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PAUL BARNETT

The Message of

2 Corinthians

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of 2 Corinthians
Power in weakness

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Author's preface

This is the day of the mega-commentary. Two massive studies on 2 Corinthians have recently appeared—Ralph Martin's and Victor Furnish's in the *Word* and *Anchor Bible* series, respectively. The strength of such works is their attention to detail and the exhaustive research into the meaning of the text, the cultural background of the times and the views of other commentators over the centuries. But there is a weakness inherent in these great works, despite the best efforts of the authors and their editors. It is, simply, that these commentaries are *so* large, many, many times larger than Paul's original letter. The result is that, while they are very helpful about details, they are so long that it is very difficult for the reader to stay in touch with the main themes and emphases of the apostle.

It seems to me that Paul envisaged that this letter would be read straight through, not broken up into paragraphs and studied microscopically. Of course the mega-commentaries have their place; but smaller works are also very important. One of the strengths of the *Bible Speaks Today* series is the relative brevity of the exposition it offers. The writer is able to keep the reader's attention focused on the apostle's essential message.

Among the commentaries written prior to this century, those by Calvin and Denney are still very rewarding. More recently, Barrett and Hughes have made distinguished contributions to the 2 Corinthians library—the former strongly historical, the latter powerful theologically. An outstanding brief commentary has been written by Harris.

The writing of this exposition has been a long odyssey for me. Long convinced that the letter was little read *as a whole* by Christians, I began speaking on it at a number of Bible conferences, culminating at the Church Missionary Society Summer School at Katoomba, New South Wales, in 1977. Since then a manuscript has been prepared in several drafts until it has reached this present form. In all this, I have enjoyed the kindly patience of John Stott and of Frank Entwistle from IVP, but above all of my wife Anita and our children David, Peter, Anne and Sarah.

2 Corinthians is great biblical literature. It depicts a powerful debate between Paul on the one hand and, on the other, the alliance between his shadowy opponents who had recently come to Corinth and the local church members who supported them. It is a fascinating record of that conflict. Above all, however, the letter is important for its magnificent theological message that the power of God is brought to bear on man, not in man's power, but in his weakness. My prayer is that my exposition will allow that message to be clearly heard.

PAUL BARNETT

Chief abbreviations

AV	The Authorized (King James) Version of the Bible, 1611.
Barrett	C. K. Barrett, <i>The Second Epistle to the Corinthians</i> (A. & C. Black, 1973)
Calvin	John Calvin, <i>Calvin's Commentaries</i> (Associated Publishers and Authors, no date)
Denney	James Denney, <i>II Corinthians</i> (Hodder and Stoughton, 1894)
Eusebius	Eusebius, <i>The History of the Church</i> (AD 325; translated by G. A. Williamson, Penguin, 2 1965)
Furnish	Victor Furnish, <i>II Corinthians</i> (<i>Anchor Bible</i> , Double-day, 1984)
Goudge	H. L. Goudge, <i>The Second Epistle to the Corinthians</i> (<i>Westminster Commentaries</i> , Methuen, 1927)
Harris	Murray Harris, <i>The Expositor's Bible Commentary</i> , vol. 10 (ed. F. Gaebelein; Zondervan, 1976)
Hughes	Philip Hughes, <i>Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians</i> (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1962)
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
LXX	The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century BC
NASB	The New American Standard Bible (1963)
NIV	The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984)
<i>Nov. Test.</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
RSV	The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2 1971, OT 1952)
RV	The Revised Version of the Bible (NT 1881; OT 1885)
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1964–76)

Commentary references
are *ad loc.*

Introduction

1. Paul and the Corinthians

a. Paul's visits and letters to Corinth

Paul's relationships with the Corinthians span a seven-year period. In ad 50–52 he spent a year and a half in Corinth establishing the church. Some time in 55 or 56 he made a second visit (2 Cor. 13:2), what he calls a 'painful visit' (2:1), and stayed with an emergency disciplinary problem in the church. In 56 or 57 he came to Corinth for the third time (13:1) and departed for three months before taking his leave of them.^[1]

Paul wrote 2 Corinthians from Macedonia in the north of Greece after his second visit to Corinth, to prepare the church for his third, final visit. Paul had decided to phase himself out of his ministry to the provinces surrounding the Aegean Sea (Asia, Macedonia, Achaia) and to establish a new work in Spain, at the western extremity of the Empire.^[2] This letter and Paul's proposed farewell visit, therefore, must be seen within the apostle's wider missionary plans.

