

"THE MESSAGE AND INTENT OF 2 CORINTHIANS"

(George Guthrie)

As described above, Paul's immediate relational network provides one framework for understanding the main message and ultimate intent of 2 Corinthians. In spite of the tensions in their relationship, the majority in the church at Corinth had responded well to the apostle's leadership—at least to a certain extent and in response specifically to the concerns in the painful letter of 2:3-7:8 (1:14; 2:6; 7:7). Now he wanted the church to move to complete obedience (10:6) and those who had yet to repent to do so (7:1; 12:20-21). He also wanted the church to follow through on their commitment to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem (chaps. 8-9) and to reject the so-called "ministry" of the interlopers. To these ends, Paul attempted to answer various charges leveled against him and, correspondingly, to commend his ministry to the Corinthians, drawing the church back into a healthy relationship with himself, his mission, and God. The book has been notorious for the circuitous development of its themes, prompting the many theories concerning patched-together fragments. Yet, from certain perspectives, there is a logic to its development.

In the overview that follows, notice two primary dynamics, the "context" and the "core content" of the apostle's communication. First, the theme of "travel" provides one important structural framework for an analysis of the book's discourse. Travel in this sense is the "geographical context" of the conversation—which is not surprising since Paul was traveling when he wrote the book. Paul begins the letter's main body by explaining his travel decisions (1:15-2:11). The apostle brackets the great central section of the letter with the "absence" and then "presence" of Titus in Paul's move to Macedonia (2:12-13; 7:5-7). That central section, the book's theological heart (2:14–7:4), is launched with an image of God as leading the apostle and his fellow ministers in triumphal procession through the world as proclaimers of the gospel (2:14-16). As Paul addresses the Corinthians' commitment to the collection Titus is again present with them (8:16-24) in preparation for the coming of the absent apostle (9:3-5). Finally, chapters 10-13 are also bracketed by the twin themes of Paul's absence and presence (10:1, 11; 13:1-2, 10), for his confrontation of the false teachers constitutes a key point in preparation for his imminent return.

If travel forms the context or framework of his communication, the content has to do largely with the network of Paul's immediate relationships described above, that is, with God, Paul's concern for the Corinthians, the authenticity of Paul's ministry (communicated in part by his suffering as he travels around), and how the Corinthians should respond in this ministry moment. Paul does not have a direct relationship with the interlopers, who are always in the background but do not become the main topic until chapters 10-13. Even then, he does not address them directly but addresses the Corinthians concerning the false teachers. Yet notice that Paul's commendation of his own ministry is woven throughout the book. At every point in this letter, we are presented with the apostle's appropriate boasting in the Lord, which often means his boasting in suffering. Notice also that Paul constantly appeals to the Corinthians, through various means exhorting them to return to a healthy relationship with their apostle.

Following the letter opening, the apostle offers a benediction, praising God for encouragement and for God's work in the midst of suffering (1:3-7). The testimony of 1:8-11 offers a specific example of how God had redeemed suffering in the life of the apostle and his fellow ministers. The weakness of suffering in Asia, where Paul was confronted with his own limitations, manifested God's strength. Thus the prologue (1:3-11), with its emphasis on God's work through affliction, highlights a dominant theme for the book. Yet it also invites the Corinthians into the messy mix of Paul's ministry. Already Paul draws the wayward church close with his words, speaking of them as those who share in his sufferings (1:7) and offer prayer to God on his behalf (1:11). Thus the prologue begins with a positive focus on God, on God's work in and through affliction, and on the Corinthians' need to share in Paul's mission.

Yet this invitation to draw close brings to mind the jarring tension that has invaded the apostle's relationship with this church, and in the next movement the apostle confronts that tension head-on (1:12-2:11). Since concerns have been raised about his change in travel itinerary, Paul defends his recent decisions as being carried out with complete



integrity (1:12-2:4). His confident testimony of a clear conscience and his desire to be understood by the Corinthians (1:12-14)—what some consider the book's thesis statement—presents another key theme of the book. The apostle has acted with complete integrity, but because they have not understood him and his mission (1:14), pain has entered his relationship with the church. This painful conflict in his relationship with the Corinthians was manifested in a painful visit (2:1), a decision not to come to Corinth as planned (1:23; 2:1-2), and a painful letter (2:3), evidently having to do with an offender who had caused a great deal of pain to the community (2:5-11).

