

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
1. Guiding Concepts	7
2. Life in Corinth	14
3. Mutual Trust Reaffirmed: A First Defense <i>1:1—2:17</i>	27
4. Adequacy in Ministry Commended: A Second Defense <i>3:1—5:19</i>	41
5. Exhortations to Reconciliation <i>5:20—7:16</i>	62
6. A Test for Sincerity of Love: Giving from the Heart <i>8:1—9:15</i>	73
7. A Warning to Recognize Paul's Authority <i>10:1-18</i>	90
8. A "Foolish" Demonstration of Paul's Authority: Earthly Examples <i>11:1-33</i>	99
9. Further "Foolishness": Heavenly Examples <i>12:1-13</i>	118
10. A Plea to Avoid Pending Judgment <i>12:14—13:14</i>	129

1

GUIDING CONCEPTS

INTRODUCTION

Flat tires, traffic jams, and dogs that bark at 1:00 A.M. have a way of exposing the depth or shallowness of our spirituality. A reaction of genuine love often seems almost impossible. But the apostle Paul had far more than traffic problems. He was misunderstood and falsely accused. His enemies lied about his desires for money, his qualifications to be an apostle, and his commitment to his friends in Corinth. They even made personal attacks against his appearance. In 2 Corinthians, Paul's reactions to those insults expose a heart of love and deep spiritual insight—truth that can lead us to deeper spiritual responses to life's problems.

Why was Paul able to respond with such maturity? How did he find the right words needed for the very sensitive situation in Corinth? How did he know what to include? What was his process of selection? What emotions directed that process? The answers to those questions uncover the beauties of Paul's heart and teach us how to recognize the world from his point of view—treating people as new creations in Christ (5:16-17). May we see our reactions to life in that light.

HOW TO INTERPRET THE LETTER

The backbone of this commentary is the consistent asking and answering of three basic questions:

WHAT IS THE BASIC CONTENT?

WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE CONTENT?

WHY DID PAUL SAY WHAT HE SAID?

Two fundamental beliefs support those questions: (1) Paul had good reasons for everything he said; and (2) his reasons can be found in the needs and problems of the original readers. A look into the lives and times of Paul and the Corinthians is vital for discovering why Paul wrote 2 Corinthians. The why behind a passage also supplies the rationale and direction for present-day application, without which we have truth without reason and arrows without targets.

WHAT IS THE BASIC CONTENT?

An outline of each section of 2 Corinthians shows the *content* Paul presented and the *order* in which he addressed it.¹ Such analysis provides the road map for finding the important link between truth and its application.

WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE CONTENT?

What is the source of the content? This question has two aspects: (1) What was the specific source of the readers' needs, questions, or problems? Paul did not waste words; he aimed at specific needs. Therefore, we must always seek to discover the needs that evoked Paul's responses. (2) What resources did Paul use to frame his responses? Were they from his own background, the Christian community, or the Old Testament? Great insights can be gained from the consistent application of these questions.

WHY DID PAUL SAY WHAT HE SAID?

Was Paul's content related to the life setting of the readers, to some problem they had? The point where Paul's resources met the Corinthians' needs becomes the point where God

1. Though I have modified his method for the literary form of a letter, I am in special debt to the works of Walter C. Kaiser, especially *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), pp. 197-210. Special help in interpreting biblical letters will also be found in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), pp. 43-71.

meets us today. Their problems are fundamentally our problems, and the way God met them then is the way He speaks to us today.

A PERSONAL NOTE

My goal is to show how God used Paul's knowledge and spiritual reactions to meet some very ugly and deep-rooted problems in Corinth. My prayer is that you will learn some helpful ways to study 2 Corinthians and that you will be led into what only the Spirit can accomplish: personal application and a changed life.

Overview and Key Verses

WHAT IS THE BASIC CONTENT?

A brief overview of 2 Corinthians is the first step in understanding why Paul had to say what he did.

THE CONCERN OVER HIS UPCOMING VISIT

Paul's travel plans pervade the entire letter. The notations of his itinerary expose three aspects of content and order:

(1) Chapters 1-7 relate to Paul's original plans, which he had to change.

I intended at first to come to you, that you might twice receive a blessing. [1:15]

But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. [1:23]

Now when I came to Troas . . . [2:12]

But taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia. [2:13]

For even when we came into Macedonia . . . [7:5]

(2) Chapters 8-9 speak of the work of Titus among the Corinthians to complete their offering. Paul wanted the matter to be settled before he arrived.

