

## **SECOND CORINTHIANS**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **AUTHORSHIP**

Paul's authorship of 2 Corinthians has rarely been questioned. Even many of the critical scholars who question almost everything else acknowledge that it is Paul's. The author twice identifies himself as Paul (2 Cor. 1:1; 10:1). An imitator would be unlikely to portray Paul as an apostle in danger of losing his authority at Corinth or an apostle struggling to preserve the Corinthians from apostasy.

#### **PAUL'S EPHESIAN MINISTRY**

Paul's Ephesian ministry is one of the more difficult periods of his life to reconstruct. It lasted for 30 or so months from the fall of A.D. 53 to the spring of A.D. 56. It was stormy, particularly toward its close. There were plentiful opportunities to evangelize (Acts 19:8-10; 20:20, 21, 31; 1 Cor. 16:9), accompanied by many healings and conversions (Acts 19:11, 18-20). There was also widespread opposition and persecution as a result of his success (Acts 19:9, 13-16; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 15:30-32; 2 Cor. 4:8, 9; 6:4, 5, 8-10). Whether or not the Demetrius riot (Acts 19:23-41) actually precipitated his withdrawal from Ephesus, it must have climaxed the hostility directed against him by the devotees of Artemis, not to speak of the Jewish opposition he encountered in the city (Acts 20:19).

#### **EVENTS BETWEEN 1ST AND 2ND CORINTHIANS**

It will be helpful to understand the events that occurred between the two epistles. Some will be looked at more fully in the study.

1. After 1 Corinthians was received the church seemed to correct most of the abuses which he had addressed. For example, he says nothing in 2 Corinthians about the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34) or about litigation among Christians (1 Cor. 6:1-8).
2. In spite of this, because of the coming of false apostles who preached another Jesus and another gospel (2 Cor. 11:4), conditions in the

Corinthian church worsened, which led to Paul's painful visit (see 2 Cor. 2:1; 12:14, 21; 13:1, 2).

3. At some time after this visit, Paul (or his representative) was openly insulted at Corinth by a spokesman of the anti-Pauline clique (2 Cor. 2:5-8, 10; 7:12).
4. Titus was sent from Ephesus to Corinth with the "severe letter" in which Paul called for the punishment of the wrongdoer (2 Cor. 2:3, 4, 6, 9; 7:8, 12). In addition, Paul instructed Titus to organize the collection for the poor Jerusalem saints (2 Cor. 8:6a), which had gone by default since the false teachers had arrived and had begun to derive their support from the church (cf. 2 Cor. 11:7-12, 20; 12:14). Titus was to meet Paul in Troas, or, failing that, in Macedonia (= Philippi ?) (2 Cor. 2:12, 13; 7:5,6).
5. Paul left Ephesus shortly after the Demetrius riot (Acts 19:23 - 20:1), began evangelizing in Troas (2 Cor. 2:12, 13), and then suffered his "affliction in Asia" (2 Cor. 1:8-11).
6. Paul crossed to Macedonia (2 Cor 2:13; 7:5) and engaged in preaching and exhorting the brethren (Acts 20:1, 2) while organizing the collection in the Macedonian churches (2 Cor. 8:1-4; 9:2).
7. Titus arrived in Macedonia with his welcome report of the good response of the Corinthians to the "severe letter" (2 Cor. 7:5-16).
8. Paul's work in Macedonia continued and then gave place to pioneer evangelism along the Egnatian Road and probably in the Illyricum (Rom. 15:19-21).
9. On returning to Macedonia and hearing of fresh problems at Corinth, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians.
10. Paul spent three months in Greece (= primarily Corinth) (Acts 20:2, 3), during which time he wrote Romans.

## **DATE**

1 Cor was probably written in the spring, perhaps shortly before Passover. In 1 Cor 16:8 Paul indicates his intention to “stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost.” This Pentecost was probably a month or two away to allow Paul to take advantage of the evangelistic opportunities he had (1 Cor. 16:9).

2 Cor was probably written in the fall. Acts 20:6 relates that Paul left Philippi for Jerusalem in the spring (“after the feast of unleavened bread”). Previously three winter months had been spent in Corinth (Acts 20:3) where Paul arrived from Macedonia. Intimations of a forthcoming visit to Corinth found in 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1 suggest the Epistle was written shortly before that winter.

