

2 Corinthians

Literary and Historical Issues

There is no doubt that 2 Corinthians provides the clearest and most profound expression of Paul's self-understanding as an apostle of God. And yet this letter, perhaps more so than any other written by Paul, presents the New Testament interpreter with a host of historical, literary and exegetical challenges. Victor Furnish opens his important commentary on 2 Corinthians with a rather cautionary and yet encouraging comment in this regard: 'No Pauline letter requires more of its readers or offers more of a reward to those who apply themselves carefully to its interpreters than 2 Corinthians' (p. 3).

One of the most widely discussed, and perhaps complex, questions arising from a critical study of 2 Corinthians relates to the literary integrity of the text. How many letters are contained within the book? It is clear that the exchange of letters between Paul and the Corinthians is larger than the two canonical letters. (We know that 1 Corinthians is not Paul's first letter to the congregation, since he refers in 1 Cor. 5:9 to an earlier letter that he wrote on ethical matters.) Critics, building on this principle, claim to have identified several epistolary fragments of letters sent from Paul to Corinth (2:14-7:4; or 6:14-7:1, chapters 8 and 9), but what is widely accepted is that chapters 1-9 and 10-13, due to a marked shift in tone and style, form distinct letters reflecting different situations in Paul's dealings with the Corinthians. In chapters 1-9 Paul writes of reconciliation and joy and expresses his confidence in the Corinthians' fidelity and in their eagerness to contribute to the collection for Jerusalem. However, in chapters 10-13 he turns to a series of rebukes and stern warnings, since he is clearly concerned about recent events in the congregation and, in particular, whether the Corinthians will reject the lure of false apostles. Additional evidence in support of the claim that 2 Corinthians consists of two originally separate letters is that Paul's name only appears in 1:1 and 10:1.

Debate continues as to whether chapters 10-13 should be identified with the so-called 'painful letter' or 'letter of tears' to which Paul alludes in 2 Corinthians 2:3-4 (cf. 7:8-12). This painful letter was written after 1 Corinthians, following a visit that involved an angry confrontation with some individual and led to Paul's withdrawal (2 Cor. 1:23-2:11; 7:12). If this letter, or the substance of it, is to be equated with chapters 10-13, it must have been composed at an earlier stage than chapters 1-9, a letter reflecting the reconciliation that seems to have been achieved after the

painful visit. This would explain why some passages in chapters 10-13 (10:6; 13:2, 10) appear to look forward to Paul's visit, whereas several passages in chapters 1-9 (1:23; 2:3) seem to look back on that visit.

The identification of chapters 10-13 with the painful letter does, nevertheless, leave several questions unanswered: would not 'letter of anger' be a more appropriate designation than 'letter of tears' if the letter in question is chapters 10-13? And from what Paul says about the content of the 'painful letter' in 2 Corinthians 2:3-11 (and 7:8-12), one of its main topics was the case of the brother who had wronged Paul. However, there is not a single allusion to this in chapters 10-13. And do not some passages in chapters 10-13 presuppose the content of chapters 1-9? In 12:18, in particular, Paul states that he had urged Titus to go to Corinth (as a past event), thus referring back to events in 8:6 and 8:16-19, where the planned visit of Titus with two brothers is promised. Whether chapters 10-13 represent the painful letter or not, it more plausibly belonged to a different letter from chapters 1-9 than to claim, in defence of the unity of 2 Corinthians, that the abrupt shift in tone is due to Paul himself taking over from his amanuensis in 10:1 or that he suffered from a 'sleepless night' before continuing to write chapters 10-13 (Lietzmann). To sum up: if 2 Corinthians 10-13 is to be identified as the painful letter, then it was written before 2 Corinthians 1-9; if not, as most scholars agree, it represents an even later letter than chapters 1-9, written in response to a new outbreak of trouble after the apparent reconciliation for which 2 Corinthians 1-7 gives thanks.

In order to understand how the letter came to be arranged in the way that it did (the addition of the shorter letter to the longer one), it must be borne in mind that there is an underlying thematic coherence in both parts on the fundamental theme of apostleship. Such coherence can in fact be expected, even in two different letters dispatched over a relatively brief of time, especially when they are addressed to the same congregation.

