

2 Corinthians 1:1–2



PAUL, AN APOSTLE of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,

To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia:

²Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Original Meaning

LETTER OPENINGS in the first century followed the typical pattern, "(Sender) to (recipient): Greetings!" Paul customarily followed this form, but expanded these standard elements in order to indicate his own authority for writing, the recipient's qualification(s) for receiving what is written, and the Christian perspective on what we desire for one another.¹ In 2 Corinthians, however, Paul foregoes a detailed elaboration of his own authority and the status of the believers in Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 1:1–3) in favor of a nearly standard salutation. His only expansions are the reminders that he is "an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God" and that the Corinthians are the "church of God," who exist "together with all the saints throughout Achaia."

This unusual simplicity serves to emphasize that Paul is an "apostle" (Gk. *apostolos*) and that he owes his calling as an apostle to the "will of God." An *apostolos* is an emissary who is authorized and commissioned to carry out a personal mission on someone else's behalf.² Paul's use of the genitive, "an apostle of Christ Jesus," indicates that Christ is the one who has *directly* and *ultimately* sent him, while the reference "by the will of God" asserts that God is the *intermediate* agent of Paul's apostleship.³ Christ is the one responsible for sending

1. For examples of ancient letters and their forms and an analysis of this genre in the New Testament, see John L. White, *Light From Ancient Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), and Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter-Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

2. The discussion that follows is indebted at several points to the helpful summary by P. W. Barnett, "Apostle," *DPHL*, 45–51, and to the standard article by Karl H. Rengstorff, "ἀποστέλλω," *TDNT* 1:398–447.

3. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 82n.30, 434n.79. This use of "by the will of God" (*dia thelematos theou*) to express the intermediate agency of an action, here the intermediate agent of the passive action implied in the noun "apostle," occurs exclusively in Paul's writings; cf. Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 8:5; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1.

Paul, but God is the one who has made this sending possible. In other words, Christ sends Paul in accordance with God's will.

Separated from Paul's tradition and culture, it is easy to miss the significance of Paul's self-designation. There is no parallel in the Greco-Roman world for the use of the noun "apostle" to refer to an emissary who carried an authorized commission as a matter of sovereign appointment. Rather, the New Testament concept derives from the Old Testament, where the verb *apostello* occurs approximately 696 times in the LXX to refer to sending someone out on a mission or special task (the noun *apostolos* occurs only once in the LXX in 1 Kings 14:6). In all but twelve of these passages it renders the Hebrew verb *šalah* (= "to commission with a mission or a task"; cf. Gen. 32:4; Num. 20:14; Josh. 7:22; Judg. 6:35; 2 Chron. 36:15; Mal. 3:1).⁴

Although *apostello* is not a specifically religious term, in the LXX it becomes a technical designation for "the sending of a messenger with a special task" in which "the one who is sent is of interest only to the degree that in some measure he embodies in his existence as such the one who sends him."⁵ This meaning anticipates a later rabbinic aphorism, that "the one sent by a man is as the man himself" (*m. Ber.* 5:5). Rengstorf consequently concludes that in contexts where sending with a religious purpose is in view, *apostello* begins to become "a theological term meaning 'to send forth to service in the kingdom of God with full authority (grounded in God).'"⁶

In line with this development, Paul's own use of the term corresponds most closely to the use of *apostello* in regard to Moses and the prophets, where it signifies that they had been sent with an official commission as a representative of Yahweh and were thus unconditionally subordinate to God's will (cf. Ex. 3:10; Judg. 6:8, 14; Isa. 6:8; Jer. 1:7; Ezek. 2:3; Hag. 1:12; Zech. 2:8–9; 4:9; Mal. 3:1; 4:5). This is confirmed by the use of the verb in the New Testament as a whole, where it occurs 135 times, only twelve of which are found outside of the Gospels and Acts.⁷ Whereas in secular literature there

4. As Rengstorf observes ("*ἀποστέλλω*" 400), the exceptions occur only when the Hebrew idiom will not allow it (cf. Gen. 3:22; 22:12). Rengstorf points out that the nuance of *apostello*, over against *pepo* (to send), is not in the nature of the sending as such, but in the fact that *apostello* "unites with the sender either the person or the object sent" (398). Hence, in both secular and religious contexts, *apostello* implies a commission and "associated authorization," typically from either a king or a deity. "The men thus described are representatives of their monarch and his authority," or carry divine authorization that grants them "full religious and ethical power" (399, cf. its use by Cynics and Stoics, e.g., Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.24.6, 3.22.23, 69; 3.23.46; 4.8.31).

5. *Ibid.*, 400–401.

6. *Ibid.*, 406.

7. Cf. Rom. 10:15; 1 Cor. 1:17; 2 Cor. 12:17; 2 Tim. 4:12; Heb. 1:14; 1 Pet. 1:12; 1 John 4:9, 10, 14; Rev. 1:1; 5:6; 22:6.

is no essential distinction between *πέμπο* (to send) and *ἀποστέλλω*, in the NT *πέμπο* usually occurs when the emphasis is on the sending as such (cf. Rom. 8:3; 2 Thess. 2:11), whereas *ἀποστέλλω* carries the nuance of a commission.⁸

This same emphasis on being sent with a commission is found in the seventy-nine uncontested uses in the New Testament of the corresponding noun, "apostle" (*ἀποστόλος*), where all ten of its occurrences in the Gospels refer to the twelve "apostles" who were commissioned and sent out by Christ.⁹ Hence, although Paul's letters are the earliest writings of the New Testament, and although he uses the word *ἀποστόλος* more than any other New Testament writer, the origin of its specific use for Christian emissaries almost certainly goes back to Jesus, who himself was "sent" (*ἀποστέλλω*) by the Father (cf. Mark 9:37; Luke 4:43; John 5:36) and can therefore also be called an "apostle" (Heb. 3:1).