Possibly as much as 18 or more months intervened between the writing of the two letters. If written between spring and winter, they could have been written in the same year, but there are indications of a longer time. First, adequate time must be allowed for Paul to engage in evangelism along the Egnatian Way and in Illyricum (Rom. 15:9), and it is generally considered that it must have occurred between his Ephesian residence (Acts 19) and his arrival in Greece (Acts 20:2). Second, it is difficult to fit all the travel between Ephesus and Corinth and all the events at Corinth that took place between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians.

If 1 Corinthians was sent in the spring of 55 A.D., then 2 Corinthians would have been written in the Fall of 56 A.D.

Tentative chronology:

1 Corinthians	Spring 55.
Painful visit	Summer or Fall of 55.
Severe Letter	Spring 56
Paul leaves Ephesus	Spring 56
Paul in Macedonia	Summer 56
Titus arrive in Macedonia	Summer 56
2 Corinthians	Fall 56

## **OCCASION AND PURPOSE**

Occasion was twofold:

1. The arrival of Titus, who brought welcome news of the favorable response of the majority of the Corinthians to the “severe letter” (see 2 Cor 7:6-16).
2. The arrival of fresh disturbing news concerning Corinth.

Purpose was multiple:

1. To express relief and delight and the response to the “severe letter” that had been delivered and reinforced by Titus (2 Cor 2:6,9, 12-14; 7:5-16).
2. To exhort the Corinthians to complete their promised collection for the saints at Jerusalem before his arrival on the next visit (2 Cor 8:6, 7, 10, 11; 9:3-5).
3. To prepare them for his forthcoming visit by having them engage in self-examination and self-judgment (12:14; 13:1, 5, 11), so that they could discover the proper criteria for distinguishing between rival apostles (chapters 10 - 13); and so that Paul could be spared the pain of having to exercise discipline (2 Cor 10:2, 5, 6, 11; 11:3; 12:19-21; 13:10).

Was 2 Corinthians successful. Certainly it seems to have been at least to some degree. Paul made the promised visit (Acts 20:2, 3) and during this three month stay in “Greece” (primarily Corinth, in the winter of A.D. 56-57) he wrote or completed his letter to Rome, which does not mention trouble at Corinth. Also, Romans 15:26 shows that the Corinthians did complete their collection for Jerusalem.

Sadly, when Clement of Alexandria wrote the Corinthians in A.D. 96 he had to rebuke the same division, internal strife, and rebellion against authority that Paul had condemned 40 years earlier.

## **WHAT THE LETTER IS ABOUT**

The letter is about two closely related things. -- the glory of God and the reputation of Paul. Crucial to the whole is the relationship between these two themes, and perhaps it is no accident that the Greek word *doxa* means both reputation and glory. It is important to know the circumstances which have occasioned the letter if we are to understand why these themes figure as they do. But it is doubtful whether the precise reconstruction of the circumstances is vital for interpretation - it is only too obvious that Paul's reputation is at stake, and that is sufficient, at any rate to begin with.

The Greek word *doxa* means in the first place, 'opinion', and so 'glory' in the sense of high reputation among men, with its consequent status and pride, the sort of glory people vied for in Greek society, what the Greek Fathers would later call *kenodoxia*) vainglory, empty glory. However, Paul only once uses the word to refer to his own reputation (6. 8). What Paul is concerned about is the glory of God, or the glory of Christ, and his usage has been affected by the connotations of *doxa* in the Scriptures.

In Hebrew the word *kabod* originally had connections with 'weight', and by being used to describe a 'weighty' person came to connote a person with reputation, not unlike the Greek word eventually used to translate it. (Was Paul aware of this when he spoke of 'an eternal weight of glory' in 5:17?)<sup>1</sup> But when used of God, the word acquired connotations of splendor and radiance, and is usually associated with what Old Testament scholars call 'theophanies'. So for Paul, the glory of God is sometimes the glory given to him by the praises of men, his reputation, the hallowing of his name (1:20; 8:19), and sometimes the glory imparted by God (2Cor. ch.3 passim) through his self-revelation. That is the true glory, the glory that made Moses' face shine, however temporarily, and which transforms those who believe in Christ so that they reflect the glory of God which is revealed in his image, in the face of Jesus Christ. That is the kind of glory Paul claims, rather than the empty glory imparted by human society. That is why the issue of his reputation is closely interwoven with his profoundly theological discourse about the glory of God. It is also the basis of his claim to authority.

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<sup>1</sup>We use similar expressions when we refer to someone as a "heavy hitter" or a "500 pound gorilla."

