

Second Corinthians

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Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the

biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible (NAB), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NAB and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a Glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of Suggested Resources, an Index of Pastoral Topics, and an Index of Sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series web site, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Note to Readers

The New American Bible differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of the Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NAB is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NAB is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

Introduction

Second Corinthians is chock-full of challenges and treasures. Victor Paul Furnish begins his magisterial commentary *II Corinthians* by remarking that no other letter attributed to Paul demands more study and effort than this one. At the same time, Furnish acknowledges the rich recompense that comes to the one who engages this text with care.¹ In this letter Paul opens to us a unique window into the way he understands his apostolic life and ministry as patterned after the example of Jesus. We see the Apostle's love and care for a church he has founded. We sense his joys and frustrations. We discover a fledgling community that struggles with many of the same issues that Christians face today, nearly twenty centuries later. And in the midst of all this, we catch glimpses of Paul's inspired—and inspiring—insight into who God is and how he has reached out in love to the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Such insights into God's faithfulness and love demand an appropriate response, and Paul challenges the Corinthians—as well as us—to offer one.

I like to compare the study of 2 Corinthians to the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel of God (Gen 32:23–33). Just as Jacob struggled strenuously through an entire night in his contest with the mysterious heavenly figure, so the reader of 2 Corinthians must be willing to expend energy in hard work. But just as Jacob awakened from his struggle with the divine as a changed person, so the one who works carefully through this letter—a letter that communicates *God's* word—can experience transformation. In fact, Paul alludes to this transformation in 2 Cor 3:18, where he speaks of the Spirit's empowerment

1. Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32A (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 3.

enabling us to grow more and more Christlike. It is my sincere hope and desire to facilitate the reader's fruitful engagement with this letter. Thus we begin with a brief discussion of its authorship, literary unity, historical context, theological themes, and relevance for today.

Authorship

No reputable scholar doubts that Paul is the author of 2 Corinthians. This epistle is one of the so-called authentic or undisputed Pauline letters.² But to say that Paul is the author of 2 Corinthians is not the same as claiming that he literally wrote the text itself. Paul's letters reveal a complex process of composition. Most (if not all) of his letters were likely dictated to a scribe, or amanuensis (see Rom 16:22). In some of his letters, Paul actually took pen in hand to write only the concluding remarks (1 Cor 16:21–24; Gal 6:11–18; Col 4:18; 2 Thess 3:17–18). Second Corinthians contains neither a reference to a secretary nor an explicit notice that Paul writes a note at the end. Does this indicate that this letter, which is personal in so many ways, is from Paul's own hand? Possibly, but not necessarily.³

Another indication of authorial complexity is found in the letter's opening line, where Paul identifies "Timothy our brother" as cosender of the letter. Timothy, along with Silvanus, ministered alongside Paul when Paul first brought the [†]gospel to Corinth (2 Cor 1:19). Some time later, he dispatched Timothy from Ephesus to Corinth to remind the community of what he had taught them (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10). How much, if any, of the content of 2 Corinthians is Timothy's contribution is not possible to determine. What cannot be disputed is that Paul's own personality and voice come through loud and clear. Indeed, the Apostle's voice is the predominant one.

Still, to say that Paul is the author of 2 Corinthians does not exhaust the question of authorship. According to *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, sacred Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Thus, in a very real sense, it is also proper to speak of God as the author of this letter, and this without denying Paul's own creativity and contribution (*Dei Verbum* 11).

2. The other undisputed letters are Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon. Six other letters attributed to Paul—Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus—are regarded by many scholars as written in the Apostle's name after his death. Luke Timothy Johnson, however, offers plausible grounds for holding that all thirteen letters derive from Paul. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 393–95, 407–12, and 423–28.

3. Galatians, like 2 Corinthians, includes several of Paul's personal revelations, but the final verses make clear that the letter itself was actually written by a secretary or scribe.

That is to say, we must take into account both the human and divine aspects of the letter's authorship. In connection with the human authorship, we must pay attention to how Paul expressed himself within the limits of a particular time and culture. This means that, among other things, we must be sensitive to the way he reads and interprets the Old Testament.⁴ In connection with the divine authorship, we must examine 2 Corinthians within the wider context of the entire biblical canon, both Old and New Testaments, the content of the Church's tradition, and the †analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12). It is my hope that in using this approach we will in some way do justice to both voices as they speak in this extraordinary letter.

