

THE IMPORTANCE OF 2 CORINTHIANS FOR CHRISTIAN BELIEF

(Paul Barnett)

Despite the structural unevenness of the letter and its emotional extremes, 2 Corinthians makes a magnificent and abiding contribution to our understanding of Christianity, in the following teachings.

a. God has proved faithful in keeping his ancient promises by his recently inaugurated new covenant of Christ and the Spirit (1: 18-20; 3:3-6, 14-18). Moreover, God faithfully delivers and holds on to those who belong to Christ (1:3-11, 22; 4:7-9; 7:6).

b. The new covenant, based as it is on the graciousness of God (6:1), has now surpassed and replaced the old covenant (3:7-11). It powerfully meets man's needs at his points of greatest weakness - in his aging and death (4:16 - 5:10) and in his alienation from God due to sin (5:14-21).

c. Christ is the pre-existent Son of God (1:19; 89), the image of God (4:4), the Lord (4:5), the judge of all (5:10), the sinless one who died as substitute and representative for all people, God reconciling the world to himself through him (5:14-21). 2 Corinthians contains Paul's most comprehensive statement about the death of Christ (5:14-21).

d. Genuineness of New Testament ministry is not established by 'letters of recommendation' or by a would-be minister's mystical or miraculous powers, but by his faithfulness in persuading and his effectiveness in converting people to the Christian faith (5:11-12; 3:2-3: 10-7). The very existence of the Corinthian congregation was Christ's living letter of recommendation of Paul's ministry (3:2-3). The pattern and measure of the minister's lifestyle is the sacrifice of Christ (4:10-15; 6:1-10; 11:21-33). Establishing true criteria for genuine Christian ministry is one of the major contributions of this letter.

e. The 'word of God', the gospel, has a definable, limited content which neither ministers nor anybody else may add to or subtract from (4:2; 11:4). This gospel is exceedingly powerful in bringing rebellious humans under the rule of God (4:6; 10:4-5).

f. Paul was, both in person and through his writings, the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. The risen Lord gave Paul this 'authority' in his historic commissioning of him on the road to Damascus (10:8; 13:10), and it is still exercised to subsequent generations through his letters, which now form part of the canon of Scripture. This letter is very important because it is Paul's major defense of his apostleship to his detractors - both ancient and modern. In it Paul answers the perennial question why he should be regarded as having authority over churches and Christians.

g. Christian giving and serving arise out of and are in response to the graciousness of God displayed towards and in us. Cheerful and generous giving, in all its forms, brings a harvest of great enrichment to the givers (chapters 8 - 9).

It is significant that Paul's expression of these teachings in this letter was inspired by the personal crisis he underwent during his rebuttal suffered on his second visit to Corinth (2:1-4, 9), his desperate escape from Ephesus (1:8-11) and his deep anxiety for the Corinthians experienced at Troas and Macedonia (2:13; 7:5-6). It is no exaggeration to say that the coming of these 'apostles' to Corinth with their 'different gospel' and their 'other Jesus', accompanied as it was by a massive assault on the integrity of Paul, could easily have spelt the end of Pauline Christianity there. That it survived and continued is probably due, in no small part, to this powerful letter.