Usage of the particular word *doxa* is largely to be found in 2 Cor. 3 and 4; and there are none after 2 Cor. 8. That should not, however, mislead us into thinking that it is a mistake to treat this as the central theme. Throughout the epistle we find the verb *kauchomai* and the related nouns *kauchesis* and *kauchema*; these are now usually translated '**boast**' but the AV used '**glory**', John Wesley used '**rejoice**', and we could use 'exult' or 'take a pride in'. One of the questions we will look at is whether these words are used in a different sense in the last four chapters than in the first part of the epistle. It is possible to 'boast' appropriately or inappropriately, to take an appropriate or inappropriate pride. Consider whether, in the early part of the epistle, Paul uses the words positively for the most part; and in the last four chapters he is sensitive to their negative possibilities. But throughout, what he is after can be summed up in the text he quotes in 10:17,<sup>2</sup> which some translate: 'Let him who prides himself on anything, pride himself on the Lord.' The same issue is at stake: namely the right kind of 'glorying', and the contrast between what usually goes on and what Paul claims for himself, and urges upon other apostles.

**Proper pride** depends upon being dependent on God and operating 'according to the Spirit'; **improper pride** arises from glorying in one's own achievements, operating 'according to the flesh', that is according to human norms. Paul cannot accept any compromise with the human techniques of ensuring or claiming success, human wisdom though it be. Simply because it is self-dependent and not the result of single-minded concentration on God, it is a form of cheating and deception, and not the way to proclaim the gospel of the new covenant in the Spirit.

The so-called 'opponents' of Paul are foils to bring out this fundamental contrast, the kind of glory sought among men and the kind of glory imparted by God. It is possible to understand a good deal of what Paul is saying without ascertaining the exact 'charges' against him, or the identity of these shadowy figures. His target is a stereotype whose main purpose is to help make Paul's point about the character of his own mission. Paul's way of going about things had a certain idiosyncrasy, and did not conform to norms in contemporary society. He did not seek patronage, or offer teaching for money. On the other hand, he was now trying to get money out of them for one thing and another, and his extreme caution about not handling the

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<sup>2</sup>2 Corinthians 10:17 But he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord. (ASV)

cash himself (8:20) suggests that suspicions surrounded this. There were other reasons for suspecting him of being two-faced: his constant protestations that he was coming to Corinth and his repeated failure to turn up. There is a deep crisis of confidence in the relationship between Paul and his converts in Corinth. That is clear. The entire letter is concerned with reestablishing mutual confidence. But Paul is more concerned to convey his own understanding of his own role and woo back the doubters, misled by others or not, than to attack any specifically identifiable 'opponents'.

Throughout, Paul's fundamental aim, in the face of suspicions of his double-dealing, is to assert his utter transparency and openness and his single-minded commitment to his vocation. The focus is on the God who empowers him, as he tries to play down any powers of his own. Human wisdom and God's grace are contrasted over and over again as Paul ranges from appeal to cajoling, warning, anguish, anger, love and longing in his efforts to get across to his perverse children. At one level he is indulging in an emotional self-justification; at another he is proclaiming a high theology of the cross - for God's glory and power are there supremely revealed in weakness, and it provides the model for his own pattern of ministry. In the end it is not a case of justifying himself, but of pleading with them not to forgo the salvation they received through his ministry. Everything is for their sake, and their future is at stake if they refuse to be reconciled with the spokesman of God, in other words, Paul.

Over the whole letter hovers a sense of urgency arising from the reality of God's final judgment. Then the truth will out. But what Paul is most anxious to achieve is mutual support and recognition when it comes to that appearance before God. The real sign of his apostleship is the community of the new Covenant which he has formed. So he depends on them, just as they depend on him. A web of partnership, collaboration and interdependence is both affirmed and threatened in this letter, and it is this which makes the emotional tone both intense and alternating. Crises of confidence are most painful when they arise within the most intimate relationships. Furthermore, the need to persuade, a need both personal and pastoral, would imply skillful manipulation of mood to provoke the required reaction. The author's intention is to evoke a response, and one way to do that is to play upon the feelings of the 'audience' in an appropriate way. Like a parent Paul switches from compliment and encouragement to threats and warnings; the stick and the carrot can both be effective.

Paul's reputation is at stake, and yet 'everything is for your sake, so that grace abounding through more and more (of you) may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God' (4.15).<sup>3</sup> In this way the theology and circumstances cohere: the response of the community is important both for the reputation of Paul and for the glory of God, two things which are themselves indissolubly linked.

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<sup>3</sup>2 Corinthians 4:15 For all things [are] for your sakes, that the grace, being multiplied through the many, may cause the thanksgiving to abound unto the glory of God. (ASV)