Literary Unity

Several interpreters of 2 Corinthians have claimed that the canonical text as we have it today shows evidence of having one or more “seams.” These are places in the text where juxtaposed material seems to lack logical coherence or reflects an improbable mood swing, at least in the minds of some. One example is found at 9:15–10:1. After working hard to facilitate reconciliation with the Corinthians following misunderstandings between himself and the community (7:5–16), and after asking them to be generous in contributing to the collection for the church in Jerusalem (8:1–9:15), why would Paul then harangue and threaten the Corinthians (10:1–13:10)? To some, this sudden shift suggests an unlikely mood swing—not to mention an ineffective way to raise funds!

Another seam is detected at 8:24–9:1. Given that Paul offers a lengthy exhortation for the collection in 8:1–24, why does he then speak about it in 9:1 as if he were raising a new topic? A third instance is 2:13–14. Why does Paul suddenly interrupt his report of his anxiety over not finding his coworker Titus (2:12–13) with an exclamation of thanksgiving that is followed by an extended discourse on †apostleship (2:14–7:4)? Yet another seam is discerned at 7:4–5. Why does Paul wait nearly five chapters to resume and finish the story concerning Titus (7:5–16)? Indeed, the resumption of the story at this point seems to some commentators to come from out of the blue. Finally, many interpreters of 2 Corinthians have been baffled by the unusual phrasing and imagery in 6:14–7:1, a passage that seems to interrupt two invitations from Paul to the community to open their hearts to him (6:13 and 7:2).

4. Of course, what we refer to today as the Old Testament was the only Scripture at the time when Paul composed his letters.

In addition to these literary seams, there are references to people and events that are difficult to reconcile in the text as it now stands. Paul's various references to Titus illustrate the difficulty. In 7:5–16 Paul recounts his reunion with Titus after the latter had undertaken a delicate mission to the Corinthians. Titus's task involved conveying to the community a letter from Paul, written in tears, at a critical moment in the Apostle's relationship with them. Titus's mission was apparently successful, as he was able to report back to Paul the Corinthians' desire to be reconciled with him.

Next, in 8:6 Paul alludes to Titus's having begun to facilitate the Corinthians' contribution to the collection for the church in Jerusalem. But when did Titus begin this work? At the time of his recent visit to the community? But was the occasion of that visit—to foster reconciliation between Paul and the Corinthians—an appropriate time to ask them for money? Or had Titus begun this work beforehand?

Then, in 8:16–24 Paul announces that he is sending Titus along with two unnamed “brothers” in order to complete the administration of the collection. Finally, in 12:17–18 Paul refers to a previous visit made by Titus and one unnamed “brother,” apparently in connection with their comportment while attempting to raise funds. How does one make sense of these various references?

In order to explain the presence of what may appear to be literary seams and the puzzling references to people and events, many commentators resort to partition theories. They claim that the text of 2 Corinthians as it presently stands is a composite of two or more letters, and they subdivide the text to cull out the original letters or parts thereof. According to these theories, a later editor arranged the text into its [†]canonical form. Partition theories range from the simple to the complex. One prominent hypothesis is that 2 Corinthians consists of two letters: Paul originally wrote what is now found in chapters 1–9, a letter in which he attempts to foster reconciliation between himself and the Corinthians. Later, when he learned of further problems in the community caused by intruding missionaries, he composed the angrily penned chapters 10–13. This theory claims to account for the mood swing between chapters 9 and 10. A more complex theory hypothesizes that 2 Corinthians is a composite of fragments from six different letters. This hypothesis pulls the text apart at all the literary seams and involves a detailed, complicated reconstruction of events between Paul and the community.

