

# Second Corinthians

## "A Ministry of Reconciliation"

*Second Corinthians* reveals Paul's deep concern for a troubled Greek church. The Church at Corinth had great potential, but its history was marked by dissension, confusion in theology, distortions in worship, and apathy in moral concerns. Therefore, it is a letter of extreme relevance for churches in our day and age.

This is a unique letter with a writing style that is very personal, bold, at times sarcastic, and very defensive. It shares the concern, passion, intimate feelings and thoughts of an apostle who is defending his own apostleship and ministry in a church which he founded. The letter is the least systematic of the Apostle Paul's writings. Even a casual reading gives the impression of a man who is on his feet fighting a battle with his feelings and personal biases clearly involved. It reads almost like a man who expresses freely his feelings about himself and his ministry in a journal. Thus analysis of this letter is almost impossible. Try outlining it for yourself. Read with pencil in hand.

### THE CITY OF CORINTH

If it weren't for a tiny four mile strip of land the southern part of Greece would be an island. That little strip of land joins the two parts of Greece together. The city of Corinth stood on that narrow neck of land. All of the land traffic from Athens and northern Greece to Sparta had to be routed through Corinth. Also the east to west traffic of the Mediterranean passed across this strip of land. The extreme southern tip of Greece, the Malea, was the most dangerous cape in the Mediterranean for shipping lanes. The Greek mariners said, "Let him who sails round Malea forget his home." Another said, "Let him who sails round Malea first make his will."

If the ships were small enough they were dragged out of the water, set on rollers, and hauled across the isthmus, and re-launched on the other side. "The isthmus was actually called the *Diolkos*, the place of dragging across." If the ship was too large to be dragged across the isthmus, the cargo was unloaded and carried by porters to the other side and re-embarked on another ship at the opposite side.

Corinth was a rich, thriving, commercial, cosmopolitan city of almost 700,000 people. It was located on the Isthmus of Corinth connecting northern and southern Greece. The city was one of the greatest trading and commercial centers in the Roman Empire. Farrar wrote, "Objects of luxury soon found their way to the markets which were visited by every nation in the civilized world. . ." It was also the place where the Isthmian Games were held, which were second only to the Olympics.

But it also became a byword for its moral corruption. Corinth became synonymous with immorality. To live like a Corinthian meant to have extremely low moral standards and loose conduct. They used the word *korinthiazesthai* meant to live like a Corinthian, i.e., live a drunken, immoral, perverted life style.

If that life style wasn't bad enough above the city was a hill called Acropolis, and on it stood the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Perhaps it would be more accurately named the goddess of lust. A thousand

Aphrodite, the goddess of love. Perhaps it would be more accurately named the goddess of lust. A thousand priestesses, or sacred prostitutes were attached to this temple. At night they came down from their temple to ply their trade upon the streets of Corinth.

From 350-250 B.C. Corinth was the most prominent city in Greece. Disaster fell upon Corinth in 146 B.C., and the city was completely destroyed when the Romans conquered Greece. After a century of ruins, in 46 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt her, and she became a Roman colony, and capital city of the Roman province of Achaia from 27 B. C. The merchants came back and she regained her commercial supremacy under the Romans. A large colony of displaced Jews grew in the city. Trades people from all over the world came to Corinth. "Roman Corinth quickly regained the prosperity of its predecessor. . . With the old prosperity, the old reputation for sexual laxity returned."

As a Gospel witness it was both a strategic and difficult city. The citizens enjoyed a diverse life-style. Many races and cultures greatly influence the character of the city. Transients and tourists came to Corinth in search of pleasure, diversion, and commerce. It was a hotbed of crime and vice.

## **THE CHURCH AT CORINTH**

On his second missionary journey (c. A. D. 50), Paul established the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18). He came from Athens after an extremely difficult situation. One scholar suggests that Paul was in a dejected mood when he arrived.

