

# 2 Corinthians - Introduction & Background

## Authorship

Internal evidence favors Pauline authorship. Paul claims to be the author (2 Cor 1:1; 10:1). The autobiographical information presented in the book harmonizes well with the information presented about Paul elsewhere. For example, Timothy, Silas, and Titus are mentioned at various places in the letter (1:1,19; 2:13; 7:6,13-14; 8:6) and these three figures are typically associated with Paul elsewhere in Scripture. Moreover, the geographical movements presented in the book (1:16; 2:12; 7:5) harmonize with Paul's geographical movements as portrayed elsewhere in Scripture. The style and vocabulary are Pauline. In addition, the literary style and form of argumentation are the same as what is found in 1 Corinthians. External evidence favors Pauline authorship as well. While it is true that Clement of Rome never quotes from 2 Corinthians, many other early fathers either quoted from it or alluded to it. Such early fathers include Polycarp, Diognetus, Athenagoras, Theophilus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus. Moreover, 2 Corinthians is also listed in the Muratorian Canon and in Marcion's Apostolicon.

## Unity

Many have speculated that 2 Cor 10–13 were not originally part of 2 Corinthians. The evidence for this view is supposedly seen in a change of tone in between chapters 1–9 and 10–13. According to this view, 10–13 represented the "severe letter" (2:4) that was later attached to 2 Corinthians. However, several reasons make this suggestion unlikely. First, 10–13 are not sorrowful. Second, 10–13 make no mention of the offender about whom the "severe letter" was written. Third, since the "severe letter" was written before 2 Corinthians, it probably would have been attached to the beginning of 2 Corinthians rather than at the end. Fourth, no external manuscripts challenge the unity of 2 Corinthians. Fifth, a change in tone between the sections would be appropriate given Paul's change of emphasis away from the repentant majority and to the rebellious minority within the church.

## Destination and Opponents

The recipients of the letter were the Corinthians (1:1). Thus, the letter's destination is Corinth. For a description of the city of Corinth, see the material given in my 1 Corinthians argument. Paul's opponents were Jews (11:22), claimed apostleship (11:5, 13), and preached a false gospel (11:4) that enslaved the church (3:17). These opponents were

Judaizers who taught sanctification through adherence to the Law of Moses. In all likelihood, Paul's opponents were believers.

### **Occasion for Writing, Place of Writing, Date**

After Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, he later returned to Corinth in what he called his "painful visit" (2:1; 12:14; 13:1-2). During this visit, Paul lost face and was insulted by the rebellious Corinthian assembly (2:5-8; 7:12). Upon returning to Ephesus, he penned what he called the "severe letter" (2:3-4; 7:8-12). He sent this letter via Titus and an unnamed brother (12:18). The letter was directed at those that opposed Paul in general and the leader of this opposition party in particular. Paul waited in Ephesus to receive word from Titus concerning the Corinthians' response to the "severe letter." However, persecution forced Paul to leave Ephesus (Acts 19; 20:1). He then journeyed to Troas where he intended to meet Titus, who was taking the land route back to Ephesus from Corinth. In Troas, Paul found an open door for ministry (2:12). Paul then moved to Macedonia (2:13). There he finally met Titus who gave Paul an encouraging report (7:6-16). To Paul's relief, most of the congregation had repented and had even disciplined its troublemakers (2:5-11).

However, a rebellious minority faction remained within Corinth that seemed to be headed up by a single individual. This minority attacked Paul's character and questioned his apostolic authority. Thus, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians in order to rejoice at the repentance of the majority, confront the minority, and defend his character and apostolic authority. Paul also wrote to clarify the nature of his ministry, to stimulate the Corinthians to continue the project that they had originally begun (1 Cor 16:1-4) regarding the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9), to expose the false teachers (11:13-15), and to prepare them for his third visit to them (12:15; 13:1-2, Acts 20:2-3). Paul dispatched the letter from Macedonia (2:12-13; 7:5-7; 8:1) via Titus and another brother (8:16-24) in 56 AD during his third missionary journey. Thus, 2 Corinthians was written probably within 6 months to a year after he penned 1 Corinthians.