The very presence of partition theories attests to the challenge that any commentator on 2 Corinthians faces. There *are* places in the canonical text that present interpretive difficulties, and fine scholars disagree about how to resolve

them. In my opinion, however, partition theories raise more questions and problems than they claim to solve.⁵ Indeed, there is no manuscript evidence that any of the proposed partitioned letters or fragments of letters ever existed independently. Applying the principle of Occam's razor—namely, the simplest explanation that coherently explains the data is preferable—it is possible to make good sense of the text by reading it as a single, unified letter.⁶ Readers may judge for themselves if the study presented in this commentary succeeds in offering a coherent way of resolving the aforementioned difficulties.

Whether 2 Corinthians was originally two or more letters, or a single letter, as I think, is ultimately not the most important question. I take as my responsibility to explain the inspired canonical text that the Church has handed on to us rather than what *might* lie behind it. The canonical form of 2 Corinthians is that of a single work, so in interpreting it for the life of the Church it makes the most sense to read it as such.

Historical Context

Second Corinthians is actually the fourth letter that Paul wrote to the community in Corinth after bringing the [†]gospel to them a few years earlier (1 Cor 2:1–5; 2 Cor 1:19). We can reconstruct the historical context of the letter according to stages, as follows.

*Stage 1: Paul founds the church at Corinth, AD 50–51.*⁷ According to Acts 18:1–18, Paul spent eighteen months during his founding visit and succeeded in establishing a community of believers consisting of [†]Gentiles (the majority) and Jews.⁸ The church in Corinth proved to be a vibrant but perplexing community, one that excelled in many things (2 Cor 8:7)—including its penchant for misunderstanding Paul!

Stage 2: Paul's first letter to Corinth between AD 51 and AD 53. From 1 Cor 5:9 we learn that Paul had written an earlier letter to the Corinthians. In this letter, now lost, he had urged them “not to associate with immoral people.” Apparently

5. For a review and critique of the four main partition theories, see Thomas D. Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians*, AnBib 158 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005), 5–25.

6. Many of the recent commentaries and full-length studies of 2 Corinthians argue for the letter's unity.

7. Dates in this section are approximations. See figure 3 for a map of the [†]Aegean Sea.

8. For a helpful study of the city of Corinth at the time of Paul, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology*, 3rd rev. and exp. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002). See also George T. Montague, “Corinth: A Cauldron of Cultures,” in the introduction to *First Corinthians*, CCSS (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

some in the community misconstrued his words to mean that they were to avoid contact with *all* outsiders. (This may have been the source of the question about whether or not to divorce unbelievers; see 1 Cor 7:12–16.)

Stage 3: Paul sends 1 Corinthians from Ephesus via his delegate Timothy, spring AD 54. Some time later Paul wrote a second letter, what is presently known as [†]canonical 1 Corinthians. In this letter he responded to oral reports about divisions (1 Cor 1:11) and scandalous behavior in the community (5:1–6:20; 11:2–34), as well as to issues raised in a letter written to him by some of its members (see 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1). Paul wrote 1 Corinthians from [†]Ephesus

(16:8) in order to exhort the church in Corinth to strive for unity (1:10) as members of the one body of Christ (12:12–27). He also sent his coworker Timothy to Corinth to remind the community of all he had previously taught them (4:17; 16:10).

If Paul thought that his letter urging unity and his sending Timothy to Corinth would resolve all of the community's questions and problems, he was soon proven wrong. Most likely, Timothy returned quickly to Ephesus with some sobering news. The precise content of that news is impossible to reconstruct. Did the Corinthians reject the youthful Timothy in his role as Paul's envoy (see 1 Cor 16:11)? Did some persist in aberrant behavior as an expression of their freedom in the Spirit? Were some offended by Paul's use of irony and sarcasm (e.g., 4:8–13)? Were suspicions raised about Paul's proud insistence that he preaches the gospel free of charge (9:12–18) while collecting money for another church (16:1–4)? Had intruding missionaries arrived in Corinth, criticizing Paul's gospel and his manner of being an [†]apostle? Any one or combination of these is possible.

Stage 4: Paul makes an emergency visit, early summer AD 54. In response to the situation, Paul paid an emergency visit to Corinth during the summer of AD 54, a visit that he later confessed was "painful" (2 Cor 2:1). That this visit was urgent and unexpected is suggested by the fact that he changed the travel plans he had indicated in 1 Cor 16:5–7, deciding to go directly to Corinth from Ephesus. Paul's second visit to the Corinthians culminated in an unpleasant incident with a person



Jim Yancey

Fig. 1. Paul first entered Corinth with "fear and much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3) ...