He had been forced to flee from one Macedonian city after another leaving behind churches in Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea. He arrived in Corinth in a state of "weakness and in much fear and trembling" (I Cor. 2:3). According to Paul's example it was a long ministry, eighteen-months, second only to his stay at Ephesus. In Corinth he lived with Aquila and Priscilla, who until recently had resided in Rome, but were forced leave by Claudius' edict expelling Jewish colony from Rome. This rather well to do couple followed Paul's customary manner of tent-making and preaching in the synagogue. Timothy and Silas arrived from Macedonia to help. The term was characterized by continuing harassment by unbelieving Jews, and Paul was forced to leave the synagogue (Acts 18:6). Crispus was the ruler of the synagogue who became a believer. Titus Justus, a recent convert, opened his house for services and became the first meeting-place of the Corinthian church. The church grew rapidly and included both Jews and God fearing pagans. When Paul left the city for Syria (A. D. 52) "there was a large and vigorous, though volatile, church there."

However, the young believers later met pressures from troublemakers and divisive forces from within.

## **DATE, PLACE AND OCCASION**

Internal evidence suggests strongly that Paul wrote *2 Corinthians* on his third missionary journey. Various dates between 55 A. D and 57 A. D. have been proposed. And approximate date of 55 A. D. for *1 Corinthians* and 56-57 A. D. for *2 Corinthians* would be acceptable.

The occasion for *2 Corinthians* was the resurgence of hostility and antagonism toward Paul's apostolic authority. Various allegations against Paul are scattered throughout the letter (1:15ff; 3:1ff; 10:1ff, 13ff; 11:7ff; 12:12).

The place of writing is Macedonia, a year or more after *1 Corinthians* and before the writing of Romans (Acts 20:1-3; Rom. 16:1).

A chronology of the difficulty in determining these dates and occasion is given below.

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## GENUINENESS OF THE EPISTLE

Many scholars are of the same opinion as J. W. Shepard regarding the genuineness of *2 Corinthians*. He writes:

There is abundant proof of the circulation and genuineness of this epistle previous to 120 A. D. Polycarp and Irenaeus are among those who testify to this fact ;through citation and otherwise. The evidence is yet more copious for early circulation dating from 175 A. D.; the Muratorian Fragment, Marcions Canon, and the citations from Clement of Alexandria and others. . . The internal evidence of Pauline authorship is so clear in the matter of style, vocabulary, and character of its general teachings as to render its authenticity unmistakable. So strong is both the external and internal evidence that only a small group of eëcentric critics any longer call in question its genuineness.

## CHRONOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

1. Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and established a church there about A.D. 50 (Acts 18:1-17).
2. While in Ephesus (A.D. 55), Paul heard of moral problems within the Corinthian church from Chloe's people and wrote a letter of instruction to them. He referred to this "previous letter" in 1 Cor. 5:9. This letter no longer exists; it was lost without trace. We will call it Paul's "Corinthians A" letter after F. F. Bruce's designation.
3. Paul received a letter from some of the members in the church concerning serious problems within the fellowship (1 Cor. 7:1). They sought Paul's counsel in dealing with the issues. The family of Chloe came with news of the church (1 Cor. 1:11), and the visit of Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17). On the basis of the letter and other information that reached him in Ephesus about problems in the church, Paul wrote what is now called 1 Corinthians in about A.D. 55 and sent it to Corinth via Timothy (1 Cor. 4:17). We will call *1 Corinthians* letter "Corinthians B".
4. The pastoral letter, *1 Corinthians*, was not successful and the situation grows worse. In fact, it seems to have stimulated further rebellion against Paul's authority. In response Paul probably made a brief visit across the Aegean Sea to Corinth in a personal attempt to resolve the crisis (2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2). This is often referred to as the "painful visit" which breaks his heart. Paul was rebuffed by members of the church. The opposition comes to a head with one member in particular defying his authority. The leadership in the church took no effective action in Paul's defense. Paul, deeply humiliated, left Corinth.
5. The "painful visit" didn't accomplish its goal, therefore Paul returned to Ephesus and wrote a third letter to the Corinthians "out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears." It is referred to in *2 Corinthians* 2:3-4, 9, and 7:8, 12. This "exceedingly severe letter," delivered by Titus (2 Cor. 2:3f, 13; 7:13), is often called the stern or rebuking letter. This letter left Paul almost sorry that he had written it. We will call it letter "Corinthians C".
6. Titus visited Corinth with the "severe letter" in an attempt to reconcile the situation. Paul, in the mean time, was so anxious to hear from Titus that he left Ephesus traveling north to Troas seeking him (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:5, 13). Somewhere in Macedonia, probably Philippi, Paul received the good news from Titus of a change in attitude in the Corinthian church. The leader of rebellion had been rejected and disciplined. The church was once again open to Paul's counsel and desirous of his friendship.