b. Differences in style between 1 and 2 Corinthians

Of the churches founded by Paul, the Corinthian church proved to be the most demanding. Their problems, both among themselves and in their relations with him, caused him to write not only the two lengthy letters we have, but also two others which have not survived—one written before, the other after, our 1 Corinthians.^[3]

There are major differences of emotional tone between the two surviving letters of Paul to the Corinthians. The first indicates major problems of behaviour (e.g. divisions, slack moral standards, lawsuits, unkindness to the poorer or less-gifted members) and of doctrine (e.g. doubts about the coming resurrection of believers). There is evidence that the believers questioned Paul's abilities and authority.^[4] Nevertheless the apostle writes objectively, confidently^[5] and with his emotions well controlled throughout.

The second letter, however, is less well arranged than the first, and, moreover, reveals a range of emotional extremes in the author. On the one hand he is overjoyed and has confidence and pride in the Corinthians (7:4), while on the other, he is deeply hurt that they are withholding their affection from him (6:12) and that they have to 'put up' with him (11:1). Moreover, they have been ready to believe a whole range of criticisms against him—of being worldly and irresolute (1:17), of moral cowardice in writing instead of coming (1:23), of his lack of inner strength (4:16), of being demoralized and theologically deviant (4:2), of being an impostor (6:8), of being corrupt and exploitative (7:2), of not being a true minister of Christ (10:7), of being weak in speech when present and powerful only by letter, when absent (10:1, 10; 11:6, 21), of being a fool, even mad (11:1, 16, 23), of breaching convention or of craftiness in declining their financial support (11:7; 12:13–16), and of lacking mystical and miraculous credentials of ministry (12:1, 11–12). Throughout this letter Paul is forced to defend his doctrines, his ministry and his character. He expresses sorrow that the Corinthians do not reciprocate the love he had for them (6:11–13) and that they do not acknowledge the genuineness of his apostleship and what, under God, has been achieved by him among them (3:1–3; 12:11–13).

Nevertheless, despite the emotions he displays, the letter ends in a strong and confident way, evidence perhaps of Paul's God-given resilience.

c. Why were the Corinthians unhappy with Paul?

What, then, had occurred between the two letters to explain their differing characters and, in particular, to account for the battery of complaints and accusations which Paul now faced? Broadly speaking, there are two factors which contributed to the Corinthians' unhappiness with the apostle, as reflected in his second letter to them.

First, there were what we might call residual cultural problems. It is evident that Paul's relationships with these southern Greeks had been strained for some time. The first letter, written about two years earlier than the second (i.e. in about 54 or 55) reveals that not all the Corinthians acknowledged Paul's authority as an apostle, some preferring the ministry of Apollos, others the ministry of Cephas (Peter), both of whom had visited Corinth more recently than Paul.^[6] Jewish members would have been attracted to Cephas, a Palestinian Jew who had been a leading disciple among the original followers of Jesus. Educated Greek members, on the other hand, would probably have been drawn to the gifted orator Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew.^[7] To the latter group, fascinated as they were by intellectualism and sophisticated discourse, Paul, the manual worker with amateurish speaking abilities, would have appeared singularly unimpressive in an age in which rhetoric and oratory were highly valued. Not least offensive to this group was Paul's utterly perverse refusal to accept money from them in patronage of his ministry, though he was not above accepting money from the rustic northerners in Macedonia (11:7–9). Moreover, his insistence on disciplinary action against wayward members still caught in (pagan) temple worship or fornication was, many of them would have felt, over-zealous. That Paul in his second letter^[8] as well as in his first continued to admonish the Corinthians about idolatry and immorality indicated that these were ongoing, unresolved problems among them. It is clear that some at least of the criticisms against Paul, which are so evident in the second letter, had their origins in his earlier relationships with them.

The second and major source of criticism of Paul arose, apparently, from the recent arrival of certain Jewish 'ministers' or 'apostles' (as they called themselves; 11:13, 23), whom, however, Paul does not name or identify. These newcomers were seeking to persuade the Corinthian church that Paul's theology was in error and, specifically, that the covenant of Moses was still in force. They argued for their legitimacy as ministers on the grounds of mystic and paranormal abilities, claiming that Paul lacked these superior gifts and, moreover, that he was personally and morally deficient in many ways. The coming of these 'apostles' may have heightened some of the long-standing Corinthian

criticisms of Paul as well as creating new complaints. Unquestionably the arrival of these intruding ‘ministers’ and their campaign against Paul’s doctrines and character are the chief reason for the difference in emotional tone evident between the first and second letters.

