

PAUL AND THE CORINTHIANS

(Paul Barnett)

Paul's Visits and Letters to Corinth

Paul's relationships with the Corinthians span a seven-year period. In AD 50-52 he spent a year and a half in Corinth establishing the church. Some time in 55 or 56 he made a second visit (2 Cor. 13:2), what he calls a 'painful visit' (2:1), to deal with an emergency disciplinary problem in the church. In 56 or 57 he came to Corinth for the third time (13:1) and stayed for three months before taking his leave of them.

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in the north of Greece after his second visit to Corinth, to prepare the church for his third, final visit. Paul had decided to phase himself out of his ministry to the provinces surrounding the Aegean Sea (Asia, Macedonia, Achaia) and to establish a new work in Spain, at the western extremity of the Empire (Romans 15:23-29). This letter and Paul's proposed farewell visit, therefore, must be seen within the apostle's wider missionary plans.

Differences in Style Between 1 and 2 Corinthians

Of the churches founded by Paul, the Corinthian church proved to be the most demanding. Their problems, both among themselves and in their relations with him, caused him to write not only the two lengthy letters we have, but also two others which have not survived - one written before, the other after, our 1 Corinthians. There are major differences of emotional tone between the two surviving letters of Paul to the Corinthians. The first indicates major problems of behavior (e.g. divisions, slack moral standards, lawsuits, unkindness to the poorer or less-gifted members) and of doctrine (e.g. doubts about the coming resurrection of believers). There is evidence that the believers questioned Paul's abilities and authority. Nevertheless the apostle writes objectively, confidently and with his emotions well controlled throughout.

The second letter, however, is less well arranged than the first, and, moreover, reveals a range of emotional extremes in the author. On the one hand he is overjoyed and has confidence and pride in the Corinthians (7:4), while on the other, he is deeply hurt that they are withholding their affection from him (6:12) and that they have to 'put up' with him (11:1). Moreover, they have been ready to believe a whole range of criticisms against him - of being worldly and irresolute (1:17), of moral cowardice in writing instead of coming (1:23), of his lack of inner strength (4:16), of being demoralized and theologically deviant (4:2), of being an imposter (6:8), of being corrupt and exploitative (7:2), of not being a true minister of Christ (10:7), of being weak in speech when present and powerful only by letter, when absent (10:1, 10; 11:6, 21), of being a fool, even mad (11:1, 16, 23), of breaching convention or of craftiness in declining their financial support (11:7; 12:13-16), and of lacking mystical and miraculous credentials of ministry (12:1, 11-12). Throughout this letter Paul is forced to defend his doctrines, his ministry and his character. He expresses sorrow that the Corinthians do not reciprocate the love he had for them (6:11-13) and that they do not acknowledge the genuineness of his apostleship and what, under God, has been achieved by him among them (3:1-3; 12:11-13).

Nevertheless, despite the emotions he displays, the letter ends in a strong and confident way, evidence perhaps of Paul's God-given resilience.



Why Were the Corinthians Unhappy with Paul?

What, then, had occurred between the two letters to explain their differing characters and, in particular, to account for the battery of complaints and accusations which Paul now faced? Broadly speaking, there are two factors which contributed to the Corinthians' unhappiness with the apostle, as reflected in his second letter to them.

First, there were what we might call residual cultural problems. It is evident that Paul's relationships with these southern Greeks had been strained for some time. The first letter, written about two years earlier than the second (i.e. in about 54 or 55) reveals that not all the Corinthians acknowledged Paul's authority as an apostle, some preferring the ministry of Apollos, others the ministry of Cephas (Peter), both of whom had visited Corinth more recently than Paul. Jewish members would have been attracted to Cephas, a Palestinian Jew who had been a leading disciple among the original followers of Jesus. Educated Greek members, on the one hand, would probably have been drawn to the gifted orator Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew (Acts 18:24-28). To the latter group, fascinated as they were by intellectualism and sophisticated discourse, Paul, the manual worker with amateurish speaking abilities, would have appeared singularly unimpressive in an age in which rhetoric and oratory were highly valued. Not least offensive to this group was Paul's utterly perverse refusal to accept money from them in patronage of his ministry, though he was not above accepting money from the rustic northerners in Macedonia (11:7-9). Moreover, his insistence on disciplinary action against wayward members still caught in (pagan) temple worship of fornication was, many of them would have felt, over-zealous. That Paul in his second letter as well as in his first continued to admonish the Corinthians about idolatry and immorality indicated that these were ongoing, unresolved problems among them. It is clear that some at least of the criticisms against Paul, which are so evident in the second letter, had their origins in his earlier relationships with them.

The second and major source of criticism of Paul arose, apparently, from the recent arrival of certain Jewish 'ministers' or 'apostles' (as they called themselves; 11:13, 23), whom, however, Paul does not name or identify. These newcomers were seeking to persuade the Corinthian church that Paul's theology was in error and, specifically, that the covenant of Moses was still in force. They argued for their legitimacy as ministers on the grounds of mystic and paranormal abilities, claiming that Paul lacked these superior gifts and, moreover, that he was personally and morally deficient in many ways. The coming of these 'apostles' may have heightened some of the long-standing Corinthian criticisms of Paul as well as creating new complaints. Unquestionably the arrival of these intruding 'ministers' and their campaign against Paul's doctrines and character are the chief reason for the difference in emotional tone evident between the first and second letters.

2 Corinthians, then, was written to prepare the way for Paul's pending farewell visit to them. In it he attempts to explain why he deferred the third visit and wrote to them instead (chapters 1 - 2), expressing joy, nevertheless, that the moral problem which necessitated the second, painful visit and the (now lost) 'sorrowful' letter has been resolved (chapter 7). Further, in writing to them he urges that the collection of money for the Jerusalem church, which had lapsed, be revived and completed before his arrival (chapters 8-9). The major part of the letter, however, is devoted to his answer to these recently arrived 'apostles' - to their 'different gospel' (chapters 3 - 6) and to their assault on his character (chapters 10 - 13).