

SESSION 2: AN OVERVIEW, PART ONE

PREFACE

March 23, 2025

I wish I had studied Second Corinthians many years ago, for aside from it being a transparent portrait of a painful period in the apostle Paul's life, it is an invaluable handbook for authentic ministry in the name of Christ. It pulls no punches. It is an honest account of what lies in store for anyone called to serve in a holy pursuit. And one of the most alarming, and sadly typical, components of any ministry will often be contention and opposition—not from without, but from *within* the body of Christ.

THE LETTER'S THEME

We are accustomed to the NT epistlers switching from topic to topic within one document; in First Corinthians Paul broached new topics with, “Now concerning things sacrificed to idols...” and “Now concerning spiritual gifts...” 📧 (five times in all)—i.e., *OK we covered that; now let's talk about this*. There is none of that in this letter. Paul stays on-point—albeit from different directions and employing various imagery—addressing the rift that has occurred between the church and him.

8:1 and 12:1, respectively

Let's consider this from a physical, human perspective. Imagine something like this happening in a church today; this is not hypothetical: it happens all the time.

The closest to this I have personally witnessed was after Linda and I moved back to the Midwest from California in 1991. Once we had moved to our present home, we settled on a Baptist church in Des Moines. We subsequently learned that that congregation had recently gone through a traumatic period in which they discovered that their beloved pastor of many years had been embezzling funds. He then left the church and they replaced him with the pastor who was there when we began attending, whom we found to be a solid, Bible-teaching man of God.

At a church business meeting a while later, after the pastoral staff had excused themselves (a standard practice, we assumed), imagine our shock when a woman immediately stood up and said, “How do we get rid of the pastor?” Those were her very words. To say the deacon running the meeting was flummoxed would be an understatement. He didn't know how to respond.

Not surprisingly, it was not long before *that* pastor was gone. We later found out that there was a sizable contingent in that church which—while admitting the previous pastor had sinned terribly and played them false—were dissatisfied with his replacement because he was not like him! This means that all the time that pastor was ministering to the flock, there was an active cabal—*within* his parishioners—seeking to get rid of him.

Now, that was one pastor—a *resident* pastor—in just one church. Imagine the challenge for the apostle Paul in dealing with *multiple* churches, in different regions, and most a fair distance from himself, so that he must accomplish his ministry to them by long distance, through correspondence—delivered by hand, by the way—to address a variety of situations and problems. Imagine his frustration, and his need for “comfort,” as he repeatedly emphasizes in the opening of this letter (1:3-11).

In Corinth there was not one emphatic woman standing up to publicly voice her disapproval, but an organized group of troublemakers—Paul will describe them as “false apostles, deceitful workers.”

Read 2 Corinthians 11:12-15.

In our previous session I told the story—the history—of Paul’s relationship with these believers. Let us now look at an overview of this second (extant) and last known letter from Paul to this congregation. As I have said, almost the entire letter is comprised of variations on a theme. That theme is, as this class is titled, “Defense of an Authentic Ministry.” Except for the letter’s first few and last few verses, the apostle pretty much stays on-point with that theme.

AN OVERVIEW

After his greeting and an opening prologue (which still ties into the letter’s general theme), Paul’s letter can be subdivided into three convenient sections:

1. The Integrity of Paul’s Ministry (1:12 to 7:16);
2. The Ministry of Giving (8:1 to 9:15);
3. Paul Confronts the Malignant Ministry of His Opponents (10:1 to 13:13).

The Integrity of Paul's Ministry (1:12 to 7:16)

The apostle begins this section with an opening statement in **Chapter One** regarding the integrity of his ministry.

Read 2 Corinthians 1:12-13.

Then, in **Chapter Two**, Paul moves into an explanation for why—even though he had previously made plans to visit Corinth—he eventually changed those plans. In this we see the heart of an apostle, the heart of a pastor.

Read 2 Corinthians 2:1-4.

But there was a second reason Paul altered his plan to visit Corinth: While in Ephesus Paul had expected to meet up with Titus, who was on his way back from delivering the previous “painful letter” to the Corinth church. But Titus didn’t show, which certainly must have added to Paul’s apprehension. So he continues on to Macedonia. When he pens his final letter to Corinth he will describe this period as one in which he had no rest in his spirit, was troubled and fearful. (2:12-13)

How very human. His disciple and co-worker was expected and didn’t show, and Paul was worried. When Titus did eventually arrive, Paul was not just relieved to see his disciple, but he also brought with him encouraging news about the church.