### **Structure**

As hinted in the above discussion, there are essentially three sections in 2 Corinthians. In the first section, Paul explains his ministry (1-7). In the second section, Paul prompts the Corinthians to follow through with their plans to collect money for the poor saints in Jerusalem (8-9). In the third section, Paul vindicates his apostleship (10-13). These three sections can be remembered geographically. In the first section, Paul defends his change of itinerary and movement from Ephesus to Macedonia. In the second section, written from Macedonia, Paul urges the Corinthians to continue with the collection. In the third section, Paul writes from Macedonia about the imminence of his trip to Corinth.

### **Unique Characteristics**

2 Corinthians has numerous unique features. First, while the other letters that Paul wrote on his third missionary journey (1 Corinthians, Romans) are orderly and systematic, 2

Corinthians is uneven and digressive. It is marked by mixed metaphors, broken sentences, and shifts in feeling and tone. Second, 2 Corinthians is a personal letter divulging Paul's hardships, heart, character, priorities, emotions, and desires. Third, 2 Corinthians is extremely autobiographical. It may be the most autobiographical book next to Galatians in the entire Pauline corpus. Fourth, 2 Corinthians is dedicated to answering objections against Paul. In the letter, Paul answers numerous objections raised against his apostleship, character, and call.

Fifth, although 2 Corinthians is not known for its doctrinal content, it makes enormous doctrinal contributions. Such contributions can be seen in Paul's explanation of the Old versus the New Covenant (3), Christ's sufferings (4:8-18), future resurrection and judgment (5:1-13), reconciliation and imputation (5:14-21), separation (6:14—7:1), and giving (8-9). Sixth, 2 Corinthians gives great insight into the character and strategy of the "dark side," such as that of false teachers (3:1; 10:10; 11:5-6,7-12,22-23; 12:11-12) and Satan (2:10-11; 4:4; 11:3,14-15; 12:7-9). Seventh, 2 Corinthians focuses upon numerous paradoxes. For example, it explains how human weakness manifest God's power and glory. Eighth, the letter contrasts human boasting with boasting in God. While Paul's opponents boasted in themselves, Paul boasted in God. To this end, the word "boast" is used 29x in the letter. Ninth, the letter is filled with irony and sarcasm. Paul repeatedly uses this device to argue his case throughout the letter.

### **Message and Purpose**

While rejoicing over those who repented in Corinth, Paul wrote to express concern regarding the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem as well as defend his character and apostolic authority from the ongoing attacks of the Judaizers. As Paul answers his critics and affirms his apostleship, Paul contrasts the self-promotion of his opponents with his own self-effacement. Such self-effacement ultimately leads to God's glory.

### **Outline**

#### I. Paul's explanation of his ministry (2 Cor 1:1—7:16)

- (1) Introduction (1:1-11)
  - (A) Greeting (1:1-2)
  - (B) Thanksgiving (1:3-11)
    - (a) For comfort (1:3-7)
    - (b) For deliverance (1:8-11)
- (2) Change of plans defended (1:12—2:13)
  - (A) Sincerity of Paul's conduct (1:12-14)
  - (B) Consistency of Paul's conduct (1:15-22)
  - (C) Paul's loving motivation (1:23—2:4)
  - (D) Paul's forgiveness of the offender (2:5-11)
  - (E) Paul's journey from Ephesus to Troas to Macedonia (2:12-13)

(3) Paul's philosophy of ministry (2:14—6:10)

