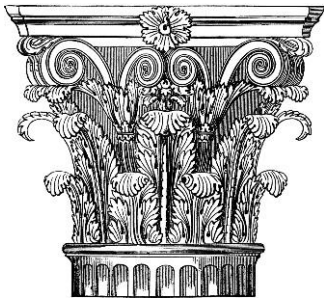


A Ministry in Crisis: Paul's 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians



Ever seen a project stumble or fail despite your best efforts? Second Corinthians finds Paul in a difficult place with his relationship to the church he founded in the southern Greek city of Corinth. While Paul sees the church as his spiritual children, the members instead have declared their independence from him, prodded by outsiders from Jerusalem and their own cultural assumptions. Paul forcefully defends his ministry's legitimacy, reasserting the gospel as the true seal of authority on his proclamation and the Corinthian church's existence as proof of his divine commission. Second Corinthians gives us Paul's unedited thoughts on his ministry and the pre-eminence of the gospel message in it.

Paul's Corinthian Correspondence

The letter of Second Corinthians was the last of four communiques between Paul and the church there. Having arrived in the Roman colony of Corinth about 50 CE, Paul immediately befriended Priscilla and Aquila, recently exiled from Rome by Emperor Claudius. He spent a year and a half in the regional capital, proselytizing both Jews and Gentiles before leaving in the summer of 52 CE for Jerusalem, then going to Ephesus. Other Christian missionaries visited in his absence, including the rhetorically-gifted, Alexandrian-born Jew Apollos and possibly even the Apostle Peter. Noting the church's failure to discipline members involved in sexual immorality, Paul first wrote a letter that has not survived, "**Letter A,**" in 53 CE. Soon after, two delegations from Corinth arrived in Ephesus with more questions, leading Paul to write **First Corinthians** in 53/54 CE. After Timothy delivered First Corinthians, his report so alarmed Paul that he immediately returned to Corinth to deal with issues. Heading north to Macedonia after a contentious visit, Paul decided to write another lost letter in 55 CE, "**Letter C**" or the "**Severe Letter,**" rather than add an additional visit to Corinth, which he felt would cause too much pain between them. Paul feared the letter would end his relationship with the Corinthians and, thus, was overjoyed when Titus reported back that the church had responded favorably. However, doubts and accusations about Paul continued after visits by the "false apostles" or "super-apostles," generating the fourth letter, **Second Corinthians**, to defend Paul's ministry in late 55 CE. Paul followed with a 3-month visit to the city in early 56 CE, during which he wrote the Letter to the Romans before departing for Jerusalem with the money collected for the believers there from the Greek churches.

Issues Discussed in Second Corinthians

Paul's argument explores four major issues dogging his relationship with the Corinthian church in Second Corinthians:

Factionalism: The divisions illuminated in First Corinthians continued to hamper the church (12:20). For example, only "the majority" (2:6) has responded to his calls to discipline a member. Paul defends his ministry against accusations, telling the church they are "withholding" their affections (6:12).

Collection for the saints: The offering for the Jerusalem church, originally suggested by the Corinthians, had stalled. Paul urged them to “finish the work” (8:10-11) to live in “equality” with the others (8:13).

Financial impropriety: Paul had turned away several requests to financially support his ministry (12:14). Accepting them would have placed him under the authority of those church members according to cultural mores. This deferral now led to accusations that Paul was “tricking” the church to gain financially in some way and “exploiting” the Corinthian church (12:16).

“False apostles”: Another large question revolves around the identity of Paul’s opponents, the “super-apostles,” who visited Corinth in Paul’s absence. Coming from Jerusalem, these agents degraded Paul for his lack of impressive presentation and recommendation letters (11:6, 3:1). The message of the “deceitful workmen” apparently revolved around Jewish Sophism, a movement that prioritized rhetorical skill (11:6), ecstatic experience (12:1) and access to Wisdom, the personified Spirit of God from Proverbs (10:12). They highlighted their Jewish heritage (11:22) and a Christian faith built on personal excellence (11:12). In response, Paul revels in weakness as the true source of grace (12:9-10).

The Literary Structure of Second Corinthians

A major interpretive issue for this letter involves how to parse it from a literary standpoint. Traditionally, Second Corinthians has been understood as a **composite of several different letters**, with divisions between chs. 1-9 and 10-13 on the basis of **theme, lexical analysis, and redaction criticism**, which examines literary “seams.” Some scholars have also posited 6:14 – 7:4 to be the lost “Letter A” and chs. 10 – 13 as the “Severe Letter” sent by Paul. This approach has a long history in theology (18th c. to present), but has been **challenged** by the results of **rhetorical criticism**, which examines the letter through ancient speech patterns. Paul’s letters were written to be heard in the assembly rather than simply read individually. Using this lens, the letter appears as **a unified whole**, with its sections given specific roles to play in the overall composition. These literary segments **re-affirm the aims of Paul** in sending the letter to the Corinthians with their structural emphasis on the issues under dispute.

Passage	Rhetorical Mode	Function
1:1 – 2	<i>Prescript</i>	Introduces author and recipient
1:3 – 7	Thanksgiving and <i>exordium</i>	Aims to make the audience open to the argument
1:8 – 2:16	<i>Narratio</i>	Explains facts of the situation and reason for writing the letter, with additional thanksgiving
2:17	<i>Propositio</i>	Basic thesis statement of the entire letter
3:1 – 13:4	<i>Probatio and refutatio</i>	Main argument section covering: <i>Paul’s approach to ministry (3:1 – 6:13)</i> <i>Deliberative digression on pagan feasts (6:14 – 7:1)</i> <i>Defense of the Severe Letter (7:2 – 16)</i> <i>Jerusalem collection (8:2 – 9:15)</i> <i>Rhetorical synkrisis comparing Paul and his opponents (10:1 – 13:4)</i>
13:5 – 10	<i>Peroratio</i>	An emotional appeal for change to the audience
13:11 - 14	Closing	Final greetings