Moreover, the transition from the ministry of Jesus to that of the apostles is reflected in the fact that in the Gospels and Acts the action of "sending" (*ἀποστέλλω*) is emphasized, whereas in the letters the emphasis is on the one sent (*ἀποστόλος*). These statistics point to the unique meaning of "apostle" within early Christianity as a designation of those commissioned to preach and act in the authority of Christ's name (cf. Matt. 10:1, 7–8; Mark 3:14; 6:30; Luke 9:1–2). Paul's point in 2 Corinthians 1:1 is that the will of God that sent Jesus is the same will that Christ enacts in sending Paul to represent him as his "apostle."

The simple declaration in 1:1 thus reminds Paul's readers of his divinely appointed role and authority among God's people, thereby opening the way for the defense of his apostolic ministry that will be the focus of so much of 2 Corinthians (see Introduction). Indeed, Paul's self-designation in 1:1 is the first salvo in the battle to reaffirm his apostolic legitimacy (cf. 10:1–6). There can be no compromise between Paul's claim here and the claims of those whom Paul will unmask as "pseudo-apostles," "deceitful workmen," and "servants" of Satan (cf. 11:13–15). This affirmation of Paul's own authority as an apostle is most likely the reason why he also mentions Timothy, his "brother," as a cosender of the letter.¹⁰ By associating Timothy with

8. Cf. Rengstorf, "*ἀποστέλλω*," 402, 404, for the points concerning the use of the two verbs. In John's Gospel *πέμπο* occurs thirty-three times and takes on a theological significance in regard to the sending of Jesus by the Father that is unique to this Gospel.

9. Cf. Matt. 10:2; Mark 3:14 [textually uncertain]; 6:30; Luke 6:13; 9:10; 11:49; 17:5; 22:14; 24:10; John 13:16.

10. The fact that Timothy is identified as "our brother" (lit., "the brother") indicates that he is considered a coworker alongside Paul, but not a fellow "apostle" of equal status with Paul. "On the contrary," Ralph Martin suggests, "it is more probable that Timothy is mentioned in the letter's prescript because he needed Paul's endorsement of all he had sought to do as he undertook an intermediate mission between the visits of Acts 18:3 and 20:4" (2 Corinthians, 2). On Timothy, see Acts 16:1–3; 17:13–15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; Rom. 16:21; Phil. 1:1; 2:19–23; Col. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1; 3:2, 6; 2 Thess. 1:1; 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:2; Phlm. 1; Heb. 13:23.

himself in this way, Paul reaffirms the legitimacy of Timothy's ministry among them, both in his helping Paul to establish the church (cf. Acts 18:5) and in his recent visits on Paul's behalf (cf. 1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10). This too underscores the validity of the gospel the Corinthians have received through Paul's coworkers (cf. 2 Cor. 1:19).

Having asserted his own authority and the validity of Timothy's earlier ministry among them, Paul turns to the Corinthians as his addressees (v. 1b). His warrant for writing (i.e., he is "an apostle of Christ Jesus") is matched by their reason for receiving it (i.e., they are the "church of God"). Despite their past problems and recent rebellion, the repentance of the majority of the Corinthians (cf. 2:6; 7:2–16) has demonstrated that they continue to be God's people (cf. 7:2–16). The designation "church" (*ekklesia*) is one of two terms used in the LXX to define the local gathering of God's chosen people (cf., e.g., Deut. 9:10; Judg. 20:1–2; 1 Kings 8:14; Ps. 22:22; 26:5; 35:18; 40:9).¹¹ Thus, just as Paul owed his life as an apostle to the same will of God that had called Moses and the prophets (cf. 2 Cor. 2:16b; 3:4–5), so too the Corinthians owed their existence as Christians to the same mercy of God that had chosen Israel.

Hence, these twin designations, "apostle . . . by the will of God" and "church of God," connote a continuity with the people of God and her leaders under the old covenant. At the same time, they also underscore the reality of the *new* covenant, since Paul is an apostle "of Christ [i.e., Messiah] Jesus," and they are the *church* of God, not the synagogue (cf. 3:14–18). Moreover, the Corinthians are part of a larger gathering of "all the saints" (*hagioi*; i.e., "holy ones") scattered throughout the Roman province of Achaia, an area roughly equivalent with modern-day Greece. Corinth was the capital of Achaia and the home of the first of the interrelated churches in the region (cf. Acts 18:1–11; 1 Cor. 16:15).

Paul's specific reference to Corinth in relationship to this wider network of churches reflects the primacy and significance of Corinth as the center of the Pauline mission in the region, from which the gospel spread like spokes on a wheel (cf. 10:15–16). In writing to Corinth, Paul is therefore writing to *all* of the churches in Achaia, not only because he viewed them as belonging to one another, but also because he knew that as things go in Corinth,

11. It was used exclusively to translate the Hebrew term *qahal*, which was also sometimes translated by the Greek term "synagogue" (*synagoge*). But unlike *ekklesia*, *synagoge* was also used to translate the Hebrew word *ʿedah*, which overlapped in meaning with *qahal*, but could also be used as a more general term to refer to non-Israelites or wicked Israelites. In contrast, *qahal*, with its Greek equivalent *ekklesia*, was the more specific term, always being used of Israel in a positive or neutral sense. The Jewish use of *synagoge* no doubt led the early Jewish Christians to use *ekklesia* as their designation of choice.