Another vexing issues in scholarship on 2 Corinthians is the identity of the rivals or opponents to whom Paul makes repeated reference in chapters 10-13 (10:11; 11:2-5, 6, 7-12, 13), but to whom he makes an initial reference in 2:17-3:1. This is an important issue, intertwined with nearly every topic addressed in the canonical letter. What I would like to emphasize is that one should avoid the temptation of drawing excessively on 1 Corinthians in an attempt to examine this particular question. There is nothing in 1 Corinthians to suggest that Paul's critics were

anything other than members of the Corinthian church, whereas it is clear that Paul's rivals in 2 Corinthians 10-13 have come from elsewhere (they are spoken of in the third person, while the church is addressed in the second person). In 10:12-18 he refers to certain people who are trespassing on his missionary territory, and the reference to 'the one who comes' in 11:4 points in the same direction. That they claim to be 'apostles' (11:13) also suggests that they have been sent to Corinth from elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that they should be termed Judaizing Christians, similar to the opponents in Galatia, since there is no reference in 2 Corinthians to the issue of circumcision and the word *nomos* (law) is completely absent from the letter. It is, however, likely that they were Jewish Christians (cf. 11:22: where they are designated as Hebrews, Israelites, and descendants of Abraham), possibly connected in some way to the Jerusalem authorities. They can, moreover, be termed pneumatic or spiritual enthusiasts in that they emphasized the importance of knowledge and wisdom, visions and revelations (12:1), and they impressed the Corinthians with their competence in Greek oratorical skills (11:6). They also preached 'another Jesus', probably a splendid figure of post-resurrection glory in contrast to Paul's preaching of the crucified Christ.

The attempts at historical reconstruction of the church at Corinth, including such issues as the opponents of Paul, may be complex and diverse, but they have been conducted primarily in order to illuminate the meaning of Paul's theological and pastoral discourse: the primary goal is to gain a clearer understanding of the text of 2 Corinthians.

The Issue of Paul's Apostleship

The main theme of the first letter (chapters 1-9), extending from 2:14 to 7:4, is a defence and explanation by Paul of his authority and service as an apostle. That this theme is central to an understanding of 2 Corinthians as a whole, in its canonical form, is demonstrated by the ways in which it reappears in chapters 10-13 in the form of Paul's most rigorous defence of his apostolic ministry, in response to rival claimants to apostolic authority and rejection of Paul's leadership and authority. The letter provides important clues as to how Paul's integrity was being called into question by the Corinthian congregation under the lure of the false apostles.

An accusation of contradiction and inconsistency brought against Paul is suggested by their complaint that he did not keep his word and visit Corinth as he

had promised (1 Cor. 16:5-6; cf. 2 Cor. 1:12-14, 18). There are also suggestions that they questioned his honesty, especially in relation to the collection of money for the Jerusalem church (11:8-9; 12:16), as well his seemingly contradictory attitudes towards financial support: why was he willing to accept support from the Macedonian churches, and yet stubbornly refuse assistance from the Corinthians (11:7-12; 12:13-16)? Would this, and his insistence on engaging in manual labour (cf. 1 Cor. 4:12), have been interpreted as a defiant act against the social conventions of patronage? The rejection of the support of relatively wealthy members of the congregation would have been tantamount to a rejection of their friendship. Paul's responses in the earlier parts of the letter also suggest that his weakness and sufferings were regarded as inconsistent with his apostolic claims (4:7-11), and, in comparison with the rival missionaries described in chapters 10-13, they were unimpressed by his rhetorical skills (11:5-6) and lack of charismatic signs (5:12-13). He, different from them, did not legitimate his authority with letters of commendation (3:1).

Paul's response to this is to offer as credible as possible defence for his God-given apostolic authority and for his consistent integrity in dealing with the Corinthians. His argument is no doubt motivated to a considerable degree by the misunderstanding of the Corinthians. However, on the basis of the many things that they share in common, he seeks to persuade them otherwise. As Frances Young and David Ford have aptly noted in their study of the letter, Paul is chiefly concerned in 2 Corinthians with two issues: the glory of God and his own reputation, and in particular the relationship between them (*Meaning and Truth*, 12). It is his reputation as an apostle of God that he seeks to highlight; he defends his ministry as one surpassing glory and as a manifestation of the purposes of God (3:4-4:11). My aim, next, is to examine how Paul develops a theological argument in defence of his apostolic ministry.

Paul's Understanding of his Apostolic Ministry

If Paul's physical weakness and personal demeanour were among the issues that led his critics to call his apostolic authority into question, he turns the tables on the Corinthians by stating that the criterion to which he appeals is not worldly wisdom but the wisdom of God (1:12; 2:17; 5:16; 10:5; cf. 1 Cor. 1:17-18). Paul, in this respect, is setting out one of the criteria by which his words and actions are to be judged; it is by means of these criteria alone that the gospel preached by him can be properly understood and his apostolic ministry legitimated. Throughout 2 Corinthians, Paul sets out a new evaluative framework, one that is

completely at variance with the understandings that conform to earthly standards. By stating that his gospel is a manifestation of the wisdom and grace of God, rather than of earthly values, Paul calls the reasoning of the world into question and challenges his readers to adopt what can only be described as a new understanding of reality. This involves an epistemological shift, one that challenges the Corinthians to distinguish between appearance and reality. It is, moreover, an evaluative framework that undergirds Paul's theological argument throughout the letter in its present form.