Second Corinthians 2:12-13 functions to effect a transition, picking up the "travel" explanations of 1:15-2:5 introducing the alternate itinerary the apostle had followed (2:12-13), and anticipating the resolution of Paul's travel narrative at 7:5-7. This transition in 2:12-13 and the resolution in 7:5-7 form a bracket and thus set in great relief the theological heart of the book, which focuses on the nature of Paul's authentic ministry (2:14-7:4). In this section Paul carries out a form of self-recommendation (3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4), explaining how his mission, as they travel through the world, spreads the aroma of knowledge about God through the gospel (2: 14-16). Paul and his fellow workers are distinct from hucksters who preach for profit, because Paul and his team are from God, live before God, and speak with sincerity in Christ (2:17).

Thus the Corinthians themselves are the only recommendation letter Paul needs (3:1-3), for he and his team are true ministers of the new covenant, which transforms people (3:4-4:6). Gospel ministry, moreover, involves sacrifice and suffering. The treasure resides in terra-cotta so that the life of Jesus can be manifested through suffering and God will be glorified (4:7-15). The frailty of the minister's life also turns his or her focus to the eternal, unseen world (4:16-18) and ultimately the resurrection from the dead (5:1-10). Paul lives openly before God and the Corinthians, and he and his fellow workers are driven by the call of God and the gospel (5:1-15). It is on the basis of this ministry of reconciliation, drawing people to right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, that Paul calls the Corinthians to be reconciled to God through being reconciled to his ministry (5:16-6:2). All of Paul's life and ministry—including his sufferings—commends his ministry to the Corinthians (6:3-10), and he pleads with them to open their lives to him (6:11-13). But since they are limited by their own affections, he uses Scripture to exhort them to turn again to the true worship of God and abandon spiritually unhealthy relationships with unbelievers (6:14-7:4).

At 7:5 the apostle resumes his travel narrative. He has allowed the others to live with the unresolved tension embodied in 2:12-13 (the absence of Titus), for authentic ministry lives in suffering and tension. But now the tension is resolved for at least two reasons: (1) Paul celebrates that the majority in the community have responded well to his painful letter. Their repentance has paved the way for their reengagement with Paul's mission through the collection. In addition the God of all encouragement (1:3-7) has encouraged Paul by the Corinthians' response, showing that God is working in their community (7:7, 12, 13-16). (2) Paul has delayed his account of Titus's coming, for it is only now that he is ready to reintroduce their need to engage in the collection for the saints (chaps. 8-9). So he has sent Titus to them again, along with two other brothers (8:17-19, 22), in preparation for Paul's return to Corinth (9:3-5).

But in preparation for Paul's return to the city, there is a final great need. The foolishness surrounding the false apostles has gone on long enough. So Paul, in a personal appeal, confronts the Corinthians' toleration of these interlopers in no uncertain terms. His apostolic power and authority will be manifested when he returns (10:1-10; 13:1-4). He makes his principles about wrongheaded boasting and games of classification and comparison abundantly clear. Paul will not play by the interlopers' rules; instead, he only boasts in the Lord (1:12-18). But then, in a grand parody of the false teachers' foolish boasting, the apostle does speak a bit of foolishness. He "celebrates" the Corinthians' amazing "tolerance" for the interlopers (11:1-4) and boasts that he has preached to the Corinthians free of charge, for that makes a clear distinction between him and the false apostles (11:5-15). The pinnacle of his "foolishness" is the grand Fool's Speech of 11:22-12:10, in which he turns boasting on its head by boasting about his weaknesses. Why has he been so foolish? The Corinthians, who should have commended him, drove him to it (12:11-13). So in preparation for his coming, they should repent and embrace his ministry, which is for building them up (12:14-13:10). Paul then closes, reiterating themes from the letter opening and prologue, longing for the Corinthians' maturity, unity, and right relationship with God (13:11-13).

In short, the message of 2 Corinthians is that Paul commends his ministry to the Corinthians as one of integrity. Appointed by God, under the lordship of Christ, and suffering in his proclamation of the gospel, Paul calls the Corinthians to repent from unhealthy relationships and embrace his authentic apostolic leadership. Their appropriate response will be seen, on the one hand, by again taking up the collection for Jerusalem, and on the other hand, by resolutely rejecting the ministry of the false teachers.