Consequently we urged Titus that as he had previously made a beginning, so he would also complete in you this gracious work as well. [8:6]

Lest if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared . . . [9:4]

(3) Chapters 10-13 focus on Paul's impending arrival. He hoped for harmony, but would not spare any who persisted in rebellion.

I ask that when I am present I may not be bold. [10:2]
Here for this third time I am ready to come to you. [12:14]

For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish. [12:20]

This is the third time I am coming to you. [13:1]

If I come again, I will not spare anyone. [13:2]

For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity. [13:10]

THE REASONS FOR PAUL'S CONCERN

A further probing of this threefold travel structure reveals Paul's rationale behind each section. He wanted them to solve their own problems while he was absent so that when he came they all could enjoy peace and harmony.

Paul's discussion of himself in chapters 1-7 gives his reasons for staying away from Corinth. He wanted to spare them from his severe authority to discipline (1:23). In fact, he remained absent and wrote 2 Corinthians for the same reason; they were still not ready for him to come in peace. The theme of sparing concludes in 13:2, where Paul reasserts that when he came again he would spare no one. Until then, he wants the Corinthians to focus on the things of the heart, not appearance (5:12).

Key Verses: Chapters 1-7

Paul's strategy is to state the *problem* and then provide the *solution*. That strategy is present in each of the letter's three sections. Paul also gives the major *purpose* behind his attempts to correct their problems.

The Problem: You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. [6:12]

The Solution: Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. [5:17]

Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. [7:1]

The Purpose: We are not again commending ourselves to you but are giving you an occasion to be proud of us, that you may have an answer for those who take pride in appearance, and not in heart. [5:12]

Chapters 1-7 carefully point out the Corinthians' root problem: worldly affections that had closed their hearts toward God and Paul. Paul's solution encourages the readers to make room for him in their hearts (6:13; 7:2). Though Paul claims a great glory for his ministry (chap. 3), the treasure is in earthen vessels (chap. 4). True glory is easily missed if one focuses on the container rather than its contents. That is why Paul only relates to a person's heart realities in Christ (5:12, 16). As Paul drives his point home, he exposes the core of the problem. It is of the heart (6:12) and could only be remedied by "perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (7:1). The entire discussion concerning Paul's ministry in weakness and glory must not be seen as a defensive reaction but as a loving correction.

Key Verses: Chapters 8-9

The Problem: But now finish doing it also; that just as there was the readiness to desire it, so there may be also the completion of it by your ability. [8:11]

The Solution: As it is written, "He who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little had no lack." [8:15]

As it is written, “He scattered abroad, he gave to the poor, his righteousness abides forever.” [9:9]

The Purpose: I am not speaking this as a command, but as proving through the earnestness of others the sincerity of your love also. [8:8]

In chapters 8-9 Paul commends those who would deliver the collection for the poor in Jerusalem. Charges of greed and thievery against Paul had blocked the progress of the collection (1:17; 2:17; 4:2; 10:2; 11:7; 12:13-18). Paul tries to correct two problems: (1) the question of equality (8:13-15) and (2) the question of giving freely from the heart (9:7-9). He wants the offering to issue from sincere love (8:8).

Key Verses: Chapters 10-13

The Problem: I ask that when I am present I may not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. [10:2]

The Solution: And He has said to me, “My Grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. [12:9]

The Purpose: All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your upbuilding, beloved. [12:19]

In this section Paul commends himself as an eminent apostle. However, his boasting in weakness is quite different from that of his opponents. He corrects their assertion that he walked in the flesh (10:2). Also, he points out that his free service of ministry should not have branded him as inferior or as cunningly designed to cheat them. The Corinthians need their appearance-oriented evaluation of Paul turned around

(12:11). They can only follow the correct pattern of godliness when they understand what makes for a commendable man of God (11:3).

Key Verses for the Letter

The Problem: You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. [6:12]

The Solution: And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. [12:9]

BROAD OUTLINE

A TEST PASSED: CONFIDENCE FOR CONTINUED OBEDIENCE
1:1—7:16

A TEST FOR THE SINCERITY OF LOVE: GIVING FROM THE HEART
8:1—9:15

TRUE VS. FOOLISH COMMENDATION: THE REAL SOURCE OF
STRENGTH 10:1—13:14