Jim Yancey

Fig. 2. ... and he resolved to preach nothing "except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

he later referred to as "the one who did the wrong" (2 Cor 7:12). Once again, we are left guessing as to what exactly happened.⁹ The most common scholarly opinion is that a member of the community slandered Paul, calling his apostolic authority into question. Whatever happened, Paul apparently left Corinth abruptly and returned by sea directly to Ephesus. That his departure was abrupt is inferred from the fact that he deviated from his revised travel plans (1:15–17).

Stage 5: Paul sends a "tearful letter" via his delegate Titus, late summer AD 54. Having returned to Ephesus, Paul decided to write another letter to the Corinthians, a letter penned "out of much affliction and anguish of heart" and "with many tears" (2 Cor 2:4; see 7:8). Like the lost letter alluded to in 1 Cor 5:9, this third piece of correspondence from Paul, known as the "tearful letter," is no longer extant.¹⁰ Nevertheless, we know the gist of its contents from various references to it in 2 Corinthians. Paul wrote to express his love and concern for the community, as well as to convey his sense of pain: was he upset that the Corinthians had not come to his defense at the time of the nasty incident? He then entrusted delivery of the tearful letter to Titus, rather than Timothy. Titus

9. It is important to understand that Paul's letters leave much unsaid because recent events were common knowledge between him and the communities to which he wrote. In writing 2 Corinthians—in which he attempts to deepen and consolidate reconciliation between himself and the community—Paul discreetly chooses not to go into detail over the painful incidents that have transpired.

10. Some scholars claim that the "tearful letter" is embedded in the canonical text of 2 Corinthians. The usual candidate is 2 Cor 10:1–13:10. The problem with this hypothesis is that there is no reference in these chapters to the painful event alluded to in 2:5–11 and 7:8–13.



Fig. 3. The direct route (—) and the (mostly) land route (---) between Ephesus and Corinth.

was charged with gauging the community's response to it. Upon receiving the letter and hearing Paul's side of things, the Corinthians were cut to the heart. The majority of the community meted out a severe punishment, probably ostracism, to the person who had offended Paul (2 Cor 2:6; 7:11). Moreover, they grieved and expressed their desire to see the Apostle again (7:7).

By previous arrangement, Paul had instructed Titus to return to him via the circuitous land route north (probably because he had decided to leave Ephesus to proclaim the gospel to the north, in [†]Troas). But Paul was anxious to receive news from his envoy, and winter was approaching; so he left a promising missionary venture in Troas in order to cross over to [†]Macedonia to meet Titus along the way (2 Cor 2:12–13).¹¹ The two found each other somewhere in Macedonia, perhaps [†]Philippi, before the onset of winter (AD 54–55). There Titus relayed the Corinthians' heartfelt response to Paul's letter, which brought great joy and consolation to him (7:6–7, 13).

Stage 6: Titus reports new problems, winter AD 54–55. The report brought by Titus, however, was not all positive and sunny. A few ominous clouds still dotted the sky. Apparently not all the members of the community agreed with

11. According to Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, the land route to the north between Corinth and Ephesus (ca. 676 miles)—which still involved sailing between [†]Neapolis to [†]Troas—required on average six or seven weeks to complete. Sea travel across the Aegean took a fraction of that time, although travel across the eastern Mediterranean was viable only from April to mid-September or October. See Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 20, 299.

the punishment imposed on “the offender” (see 2 Cor 2:6, where a “majority” is said to have punished him). In addition, Titus in all likelihood informed Paul of the arrival of other missionaries. Whether Timothy had known about them from his short visit is unclear.

