

11. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

I. Introduction: Paul's "second" letter to the Corinthians, The occasion for the letter. A painful visit and a member of the community who caused pain for Paul (2:1; 2, 5) A painful letter (2:4) To manifest Paul's love for the Corinthians (2:4) To test them (2:9) So that they can show their zeal for Paul (7:12) The intruders, "super apostles" (11:5; 12:11), "false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ" (11:13)

As a result, Second Corinthians is a very personal but also a very angry and defensive letter. The most difficult to understand of all Paul's letters. Paul jumps all around. He leaves words out, has run-on sentences, uses participles instead of principle verbs, and switches back and forth between the first person singular and the first person plural.

Perhaps the most interesting of Paul's letters. He lets his soul shine through and tells us some things about himself that he never writes about elsewhere. His near-death experience in Asia (1:8-11) The rapture to the third heaven (12:2-4) The thorn in his flesh. It is an imaginative letter insofar as Paul uses images galore to speak about himself, his ministry, and the interlopers. His mortality, like a tent (5:1-10) He is like a clay jar (4:7-11) The church is like a chaste virgin promised to Christ (11:2). The intruders might seduce the church like the Serpent cunningly seduced Eve (11:3; cf. 11:13-15).

This leaves us wanting to know more, but like all letters it is an allusive letter and doesn't provide readers, especially readers today, with all the information that they would like to have.

Is Second Corinthians one letter or a composite of many letters? The manuscript tradition hands it down as a single letter, but in addition to the inconsistencies caused by Paul's angry state of mind, there are some puzzling connections. Paul is frustrated because he hasn't met up with Titus (2:12-14), but then he thanks God (2:14) and doesn't get back to Titus until 7:5-6. Paul talks about his heartfelt affection for the Corinthians (6:11-13) and asks that it be requited (7:2-5) but interrupts himself to talk about separation from unbelievers (6:14 - 7:1). Paul sums up his appeal to the Corinthians to be generous in the collection (8:24) and then starts all over again (9:1).

Consequently, many scholars think that canonical 2 Corinthians is a composite of several fragments of letters, as many as five, which also includes a bit of material that Paul did not write (6:14-7:1): A lengthy and imaginative theological

disquisition on Paul's ministry, the "first apology" (2:14-6:13; 7:2-4) A harsh letter, the "second apology," most likely the tearful letter to which Paul refers in 2:34(10:1-13:13) A conciliatory letter, written on the occasion of Titus' uplifting report on the readiness of the Corinthians to embrace Paul (1:1-2:13, 7:5-16) An "administrative letter" telling about the organization of a renewed appeal for the support of the saints in Jerusalem (chapter 8) A second "administrative letter" that provides a theological rationale for the collection (chapter 9) A later interpolation of a few verses that urged separation from unbelievers (6:14-7:1).

II. Paul's Ministry, the Heart of Chapters 1-7 A ministry of consolation the benediction (berakah) of 1:3-7 A ministry of the New Covenant, a ministry of the life-giving Spirit, which Paul describes with an important midrash on Exod 34:29-35 (3:1-15) A ministry of reconciliation, of which Paul and his companions are ambassadors impelled by the love of Christ (5:16-21)

Review Questions

1. Why is Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians so difficult to understand?
2. In the light of 2 Cor 1:3-7, should we view Christian ministry as a ministry of consolation?
3. What is the New Covenant?
4. How do you understand the reconciliation about which Paul writes?