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7. Paul responded by writing 2 Corinthians from Philippi around A.D. 56 or early A.D. 57. We will call this letter "Corinthians D."

8. Paul made a final visit to Corinth (Acts 20:1-3) during which he solidified his relationship with the church and received the mission offering for the Jerusalem church. On this stay in Corinth Paul probably wrote his letter to the Romans. He sends Titus back to them with two other friends.

F. F. Bruce is of the opinion that "this second visit of Titus to Corinth was not so happy as the former one. . . Paul was really putting them on the spot. . . . A new feeling of resentment showed itself among some members of the church, and it was fostered by certain visitors to Corinth who did their best to undermine Paul's prestige in his converts' eyes." He bases his theory on 2 Cor. 10-13.

## **PURPOSE OF SECOND CORINTHIANS**

False teachers who claimed to be apostles had infiltrated the Corinthian church with the goal of discrediting Paul's ministry and apostleship. This letter was written with the purpose of refuting these intruders. Paul is defending his integrity.

1. Paul wrote to prepare the Corinthians for his visit and insure the restored relationship with them (chapter 1-7).
2. He wrote to remind the church of their commitment to the offering for the poor saints at Jerusalem (chapters 8-9).
3. Paul defended his apostolic authority (chapters 10-13).
4. "He wrote to reprimand the obstinate remnants of the Cephas and Christ factions for their persistent opposition" (Shepard, p. 273).

## **THEME OF 2 CORINTHIANS**

The joys and sorrows in Paul's ministry at Corinth at a time when his authority is undermined and severely questioned.

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON PAUL**

*Second Corinthians* provides us with autobiographical material unique to Paul's personal life. We observe his reaction to criticism and conflict, pastoral concern for his churches, the heartbreaks and the joys of his ministry, the inner spiritual struggles are moving, his sense of mission, his genuine humility, and unconquerable hope in Christ.

## **FORM OF ANCIENT LETTERS**

*Second Corinthians* follows normal the form of ancient letter writing. Paul used the same literary pattern everyone else used in nearly every one of his letters.

### *I. Greetings (1:1)*

*II. The Prayer (1:2)*

*III. Thanksgiving (1:3)*

*IV. Main Body of the Letter*

*V. Salutations and Personal Greetings (13:13)*

## **Dictated Letters**

Paul did not sit down and write his letter to the church. He dictated them to a secretary and then wrote a personal note and his authenticating signature. At the end of *I Corinthians* he says: "This is my signature, my autograph, so that you can be sure this letter comes from me" (I Cor. 16:21; cf. Col. 4:18; II Thess. 3:17). In my mind's eye I see Paul walking back and forth in a little room, pouring forth his heart and soul, while a secretary raced to get all the words down. In Paul's mind was those whom he was addressing. In the letter to the Romans we know who the amanuensis was. His name was Tertius (Rom. 16:22).

## **Unity of the Letter**

R. V. G. Tasker concluded, "*2 Corinthians* has come down to us as a single Epistle. In no MS (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."

Moreover, Philip Hughes concludes: "Sufficient has been said, we trust, for the presentation of our case that *II Corinthians* as it has come down to us is indeed only one letter, diversified in its parts but none has less an integrated whole."

Many modern scholars, however, do conclude the letter is composed of at least two other letters or fragments of them. See William Barclay's commentary as an example.

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