These missionaries criticized Paul’s appearance and lack of eloquence. They accused him of hiding behind the “severe and forceful” letters he wrote (2 Cor 10:10). They also claimed to have superior apostolic credentials, bringing with them “letters of recommendation” (3:1) while boasting of their pedigree (11:22) and spectacular exploits (11:23), such as visionary experiences (12:1–6). In contrast, Paul’s way of life was marked by suffering, and his preaching focused on the cross (1 Cor 2:2). How, these missionaries demanded, do such a lifestyle and gospel show forth the power of the resurrection?¹²

Moreover, Titus reported to Paul that the community’s participation in the collection for the Jerusalem church—an undertaking, we will see, that was most dear to his heart (Gal 2:10; compare Acts 11:29–30)—had come to a standstill (2 Cor 8:10). Indeed, it is easy to imagine that this was because the newly arrived missionaries planted seeds of doubt in the minds of some of the Corinthians: Isn’t Paul just really lining his own pockets? Doesn’t his constant change in travel plans reveal how untrustworthy his word really is? Doesn’t his abrupt departure during his last visit expose a lack of strength and character? Lastly, Titus must have told Paul, there were still some cases of scandalous behavior in the community (12:20; 13:2).

Stage 7: Paul sends 2 Corinthians via Titus, spring AD 55. We are now in a position to understand why Paul wrote a fourth letter to the church in Corinth, the letter known as canonical 2 Corinthians. Having spent the winter of AD 54–55 in Macedonia, he was ready to come to Corinth for the third time (2 Cor 12:14; 13:1). In order to prepare for this visit, Paul needed to accomplish several things. Since doubts still existed about his character and the authenticity of his apostleship, Paul decided to clear the air over recent events by explaining his change in travel plans and his reasons for sending the tearful letter. He also sought to defend his way of being an apostle, a way marked by self-giving love patterned after the love embodied by Jesus. Also, Paul wanted to convey his joy over the Corinthians’ response—at least the majority’s response—to his third

12. The precise identity of these intruding missionaries—often referred to as “opponents”—has been the source of much scholarly debate. See Jerry L. Sumney, *Identifying Paul’s Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians*, JSNTSup 40 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990). My method in the commentary is to offer a modest reconstruction based on the evidence given by Paul. As we will see, Paul’s critique focuses on the behavior of the interlopers that, in his mind, betrays a faulty understanding of the centrality of the cross in the gospel.

letter. Real reconciliation was now possible between them, and he desired to consolidate it and promote further rapprochement. Toward this end, Paul offered to forgive the offending member and encouraged the community to reach out to this person and receive him back.

Then, because Paul felt confident about the Corinthians' renewed enthusiasm for him, he wanted them to recommit themselves to participate generously in the work of the collection for the Jerusalem church, which, as we will see, was another expression of reconciliation—here between Gentiles and Jews. Next Paul determined to go on the attack against the intruding missionaries, whom he dubbed “superapostles,” by exposing the foolishness of their boasting. Finally, he wanted to warn those who persisted in their sinful ways that he would deal with them severely. By means of his various exhortations, the Apostle sought to have the members of the community attend to their own character rather than challenge his.

Thus, sometime in the spring of AD 55, Paul sent his fourth letter to the community via Titus and two unnamed brothers (2 Cor 8:16–24). As we will see in the following chapters, Paul bases his own self-defense—or better, *†commendation* of self—and his various exhortations on the character of Jesus, whose entire life was marked by faithful obedience to God in giving himself in love for the sake of others.

Theological Themes

Second Corinthians is a fertile source for theological reflection. To be sure, Paul was not what we would today call a systematic theologian. His letters are not theological treatises. Paul was a founder of local churches who, in the course of exercising pastoral care over them, wrote letters that dealt with practical matters and pressing concerns. Nevertheless, he tended to think theologically. In the course of handling even the most mundane affairs that arose, his strategy was to bring the realities of faith to bear on them. As we will see in our analysis of 2 Corinthians, Paul has much to say about God, Jesus, the Spirit, the Church, and salvation, but it may be helpful to provide here a few brief introductory comments about these themes.

God. Theology proper deals with the question “Who is God?” Throughout 2 Corinthians Paul names God in various ways: he is “our Father” (1:2) and the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3a), “the Father of compassion and God of all encouragement” (1:3b), the “living God” (3:3; 6:16). As the God of life, he is the one who “raises the dead” (1:9)—manifested in his raising Jesus from the dead (4:14)—and brings about a “new creation” (5:17; see 4:6).