What accounts for this new existence that cannot be fitted into worldly perceptions of reality? For Paul the basis of this evaluative framework is what God has accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ; this is the paradigmatic demonstration of God's power and wisdom, which has turned the world upside down since it is paradoxically revealed in weakness not in strength (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5).

The death and resurrection of Christ, moreover, become the interpretative key to Paul's defence of his own life and apostolic ministry. His understanding of his own weakness, adversities and life of service are shaped by the paradigm of the Christ event and, as a result, they do not belong to earthly perceptions of power and value, success and prestige. In other words, the death of Jesus and its reconciling work are manifested, according to Paul, in his *own* ministry of weakness, a ministry that seeks to effect God's reconciliation with the world. Whereas Paul's critics belittle his physical appearance and doubt his oratorical skills (11:5-6), his apostleship, he claims, is based on the categories of a servant of God (cf. 4:5): what appears weak (10:10; cf. 5:21; 11:7) or fleeting (4:18) is not so in God's sight. And so when he is forced to prove his apostolic claim and authority, he goes out of his way to draw attention to that which has brought him into disrepute: his suffering and weakness. No less than four times he lists some of the hardships that he has endured as an apostle (4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-29; 12:10), and in 11:6 he acknowledges that he might be unskilled in speaking. He deliberately portrays himself as a socially disadvantaged person, an object of shame and ridicule (cf. 4:8-9; 6:4-10; 11:23-33), because the true nature of his apostleship is to be evaluated according to divine rather than human standards. He turns the tables on his opponents by 'boasting' of his human weakness and failure.

Already in 2 Corinthians 1:5 Paul speaks of his participation in the sufferings of Christ, but it receives most detailed treatment in 4:7-15 where he considers the

implications of the manifestation of the glory of the crucified Christ for his own apostolic role. He draws attention to the treasure of the gospel found in himself, a clay jar or earthen vessel (nothing in himself at all), before listing the afflictions that he has endured: 'we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed' (4:9; cf. 6:3-10). His suffering is not a mark of his own strength and endurance, but of the power of God (4:7) who does not abandon him. In the verses that follow, Paul uses the metaphors of life and death to delineate his own apostolic ministry. He interprets his own suffering as a 'death', and states that he is 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus' in order that, through his ministry, 'the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies' (4:10). Apostolic suffering and ministry thus present, for Paul, a visual image of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In other words, Paul is mapping the role of Christ as the bringer of life through death onto his own life and activity. It is through Paul's ministry, his daily dying, that God continues the message of the gospel in order to create new life: 'For while we live, we are always being given up in death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you' (4:11-12). As the one who is 'dying', Paul is the one in whom the power of God to produce life can be seen. While the crucified Christ was the demonstration of God's power, Paul now interprets his present state of affliction as a manifestation of that power. His life and ministry are consonant with the 'gospel'. In fact, they are a manifestation of that gospel. This is Paul's attempt to convince the Corinthians of the purpose of weakness and suffering in his life; his weakness is in fact proof of his authority (cf. 1:4-7; 6:1-10; 12:8-10) and shows forth his likeness to Christ (13:3-4). His apostolic authority thus derives from 'the Lord' (1:1; 10:7-8; 13:10), but to comprehend this it is necessary to gain a totally new understanding, through the gospel, of what it means to speak of life and death, glory and power.

The death and resurrection of Christ are, moreover, the lens through which Paul understands the life of the believer. 5:14-15 makes clear that, for Paul, the death of Jesus is connected with the death of all (5:14: 'we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died'). Christ's death means life for all, a life not for themselves but for the one 'who died and was raised for them' (5:15). It is a life of service, like Paul's life, which embodies the pattern of Christian living to which he calls the Corinthians. The implicit warning of his argument is this: if Christ is

represented in Paul's message and in his apostolic office, to reject Paul is to reject Christ and to reject their own identity as a community of faith.

The impact of the christological paradigm on the lives of believers is made explicit in chapters 8-9. In 2 Corinthians 8:1-2 Paul describes the participation of the Macedonians in the collection for the Jerusalem church and argues that a 'wealth of generosity' stems from their affliction and poverty (cf. 8:9: 'For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he becomes poor'). In 8:4 the act of giving by the Macedonians from their limited resources is described as a 'sharing in this ministry' (*koinōnia*), a term repeated with reference to the collection in chapter 9 (9:1, 12, 13). This is a test of their service, a way in which they can bring glory to God through a display of obedience that is patterned on the ministry of service manifested by Christ in his death and by Paul in his 'daily dying'. As a result he tells the Corinthians that their participation in the collection would be a demonstration of their commitment to the gospel.