- (A) Christ leads us in triumph (2:14-17)
- (B) New Covenant is the basis of ministry (3:1—4:6)
  - (a) New Covenant changes lives (3:1-5)
  - (b) Old Covenant versus New Covenant (3:6-11)
  - (c) Exodus 34 versus New Covenant (3:12-18)
  - (d) New Covenant opens blind eyes (4:1-6)
- (C) Ministry imitates Christ's pattern of death and resurrection (4:7-15)
- (D) Ministry is to be performed with the right motivation (4:16—5:21)
  - (a) Eternal perspective (4:16-18)
    - (i) Outward deterioration versus inward renewal (4:16)
    - (ii) Light afflictions versus eternal glory (4:17)
    - (iii) Temporal physical versus eternal spiritual (4:18)
  - (b) Future with Christ (5:1-8)
  - (c) Future reward (5:9-10)
  - (d) Theocentric motivations (5:11-16)
    - (i) God's judgment (5:11-12)
    - (ii) God's glory and the Corinthians' welfare (5:13)
    - (iii) God's love (5:14a)
    - (iv) Christ's death (5:14b-16)
  - (e) Reconciliation (5:17-21)
- (E) Ministry without offense (6:1-10)
  - (a) Need for salvation (6:1-2)
  - (b) Need not to give offense (6:3)
  - (c) What Paul endured (6:4-5)
  - (d) Graces God produced in Paul as a result of these trials (6:6-7)
  - (e) God's opinion versus man's opinion (6:8-10)

(4) Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians to restore their confidence in him (6:11—7:16)

- (A) Appeal (6:11—7:4)
  - (a) Appeal stated (6:11-13)
  - (b) The admonition to separate from the Judaizers (6:14—7:1)
  - (c) Appeal restated (7:2-4)
- (B) Encouraging response from the Corinthians (7:5-16)
  - (a) Paul's encouragement (7:5-13a)
  - (b) Titus' encouragement (7:13b-16)

II. Paul's instructions concerning the collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1—9:15)

- (1) Example of the Macedonians (8:1-7)

- (2) Example of Christ (8:8-9)
- (3) Equality is the purpose in giving (8:10-15)
- (4) Delegates of the churches (8:16-24)
- (5) Paul's anticipated visit (9:1-5)
- (6) Benefits of generosity (9:6-15)

### III. Paul's vindication of his apostleship (2 Cor 10:1—13:14)

- (1) Paul answers false charges (10:1-18)
  - (A) Paul answers the charge of cowardice (10:1-6)
  - (B) Paul answers the charge of weakness (10:7-11)
  - (C) Paul answers the charge of intrusion (10:12-18)
- (2) Paul defends his apostleship (11:1—12:13)
  - (A) Paul's declaration evidences his apostleship (11:1-15)
    - (a) Paul's reason for making this claim (11:1-6)
      - (i) To present the Corinthians to Christ in purity (11:1-2)
      - (ii) To protect the Corinthians from falsehood (11:3-4)
      - (iii) To contend for his superiority over the "super apostles" (11:5)
      - (iv) To compensate for his inadequacy in speech (11:6)
    - (b) Paul's policy of ministering without charge does not detract from his apostolic claim (11:7-15)
      - (i) Paul did not want to be a burden (11:7-8)
      - (ii) The Macedonian gift sustained Paul (11:9)
      - (iii) Paul's motivation was love (11:10-11)
      - (iv) Paul did not want to be criticized for ministering for profit (11:12)
      - (v) Paul's opponents had no claim to apostleship (11:13-15)
    - (B) Paul's suffering evidences his apostleship (11:16-33)
    - (C) Paul's revelations evidence his apostleship (12:1-10)
      - (a) Paul's vision (12:1-6)
      - (b) Paul's thorn (12:7-10)
    - (D) Paul's signs evidence his apostleship (12:11-13)
  - (3) Paul announces his upcoming visit (12:14—13:10)
    - (A) Paul's concern not to be a financial burden (12:14-18)
    - (B) Paul's concern not to find them carnal (12:19-21)
    - (C) Paul warns them to examine themselves (13:1-10)
  - (4) Conclusion (13:11-14)
    - (A) Exhortations (13:11-12)
    - (B) Salutation (13:13)
    - (C) Benediction (13:14)