Next, from 2:14 to 5:10, Paul launches into an extended treatise on ministry—both his, personally, and authentic ministry in general. But don’t think for a minute that this is some irritating, defensive, self-centered diatribe—or that it is a dry and boring bullet-list of ecclesiastical regimen. It is a defense voiced by someone with the heart of a loving pastor. This passage is peppered not just by ministerial truth, but spiritual encouragement for the church.

For example, in **Chapter Three**, after addressing the new covenant, with the glorious ministry of the Holy Spirit, and drawing a comparison to the glory seen in Moses’ face, Paul concludes with vv17-18.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:17-18.

Continuing with reference to the veil over the face of Moses, in **Chapter Four** Paul now brings in the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (4:4). Then in v5 the apostle makes one of his best statements of defense:

For we do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus.

That is authentic ministry in a nutshell! How eloquent; how concise! 📖 He continues, in vv6-7, to expand on how he considers “slavery”:

For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

Many years ago I commandeered these three verses in Chapter Four as my own mission statement, and include the reference in my logo, which is a clay jar—an “earthen vessel.”

From this Paul, in **Chapter Five**, moves into a fascinating discourse on the temporal vs. the eternal, the unclothed vs. being clothed, mortal vs. “swallowed up by life,” “longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven.”

Then from the second half of **Chapter Five** to the beginning of **Chapter Seven** the apostle earnestly exhorts the Corinthians

- to be reconciled to God through Christ:

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-20.

- in one of Paul’s patented long sentences, to accept and respect his apostolic credentials:

Read 2 Corinthians 6:3-8.

- pleading with the Corinthians to open themselves as freely to him as he has to them:

Read 2 Corinthians 6:11-13.

- concluding in v7:2, with heart-rending emotion, “Make room for us in your hearts. We wronged no one, we corrupted no one, we took advantage of no one.”

Then Paul closes **Chapter Seven** by returning to his opening theme of “comfort” as he expresses his joy at being reunited with Titus.

Read 2 Corinthians 7:4-7.

He then speaks hard truth—but with grace. In vv8-16 he lauds their obedience and growth *because of* the sorrow he caused them: they were “made sorrowful to repentance.”

Read 2 Corinthians 7:8-9.

Finally, closing this section, Paul heaps praise upon the behavior of the church—and especially its behavior toward his “partner and fellow worker” Titus (8:23).

Read 2 Corinthians 7:13-16.

No one who studies 2 Corinthians can ever again imagine the apostles—and especially the apostle Paul—as dry, sterile, plastic saints, always “spiritual,” always high-minded, floating through their respective ministries a few inches above the corrupting soil of earth and impervious to criticism and slight.

These were flesh and blood human beings who experienced many of the same relational challenges we do today. Human beings have been in conflict since the first couple, since Adam pointed the finger of blame at his wife Eve—and even Yahweh God Himself—for his own transgression.

**And the man said, “The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave to me from the tree, and I ate.”
(Genesis 3:12)**

And it occurs to me that even with their associate weaknesses and failings, most people want to learn from people who are *real*. We are drawn to individuals who have come through hard times and survived for the better, who have made mistakes and learned from them, who may have even disappointed us; in short, we are drawn to people as imperfect as ourselves. And we want to learn from them—from their words, yes, but also from their lives.

The apostle Paul teaches with his life. Yes, he was selected out by Christ Jesus Himself, and teaches by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. But he teaches as an authentic human being who trudges the earth along with everyone else. Some in the Corinth church were saying that Paul's "letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is weak and his words contemptible." (10:10) In his previous letter he admitted to this.

And when I came to you, brothers, I did not come with superiority of word or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the witness of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my word and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power... (1 Corinthians 2:1-4)

Some in Corinth preferred someone with more charisma, such as Apollos. But if there is a NT church from which we should *not* glean a positive lesson, it would be the one in Corinth. These aren't Bereans.

Let us, instead, learn from their "unimpressive" apostle and teacher, the one covered with scars, both physical and emotional. The one who passionately loves them, warts and all.