Paul's message of a new reality, which stands at odds with human standards, accounts for what he has to say in the letter about self-commendation. He disputes that his letter is a form of self-commendation and affirms the need for spiritual discernment rather than earthly evidence (1:12: 'we have behaved in the world with godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God'). And yet he proceeds to offer a series of arguments, based on verifiable data, as support for his apostolic office (6:4-10, 11-12). He uses the verb 'to commend' with reference to himself on no less than five occasions (3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 12:11), urging the Corinthians to rely on him and to place their trust in him. Nevertheless, the interpretative key to understanding Paul's use of this vocabulary is found in 10:18, where it is made explicit that his criterion for commendation is not based on himself but comes from the Lord: 'For it is not those who commend themselves who are approved, but those whom the Lord commends'. This is what separates Paul from his rivals; they commend themselves on the basis of their own self-achievements (10:12: 'they measure themselves by one another') based on worldly standards, but Paul's criterion is his approval from God. The opponents impress the Corinthians with their letters of commendation (3:1), but Paul's response is to call on the Corinthians to judge according to the new reality that he preaches.

This finds expression in the exegetically complex statements in 3:1-3: 'Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we?' He then declares, 'You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts (following NRSV), rather than the textual variant 'your hearts', to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts'. Paul thus declares that, in contrast to the written letters brandished by his opponents, the Corinthian church is the letter written on his heart by Christ. The letter has its origin in Christ, but Paul is closely associated with it through its preparation, although the underlying Greek here could also be translated as 'supplied by us' or even 'cared for by us', to leave open the possibility that Paul views himself as the either the amanuensis or the courier of Christ's letter, that is the Corinthian church. It is not a private relationship confined to the apostle and his church; this is a letter 'to be known and read by all' in that the close relationship between Paul and Corinth is to be the object of public proclamation, a proclamation of the gospel. This forms an important aspect of Paul's understanding of his apostleship in relation to the church because he here links the legitimacy of his apostolic ministry to the legitimacy of the Corinthian church as a Christ-believing community. If they deny his apostleship, they cast doubt on their own existence as part of the body of Christ.

To claim that the Corinthians are themselves the letter of commendation for Paul highlights an important theme in 2 Corinthians, namely how Paul emphasizes the profound link and emotional tie between himself and the Corinthians, that is, between the apostle and the church. For Paul the ultimate expression of his apostolic ministry is the continuation and nurturing of this relationship between himself and the Corinthian church. The letter has been written precisely for the purpose of healing the rift between Paul and his congregation. To carry out an effective ministry of reconciliation he must restore a close relationship with them. One of the ways in which Paul seeks to bring this about is by appealing to the Corinthians through the use of parental language (cf. 10:14-15; 12:14). In 6:13, after reminding them that he has spoken to them with an open heart and unrestricted affection, he declares: 'In return – I speak as to children – open wide your hearts also'.

Furthermore, in the light of his vigorous defence of apostolic authority in chapters 10-13 (whose denial amounts to a rejection of Christ and of themselves as a

community), Paul turns to the Corinthians at the beginning of chapter 11 to express his concern about their beliefs. He addresses them by presenting himself in the role of protective father, not simply as an expression of affection but because of his sense of responsibility to God for the Corinthians as a community of faith. He is concerned that they are undermining the gospel message preached by Paul by being open to the 'other Jesus' and 'different gospel' proclaimed by his opponents (11:4). For this purpose he counters his opponents in 11:2-3 with the use of the marriage-betrothal metaphor, but he combines it with allusions from Genesis 3 to the seduction and corruption of Eve by the serpent in the garden. The Corinthians, he claims, are like a betrothed woman in danger of being wooed away from the eagerly awaited marriage to her husband. The image that he projects is that of spiritual adultery, one that destroys the purity and truth of marriage in Christ (consummated at the parousia?). Paul's relationship to the Corinthians is thus compared to that of a Jewish father who is responsible for safeguarding the purity of his daughter bride so that she might be acceptable to her husband: 'I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' (11:2).

In conclusion: while the image of the Corinthians as the letter of Christ inscribed on Paul's heart demonstrates that the apostle and church have received a divine calling, this calling is to be lived out in their relationship with one another. The image of Paul as their protective father in faith adds another dimension to that relationship, in that Paul, in the carrying out of his apostolic ministry, exercises authority and responsibility with respect to the Corinthians. This is because their relationship is a proclamation of the gospel itself - and the ultimate proof of Paul's apostleship.

Bibliography

Furnish, Victor P., *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (New York, 1984).

Hafemann, Scott J., *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990).

Murphy-O'Connor, Jerome *The Theology of the Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

Thrall, Margaret E., *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, ICC Commentary, 2 vols (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994, 2000).

Young, Frances & David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (London: SCM, 1987).