Paul emphasizes that God, out of love, has taken the initiative to put an end to the enmity between himself and humanity—the enmity caused by human sin—by effecting reconciliation through Jesus’ death (5:18–21). God desires to be “Father” to those willing to receive his mercy and become his “sons and daughters” (6:16–18). His character is thus revealed as marked by “love” and “peace” (13:11, 13), which he wishes to bestow on his children. God’s character is also one of faithfulness (1:18), because through Jesus God has fulfilled *all* of his promises (1:20).

Moreover, Paul insists, God continues to express love and fidelity through the gift of the Spirit (1:21–22) and through the generous provision of blessings (9:8–11). As the one “who encourages the downcast” (7:6), God desires that those who have benefited from his bounty be generous in turn by giving themselves for others. It is through such self-giving that God’s power continues to be at work in the world (4:7; 13:4).

Jesus. Paul’s fundamental [†]gospel proclamation is “Jesus Christ [is] Lord” (4:5). Both titles—Christ and Lord—are important. For Paul, Jesus’ lordship is intimately linked with the resurrection (4:14; see Phil 2:11), for it is the resurrection that reveals Jesus as Lord. Paul’s reference to Jesus as *Kyrios* (“Lord”) is striking when one realizes that the [†]Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—uses *Kyrios* to translate the sacred name for God, [†]YHWH (a name so sacred it is not to be pronounced).

Jesus is also the [†]Messiah, a Hebrew term meaning the “anointed one.” (The equivalent Greek term, *Christos*, gives us the English term *Christ*.)¹³ As the Messiah, or Christ, Jesus fulfilled all God’s promises. It was through Jesus, the one “who did not know sin” (5:21), that God has reconciled the world to himself (5:18–19). Jesus the Messiah is also the divine Son of God (1:3; 1:19). Jesus’ filial relationship to the Father is exhibited most clearly in his faithfulness to God and his obedience to the Father’s will (1:19). This obedience reached a climax in Jesus’ giving his life “for all,” a self-offering that declared the depths of his love (5:14–15).

Throughout 2 Corinthians Paul speaks of Jesus as the “[†]image of God” par excellence (4:4), the [†]new Adam who revealed how God intends human beings to live. In fact, one of the distinctive features of this letter is Paul’s use of the unadorned name “Jesus” in 4:5–14, by which he focuses on Jesus’ humanity. As we will see, Jesus’ loving, self-giving character (e.g., 8:9; 10:1) plays an

13. Some commentators downplay or even deny that Paul’s use of “Christ” is intended to signify Jesus’ messiahship (rather, it is said to function, in effect, as part of Jesus’ name). For a helpful explanation of the importance of Jesus’ messiahship, see N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 46–49.

important role in the way Paul presents himself and in his exhortations to the Corinthians.

Spirit. The Spirit is a gift from God (1:22). Paul refers to the Spirit in different ways: “the Spirit of the living God” (3:3), “the Spirit of the Lord” (3:17), “the holy Spirit” (13:13; see 6:6). The Spirit’s distinguishing trait is that he “gives life” (3:6). Twice Paul refers to the Spirit as *arrabōn* (1:22; 5:5), a term that signifies a “first installment,” or “guarantee,” of the eternal life that is to come to those who receive him.

The Spirit’s outpouring into human hearts points to the arrival of the “[†]new covenant” (3:6) and produces wondrous effects in the present. The Spirit transforms human beings more and more into the likeness of Jesus (3:18; see also 1:21–22, where Paul makes a play on words to suggest as much), that is, the Spirit empowers his recipients to walk in the way of Jesus’ faithfulness to God. Hence Paul refers to “the Spirit of faith” or of “faithfulness” (4:13, my translation). He acknowledges that it is the Spirit who enables him to exercise his ministry as a “servant” of God (6:4, 6 NRSV, NIV). Moreover, he reminds the Corinthians that it is the presence of the Spirit in their hearts that produces in their lives “a letter” of, or about, Christ for others to “read” (3:3, 2). Lastly, Paul mentions the *koinōnia*—“fellowship” or “communion”—of the Spirit (13:13), a reference to the reconciliation and unity that the Spirit produces in the Church.