2 Corinthians, then, was written to prepare the way for Paul’s pending farewell visit to them. In it he attempts to explain why he deferred the third visit and wrote to them instead (chapters 1–2), expressing joy, nevertheless, that the moral problem which necessitated the second, painful visit and the (now lost) ‘sorrowful’ letter has been resolved (chapter 7). Further, in writing to them he urges that the collection of money for the Jerusalem church, which had lapsed, be revived and completed before his arrival (chapters 8–9). The major part of the letter, however, is devoted to his answer to these recently arrived ‘apostles’—to their ‘different gospel’ (chapters 3–6) and to their assault on his character (chapters 10–13).

2. The importance of 2 Corinthians for Christian belief

Despite the structural unevenness of the letter and its emotional extremes, 2 Corinthians makes a magnificent and abiding contribution to our understanding of Christianity, in the following teachings.

a. God has proved faithful in keeping his ancient promises by his recently inaugurated *new* covenant of Christ and the Spirit (1:18–20; 3:3–6, 14–18). Moreover, God faithfully delivers and holds on to those who belong to Christ (1:3–11, 22; 4:7–9; 7:6).

b. The new covenant, based as it is on the graciousness of God (6:1), has now surpassed and replaced the old covenant (3:7–11). It powerfully meets man’s needs at his points of greatest weakness—in his aging and death (4:16–5:10) and in his alienation from God due to sin (5:14–21).

c. Christ is the pre-existent Son of God (1:19; 8:9), the image of God (4:4), the Lord (4:5), the judge of all (5:10), the sinless one who died as substitute and representative for all people, God reconciling the world to himself through him (5:14–21). 2 Corinthians contains Paul’s most comprehensive statement about the death of Christ (5:14–21).

d. Genuineness of New Testament ministry is not established by ‘letters of recommendation’ or by a would-be minister’s mystical or miraculous powers, but by his faithfulness in persuading and his effectiveness in converting people to the Christian faith (5:11–12; 3:2–3; 10–7). The very existence of the Corinthian congregation was Christ’s living letter of recommendation of Paul’s ministry (3:2–3). The pattern and measure of the minister’s lifestyle is the sacrifice of Christ (4:10–15; 6:1–10; 11:21–33). Establishing true criteria for genuine Christian ministry is one of the major contributions of this letter.

e. The ‘word of God’, the gospel, has a definable, limited content which neither ministers nor anybody else may add to or subtract from (4:2; 11:4). This gospel is exceedingly powerful in bringing rebellious humans under the rule of God (4:6; 10:4–5).

f. Paul was, both in person and through his writings, the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles. The risen Lord gave Paul this ‘authority’ in his historic commissioning of him on the road to Damascus (10:8; 13:10), and it is still exercised to subsequent generations through his letters, which now form part of the canon of Scripture. This letter is very important because it is Paul’s major defence of his apostleship to his detractors—both ancient and modern. In it Paul answers the perennial question why he should be regarded as having authority over churches and Christians.

g. Christian giving and serving arise out of and are in response to the graciousness of God displayed towards and in us. Cheerful and generous giving, in all its forms, brings a harvest of great enrichment to the givers (chapters 8–9).

It is significant that Paul’s expression of these teachings in this letter was inspired by the personal crisis he underwent during his rebuttal suffered on his second visit to Corinth (2:1–4, 9), his desperate escape from Ephesus (1:8–11) and his deep anxiety for the Corinthians experienced at Troas and Macedonia (2:13; 7:5–6). It is no exaggeration to say that the coming of these ‘apostles’ to Corinth with their ‘different gospel’ and their ‘other Jesus’, accompanied as it was by a massive assault on the integrity of Paul, could easily have spelt the end of Pauline Christianity there. That it survived and continued is probably due, in no small part, to this powerful letter.

