

Introduction to 2 Corinthian NIV Study Bible

Author

Paul is the author of this letter (see 1:1; 10:1). It is stamped with his style and contains more autobiographical material than any of his other writings.

Date

The available evidence indicates that the year a.d. 55 is a reasonable estimate for the writing of this letter. From 1Co 16:5–8 it may be concluded that 1 Corinthians was written from Ephesus before Pentecost (in the late spring) and that 2 Corinthians may have been written later that same year before the onset of winter. 2Co 2:13; 7:5 indicate that it was probably written from Macedonia (see chart, p. 2261).

Recipients

The opening greeting of the letter states that it was addressed to the church in Corinth and to Christians throughout Achaia (the Roman province comprising all of Greece south of Macedonia; see map, 2288).

Occasion

It seems that Paul wrote as many as four letters to the church at Corinth: (1) the letter referred to in 1Co 5:9 (see note there); (2) 1 Corinthians; (3) the “severe” letter (see 2Co 2:3–4; see also below); (4) 2 Corinthians. After writing 1 Corinthians Paul continued his ministry at Ephesus until he heard that his letter had not completely accomplished its purpose. A group of men had come to Corinth who presented themselves as apostles. They were false teachers who were challenging, among other things, Paul’s personal integrity and his authority as an apostle (see 11:4; 12:11).

In the face of this serious situation, Paul decided to make a quick trip to Corinth (12:4; 13:1–2) to see whether he could remedy the situation. The visit turned out to be painful and did not accomplish its purpose. So when Paul returned to Ephesus, he wrote the Corinthians a severe letter “out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears” (2:4), probably sending it by Titus (12:8). Some identify this letter with 2Co 10–13. Others think it has been lost.

After writing the severe letter, Paul had second thoughts. He was deeply concerned about how the Corinthians might react to it. So after the riot caused by Demetrius and his fellow silversmiths (see Ac 19:23–41), he left Ephesus and set out for Macedonia by way of Troas. He expected to meet Titus in Troas to get news of the effect of his severe letter on the Corinthian church, but Titus was not there (see 2Co 2:12–13). Still deeply concerned and despite the fact that the Lord had opened up an opportunity to preach the gospel at Troas, Paul said good-bye to the believers there and moved on to Macedonia, where he met Titus. To his relief, the news from the Corinthian church was basically good. The severe letter had brought its intended results (7:5–16). The encouraging report of Titus of the improved situation at Corinth is the immediate occasion of the writing of 2 Corinthians.

How, then, does one explain the harsh tone of chs. 10–13, which is so different from the rest of the letter? Some think that when Paul had just completed writing the first nine chapters, a report came to him that a strong and vocal minority was still causing trouble at Corinth. So before sending off the letter he added the last four chapters to address this troublemaking group. Others hold that chs. 10–13 were written some time after Paul had sent the first nine chapters and that they constitute a separate letter. There is, however, no manuscript evidence that warrants splitting 2 Corinthians into two parts.

Purposes

Because of the occasion that prompted this letter, Paul had a number of purposes in mind:

1. To express the comfort and joy Paul felt because the Corinthians had responded favorably to his painful letter (1:3–4; 7:8–9, 12–13).
2. To let them know about the trouble he went through in the province of Asia (1:8–11).
3. To explain why he had changed his travel plans (1:12–2:4).
4. To ask them to forgive the offending party (2:5–11).
5. To warn them not to be “yoked together with unbelievers” (6:14–7:1).
6. To explain to them the true nature (its joys, sufferings and rewards) and high calling of Christian ministry. This is the so-called great digression, but it turns out to be in some ways the most important section of the letter (2:14–7:4; see note on 2:14).
7. To teach the Corinthians about the grace of giving and to make sure that they complete the collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem (chs. 8–9).
8. To deal with the minority opposition in the church (chs. 10–13).
9. To prepare the Corinthians for his upcoming visit (12:14; 13:1–3, 10).

Structure

The structure of the letter relates primarily to Paul’s impending third visit to Corinth. The letter falls naturally into three sections:

1. Paul explains the reason for the changes in his itinerary (chs. 1–7).
2. Paul encourages the Corinthians to complete their collection in preparation for his arrival (chs. 8–9).
3. Paul stresses the certainty of his coming, his authenticity as an apostle and his readiness to exercise discipline if necessary (chs. 10–13).

Unity

Some have questioned the unity of this letter (see above), but it forms a coherent whole, as the structure above shows. Tradition has been unanimous in affirming its unity (the early church fathers, e.g., knew the letter only in its present form). Furthermore, none of the early Greek manuscripts breaks up the book.

Outline

- Apologetic: Paul’s Explanation of His Conduct and Apostolic Ministry (chs. 1–7)
 - Greetings (1:1–2)

- Thanksgiving for Divine Comfort in Affliction (1:3–11)
- The Integrity of Paul’s Motives and Conduct (1:12—2:4)
- Forgiving the Offending Party at Corinth (2:5–11)
- God’s Direction in Ministry (2:12–17)
- The Corinthian Believers—a Letter from Christ (3:1–11)
- Seeing the Glory of God with Unveiled Faces (3:12—4:6)
- Treasure in Clay Jars (4:7–16a)
- The Prospect of Death and What It Means for the Christian (4:16b—5:10)
- The Ministry of Reconciliation (5:11—6:10)
- A Spiritual Father’s Appeal to His Children (6:11—7:4)
- The Meeting with Titus (7:5–16)
- Hortatory: The Collection for the Christians at Jerusalem (chs. 8–9)
 - Generosity Encouraged (8:1–15)
 - Titus and His Companions Sent to Corinth (8:16—9:5)
 - Results of Generous Giving (9:6–15)
- Polemical: Paul’s Vindication of His Apostolic Authority (chs. 10–13)
 - Paul’s Defense of His Apostolic Authority and the Area of His Mission (ch. 10)
 - Paul Forced into Foolish Boasting (chs. 11–12)
 - Final Warnings (13:1–10)
 - Conclusion, Final Greetings and Benediction (13:11–14)

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