Paul’s references to Father, Son, and Spirit are striking. It can be natural for Christians today to read a developed understanding of the Holy Trinity back into his writings. We need to remind ourselves that trinitarian doctrine was not fully formulated and refined until the fourth century. Nevertheless, the Church’s understanding of God as both one and triune makes explicit and unfolds what is implicit in 2 Corinthians as well as in other New Testament writings.

Church. Paul uses the word “church” (*ekklēsia*, from which the word [†]*ecclesiology* is derived) in 2 Corinthians to refer to local assemblies of Christians (1:1; 8:1). Nevertheless, such local churches are part of “the church of God” (1:1). The latter designation signifies both the divine origin of such assemblies and the fact that together they form a larger fellowship or communion. Paul calls members of the churches “holy ones” (1:1; 8:4; 9:1). They are already holy because, collectively (i.e., as local assemblies), they are “the temple of the living God” (6:16) in whom the Spirit dwells (3:3). Moreover, they are called to grow in holiness because, as *ekklēsia*, they are betrothed to Christ, whose character is marked by innocence and purity (11:2–3). According to Paul, God has entrusted the churches with the ministry of the new covenant (see 3:6), which is also “the ministry of reconciliation” (5:18–19).

One concrete manifestation of the ministry of reconciliation is the collection for the church in Jerusalem (8:4; 9:1). By means of this collection, material resources will be distributed to those in need, thereby fulfilling God's will (8:14–15) and giving tangible expression to the gospel (9:13). At the same time, the recipients will praise God and offer him petitions for their benefactors, thereby enhancing communion among the churches (9:13–15).

Salvation. An essential part of Paul's proclamation of the gospel is that "*now* is the day of salvation" (6:2, emphasis added). In fact, he understands the fruit of his ministry to be salvation (1:6).

Salvation (*sōtēria*, from which we get the word [†]*soteriology*) has both present and future ramifications. What does this salvation look like in the here and now? How are people's lives affected concretely? Paul reveals that God's outpouring of the Spirit has brought about a "new creation" (5:17), transforming those who receive him more and more into the likeness of Jesus (3:18). Moreover, the Apostle understands the ministry of reconciliation as an essential aspect of salvation in the present (see the following section). The fullness of salvation, however, awaits a future manifestation. Paul hopes to be raised along with the Corinthians into the presence of God, a hope that is founded on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (4:14). He reminds the community to orient their lives in such a way that they may receive good at the final judgment, after which what is mortal will be swallowed up by life (5:1–10).

Relevance for Today

Although 2 Corinthians is almost two thousand years old, it speaks with uncanny relevance to us today. Discussion of the theological and pastoral implications of this letter will be the special purpose of the Reflection and Application sections that follow exegetical analyses throughout the commentary. However, I would like to prime the pump by suggesting some broad themes that speak to the Church today.

Paul sets forth a demanding model of Christian ministry. Although he is the founder of the community and exercises divinely given authority (10:8; 13:10), Paul refuses to "lord it over" the Corinthians (1:24). Instead, he regards them as a loving father does his children, always seeking what is best for them (12:14–15).

Even more, Paul views himself as the Corinthians' "slave" (*doulos*; 4:5), indicating that he has been called, first and foremost, to serve their needs. This is what it means to be a "servant" (*diakonos*) of God (6:4 NRSV, NIV). Paul has

humbled himself (11:7) so that he might preach the [†]gospel free of charge. We know from his other letters that he labored with his hands in order to support himself so that he would not be a financial burden to his fledgling churches.¹⁴ Thus we are not surprised when Paul describes his ministerial experience as follows: “in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst” (11:27; see also 6:5). He chooses to make sacrifices, to expend and empty himself, so that others might benefit (4:12; 6:10). And he does so for the sake of Jesus, whose example he follows (4:10–11). Indeed, Paul exemplifies Jesus’ teaching that the one who desires to be great must become “the last of all and the servant of all” (Mark 9:35). To say the least, this is a challenging model for any ordained or lay minister to emulate!

But Paul knows that he is no “superman.” He trusts that the power of God (2 Cor 4:7) will work through his weakness (12:9–10). Paul also recognizes that he is part of a team, and he relishes his coworkers’ help and encouragement (7:5–7). In addition, although called to render selfless service to the communities he has founded, he acknowledges the importance of receiving love and support from those communities (2:2–4). This is an integral part of his understanding of the Church as the “body of Christ.”

