. Furthermore, Paul’s use of the present tense in 2 Cor. 9:2 (“I am glorying on your behalf to them of Macedonia”), indicates that he was in Macedonia as he wrote.¹¹ Due to the lack of available evidence, however, a more specific location cannot be determined with any degree of certainty.

Occasion and Purpose

The report which Titus brought from Corinth (regarding the reception of the first epistle) was, in general, a favorable one which brought Paul much comfort. The majority of the brethren there had responded to his letter with “godly sorrow” leading to repentance (2 Cor. 7:8–10). They had made a sincere effort to obey Paul’s instructions and to set everything in order, particularly regarding the discipline of the incestuous brother (cf. 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 2:59). There was, however, still a defiant and impenitent minority in the church at Corinth. This

minority was apparently incited by some Judaizing teachers (“false apostles,” 2 Cor. 11:13) who had recently arrived from Jerusalem, complete with letters of commendation (3:1).

This group maligned Paul and sought to undermine his influence in almost every conceivable way. They doubted his credibility to begin with because he had no letters of commendation. They said that Paul was fickle and undependable (1:12–18), that his presence was weak (10:1, 10), and that he lacked love and, perhaps, confidence in his own work because he refused financial support (11:7ff.). In addition, they implied that he was dishonest, particularly regarding the collection for the poor saints in Judea (2 Cor. 8:20–21), and they attacked his apostleship (12:12). From 2 Cor. 11:22 we learn that these false apostles were Jews, and that they took great pride in being Hebrews of the seed of Abraham.

Upon examining the contents of 2 Corinthians, it seems apparent that Paul’s purpose in writing it was threefold. To begin with, most of the brethren at Corinth needed to be commended and encouraged for their willing obedience to Paul’s instructions. Hence, in the first seven chapters of the letter Paul recounted his experiences relative to the Corinthians and expressed his gratitude for the faithful majority and his (and Titus’) renewed confidence in them. Paul’s glorying on their behalf was great, and he was now “filled with comfort” concerning them (7:4–7).

All the Corinthian Christians needed to be reminded of their pledge to contribute to the collection for the poor saints in Judea. Paul had been organizing this collection for some time now, and mention was made of it in 1 Corinthians 16. Apparently, the church at Corinth had still not fulfilled its commitment in this matter. Therefore, in 2 Cor. 8 and 9, Paul told how he had now begun this collection and of the great generosity of the Macedonian brethren (8:1–5). He also urged the Corinthians not to delay any longer in doing their part (since he had already been boasting of them to the Macedonian brethren) and promised to send Titus to them again to ensure that the collection was completed on time.

As noted earlier, the news which Paul received from Titus concerning the reception of the first epistle was not entirely good. There was still a rebellious and dangerous faction within the church at Corinth. In the closing portion of 2 Corinthians, Paul addressed this problem.¹² Chapters 10–13 contain his answer to the attacks (noted earlier) that the minority group had made against him. The situation, in effect, required Paul to enumerate and discuss his apostolic credentials in detail. It seems evident, both from the content of this section and from the known

character of its author, that if given a choice, Paul would not have chosen to write in this way.

As Rex A. Turner has well noted:

The very thought of making a personal defense of himself was galling and out of character with (Paul's) sensitive nature and humility, but the opposition parties ... had laid numerous and damaging charges against his character... If he had failed to clear himself of the detestable innuendoes and flagrant charges, his influence and work for the cause of Christ would have been hampered.¹³

Unity and Integrity

It has long been recognized that this epistle contains a few transitions which may, on the surface, seem rather abrupt or even illogical. Because of this fact, some critics have been quick to conclude that 2 Corinthians is not a single epistle but is, rather, a patchwork of pieces of a number of Paul's epistles which, over a period of time, have been compiled and "pasted" together by some later, unknown editor. This type of theory, however, is by nature extremely suspect. To begin with, it necessitates the idea that, at a very early date, several of Paul's letters to the Corinthians had, through abuse and/or neglect, literally fallen to pieces ("though curiously enough rather neat and tidy [pieces]")¹⁴ and that some enterprising editor happened upon them and assembled the work we know as 2 Corinthians.

Given this scenario, it would be quite reasonable to expect at least some corroborative evidence among the earliest copies of Paul's epistles (2 Corinthians in particular). In other words, if 2 Corinthians is composed of parts of several longer letters, then there ought to be some copies of these longer letters somewhere or, perhaps, some incomplete copies of 2 Corinthians. This type of evidence, however, is simply nonexistent.

2 Corinthians has come down to us as a single Epistle. In no manuscript is there any trace of a division at any point in the letter, or any variation in the arrangement of the material; and in no early Christian writer is there any suggestion that the document is composed of parts of different letters, or that it was not all written at one time to meet one particular situation.¹⁵

To further demonstrate the doubtfulness of this hypothesis (if, indeed, it needs further demonstration), one needs merely to look carefully at the passages which are most often questioned. To begin with, it is argued that 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 must be viewed as an "extraneous insertion." Just before this section Paul had been making a very personal and intimate appeal to the Corinthians, entreating them to respond to him as he had to them (6:11-13). In 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1, however, Paul seems to have been admonishing them somewhat sternly regarding their relationship to unbelievers. Because these verses interrupt the thought of the context, and because they appear to be similar to the thrust of Paul's "former" letter to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor. 5:9), many have argued that this passage must be a part of that former

letter. It is also argued that if 2 Cor. 6:14–7:1 is omitted from the text, it still flows smoothly (cf. 6:13; 7:2).