Second Corinthians offers a timely vision of one of the Church’s primary ministries—namely, the “ministry of reconciliation” (5:18–19). Paul understands that the appropriate response to God’s gift of reconciliation through Christ is to participate in the ongoing work of reconciliation (5:20). This work begins within the Christian community. In fact, one of Paul’s main reasons for writing this letter is to continue healing old wounds in his relationship with the Corinthians (see, e.g., 6:11–7:4). Moreover, he seeks to foster the restoration of an ostracized community member (2:5–11). Given the situation of the early twenty-first-century Church—suffering from damaged credibility because of the misconduct of some clergy, from a lack of trust between parts of the hierarchy and laity, and from a lack of constructive dialogue between so-called traditionalists and progressives—the Apostle’s vision of reconciliation *within* the Church is particularly relevant today.

Paul’s understanding of the ministry of reconciliation, however, goes beyond intra-Church relationships. God’s reconciling power is to reach out to the *world* (5:19). Paul’s motive in promoting the collection for the church in Jerusalem is multifaceted. At one level, he advocates providing material or economic relief

14. See, e.g., 1 Thess 2:9: “You recall, brothers, our toil and drudgery. Working night and day in order not to burden any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.” According to Acts 18:3, Paul plied the trade of tent making.

to those in need. Such social outreach is an essential part of proclaiming the gospel (9:13)—a tenet that echoes the teaching of Jesus (Matt 25:31–46; see also James 2:14–17) and that is as timely today as ever.

At a deeper level, the collection is an important way to express the reconciliation that God has brought about between [†]Gentiles and Jews. That predominantly Gentile churches would offer financial support to the Jewish-Christian community in Jerusalem would, in Paul's eyes, be a dramatic manifestation of how God, through Christ, has created the possibility of a new humanity no longer torn asunder by divisions (Eph 2:14–16). This vision of reconciliation certainly speaks with eloquence and hope to our world today—a world in which tribal, ethnic, nationalistic, economic, and religious differences are at the root of large-scale hatred and violence.

Second Corinthians also reminds us that cultural forces and values are often opposed to the message of the gospel. One of the ways the rival missionaries made inroads in the church in Corinth is by appeal to popular values—attractive physical appearance and rhetorical eloquence (2 Cor 10:10), pedigree (11:22), impressive exploits and experiences (11:23; 12:1), and financial remuneration as a sign of worth (11:7–12). These missionaries apparently criticized Paul for lacking some or all of these. In their view, his apostolic lifestyle seemed too preoccupied with suffering, a quality that held no place in their competition for acclaim (10:12). Paul counters by reminding the Corinthians that what is in one's heart is far more important than such externals (5:12). This is the case because the “heart”—signifying the inner core of one's existence—is where the Spirit resides (1:22; 4:6).

Moreover, the Spirit enables his recipients to live after the manner of Jesus, a manner marked by loving, self-giving service. Paul therefore insists that the way to resurrection leads through the cross. The powerful cultural values against which he struggles are similar to those we wrestle with today. While 2 Corinthians challenges the Church to exercise the ministry of reconciliation in the world, it makes it clear that core gospel values are not to be compromised.

This leads to a final observation. What 2 Corinthians offers to people today is a *spirituality*. By spirituality I mean a way of life that is inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit. While Paul's vocation as [†]apostle and founder of churches has particular characteristics and responsibilities, he insists that *all* Christians are called to embody Jesus' loving, self-giving way of life in their own lives, within their own life circumstances. The [†]paschal mystery—God's bringing about new life through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—is at the center of Paul's understanding of life in the Spirit (1:3–7; 4:7–15). Christians participate in the

paschal mystery by entering into the dynamic of Christ's self-offering for the sake of others, trusting in God to bring life—to others and to oneself—out of one's various "dyings." In these and so many other ways, 2 Corinthians—aptly called by a prominent commentator "the most extraordinary letter of the New Testament"¹⁵—is extremely relevant for Christian life today.

15. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul: A Critical Life*, 309.