There are other explanations for this phenomenon, though, which are just as plausible, if not more so. It should be noted, for example, that sudden digressions were not at all uncommon in the writings of Paul (occurring in many passages, the unity of which has never been in question).¹⁶ In addition, given Paul's familiarity with preaching and teaching among the heathen, it was not so unnatural for him to use similar language when addressing brethren,¹⁷ particularly if the "unbelievers" in question (6:14) refer to Paul's opponents at Corinth.¹⁸ Furthermore, the apparent connection between 2 Corinthians 6:13 and 7:2 may simply be an indication that Paul realized that he had digressed somewhat, and was now returning to his main theme again.

One of the most common theories concerning the unity of 2 Corinthians is that Chapters 10–13 are a part of another letter which is now lost. To many it simply does not seem possible that Paul could have written both the first nine chapters and the last four chapters of this epistle to the same group of people in the same setting. It is pointed out that in the first part of 2 Corinthians, Paul's words were very positive and encouraging, and that his tone was confident. In the last section of the book, however, there is a notable (and, some would argue, drastic) change in mood. Here it seems that Paul was preoccupied with his reputation among the Corinthian Christians, going to great lengths to defend himself and warning of the possible consequences of his next visit to Corinth (cf. 10:8; 12:21; 13:1–2). If the first nine chapters are characterized by joy, comfort, and relief, it is said, then the final four chapters are characterized by doubt, anxiety, and indignation.¹⁹

Because of this sudden shift, many contend that 2 Cor. 10–13 must be a part of a "painful" or "sorrowful" letter, a letter which Paul wrote "out of much affliction and anguish of heart" and "with many tears" (cf. 2:4–9). It has already been noted, however, that there is no evidence whatsoever that any such "painful" letter ever existed, much less that it has been affixed to the end of 2 Corinthians. Furthermore, it is not at all difficult (for this writer at any rate) to imagine that Paul was referring to 1 Corinthians as the letter which he wrote "out of much affliction and anguish of heart." Surely it must have cost Paul "many tears" to have to address the numerous and serious problems of which we read in that epistle.

While there is clearly a change in tone beginning with Chapter 10, this is hardly sufficient ground for concluding that the last 4 chapters are part of another book. As Farrar has noted,

This phenomenon of a tone suddenly changed is found in other writings both sacred and secular and may be accounted for by circumstances under which the apostle wrote.²⁰

A much more reasonable explanation (if not an obvious one, based on the overall context) is that in Chapters 1–9 of the book Paul was primarily addressing the faithful majority of the church (i.e., those who had responded properly to 1 Corinthians), while Chapters 10–13 were written for the benefit of the impenitent minority (i.e., those who were still working to undermine Paul’s influence and authority). Furthermore, it has been well noted that some time may have elapsed between the writing of the first nine and the last four chapters of 2 Corinthians; time enough, perhaps, for Paul to have received additional information which he felt needed to be addressed.²¹

Conclusion

It is no exaggeration to say that 2 Corinthians is at the same time one of the most unusual and most valuable books of the New Testament. It is unusual because it does not seem to follow any definite arrangement or plan (such as Paul’s epistle to the Romans or his first epistle to the Corinthians); rather, Paul seems to have addressed each subject as it occurred to him. It has been referred to as the least systematic, most personal, most emotional, most defensive, and most difficult to follow of all of Paul’s writings.²² The great value and importance of 2 Corinthians lie in the wealth of autobiographical information which it contains. So many interesting and, in a sense, inspiring details in the life of the apostle Paul (his travels, his sacrifices, his persecutions, and his personality) would be completely lost to history if they were not recorded in this epistle. Perhaps equally important is the insight which this book (along with 1 Corinthians) provides regarding the life of the first century church. A study of 2 Corinthians is, therefore, extremely profitable to individual Christians and to the church as a whole.

Endnotes

1. Carl Holladay, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* (Abilene, Texas: ACU Press, 1979), pp. 8-9.
2. R. G. V. Tasker, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), p. 15.
3. Rex A. Turner, “The Living Message of Second Corinthians,” in *The Living Messages of the Books of the New Testament*, editor; Garland Elkins and Thomas B. Warren (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press, 1976), p. 137.

4. Bert Thompson, "The First Corinthian Epistle -- An Introduction," in *Studies in 1 Corinthians*, edited by Dub McClish (Denton, Texas: Valid Pub., Inc.1982), pp. 15-22.
5. E.g., F. C. Baur (founder of the radically liberal "Tubingen school" of Germany) only acknowledged the Corinthian letters, Galatians, and Romans as being authentically Pauline.
6. Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), p. xv.
7. Frank E. Gaebelein, general editor, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), Vol. 10, 2 Corinthians, by Murry J. Harris, p. 306.
8. Holladay, p. 10.
9. E.g., Carl Holladay, *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*; Rex A. Turner, *Living Messages*, p. 139; Robert Frew, general editor, *Notes on the New Testament*, 14 volumes (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), vol. 11:1 *Corinthians to Galatians*, by Albert Barnes, p. vii; J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans* (Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 49; et al.
10. E.g., the possibility of another trip by Paul to Corinth (cf. 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1-2) and a trip by Paul to Troas and then into Macedonia in search of Titus (cf. 2 Cor. 2:12-14).
11. Gaebelein, p. 307.
12. James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Austin, Texas: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1977), p. 301.Í
13. Turner, p. 143.
14. Tasker, p. 26.
15. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
16. Everett Ferguson, general edition, *Living Word Commentary*, 19 volumes (Austin, Texas: R. B. Sweet Company, Inc., 1970), Vol. 9: *The Second Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*, by James Thompson, p. 14.
17. Tasker, p. 30.
18. Ferguson, p. 14.
19. Tasker, p. 31.
20. H. D. M. Spence, general editor, *The Pulpit Commentary*, 23 volumes. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), Vol. 19: *Corinthians*, by Farrar, p. iii.
21. Ferguson, p. 15.
22. Turner, pp. 143-144.

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