3. Difficulties for the modern reader

Modern readers face two problems as they grapple with letters like 2 Corinthians. On the one hand we today are limited in our understanding of everyday life in a city like Corinth 2,000 years ago. With this in mind, for example, we do well to familiarize ourselves with its unique geographical position, located as it was on a narrow isthmus which was happily placed to catch the east-west sea trade and the north-south land traffic. The Roman writer Strabo described Corinth as ‘always great and wealthy’. The city is estimated by some moderns at approximately 750,000 people (comparable with Adelaide or San Francisco). The interested reader is referred to the introductions to the standard scholarly commentaries for more background information about Corinth. As we read Paul’s letters to these people it is worth asking ourselves: Were the Corinthians urban or rural, rich or poor, educated or uneducated, young or old, Jewish or Gentile? While our understanding of Paul’s original readers must remain incomplete, much labour has been devoted to answering these and related questions. Through modern sociologically based studies, we know, for example, that the Corinthian Christians were predominately middle-class, literate city dwellers, though with numbers of poorer members as well as slaves. A few members were drawn from the upper socio-economic echelons of Achaian society. There were Jews as well as Gentiles within the congregation.⁹

The other, possibly greater, problem we face is that our only knowledge of the problems in Corinth is Paul’s letter, which is written to counteract the problems as he saw them. Unfortunately he does not name or identify the ‘wrongdoer’,

the injured party (7:12), the unnamed critic (10:7–11) or the newly arrived ‘apostles’ (11:13). We can only guess at the numbers and alignments of those who supported and those who opposed Paul.

The identity of the newcomers remains one of the great unsolved (and unsolvable?) mysteries of the New Testament. The data from the letter, when analysed, suggests a profile which is difficult to imagine. Clearly they are ‘Hebrews ... Israelites ... Abraham’s descendants’ (11:22), which suggests that, like Paul,¹⁰ they are Jews with roots deep within Judaism. That they are ‘servants of righteousness’ (11:15) suggests service of the Jewish law and of Pharisaism. Once again Paul comes to mind when he writes of himself that ‘as for legalistic righteousness’ he was ‘faultless’.¹¹ His insistence that the glory of Moses is now outshone appears to be in rebuttal of the newcomers’ promotion of the Mosaic covenant (3:7–17). Their missionary labours, he implied, were a (Jewish) intrusion into his (Gentile) sphere of ministry and therefore in breach of the missionary concordat at Jerusalem a decade earlier, which allocated to Paul the apostolate to the Gentiles. This side of their profile is not too difficult to comprehend, given what we know of the Judaizing, anti-Pauline mission reflected in the letter to the Galatians. Barrett’s description of them as ‘Jews, Jerusalem Jews, Judaizing Jews’ seems accurate and appropriate.¹² Even their paranormal, ecstatic and mystic qualities (5:11–13; 12:1–6, 12) are quite capable of being located within a Jewish framework.¹³



The problem with identifying these ‘ministers’ lies in their ready welcome in Corinth, in particular by those who valued rhetoric and speech, the very people who were so critical of Paul for his deficiencies in this area (10:7–11). How was it possible that these ‘Hebrews’ were so well received by (at least some of) the educated Greek members of the Corinthian church? If these new ministers were Aramaic-speaking ‘Hebrews’, why does Paul need to engage in *Greek* rhetorical practices of ‘comparison’ and ‘boasting’ which are so dominant in chapters 10–11? The difficulty of the newcomers’ identity—and this is reflected in the scholars’ failure to reach a consensus—is that some of the data suggest they are Jews while other data suggest they were of Greek culture and origin.

Two comments may be made about this problem. First, it must not be assumed that being ‘Hebrews ... Israelites ... Abraham’s descendants’, demands that they spoke only in Aramaic or Hebrew. Once again we are reminded of Paul himself, who, though a ‘Hebrew born of Hebrews’ and one who spoke Aramaic,¹⁴ was also educated in the Greek language and was a competent writer of that language. It is possible that Paul’s deficiencies were related to his appearance and voice, and perhaps also illness-related. Since Paul’s written Greek reveals no small rhetorical ability,¹⁵ it is by no means inconceivable that these Palestinian ‘apostles’ possessed skills of eloquence. Secondly, a close examination of the passages where Paul defends his speech (10:7–11; 11:5–6) suggests that Paul may be answering long-term, indigenous Corinthian criticisms rather than responding to comments that his rhetoric is inferior to the newcomers’. In fact the problem seems to lie with the unnamed Corinthian critic of Paul who is confident that he is Christ’s minister, who complains that Paul’s ‘letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing’, and who objects that Paul fails to act when present with them, being powerful only by letter from a distance (10:7–11). This person, and others with him, may have expressed this criticism of Paul for some time. The arrival of the newcomers, with their mystical gifts, may have provoked further opposition of Paul from sections of the Corinthian church who were already critical of him.

Paul writes of 'super-apostles' (11:5; 12:11) and 'false apostles ... masquerading as apostles of Christ' (11:13). Are these one and the same or are they different? While many suggest that the 'super-apostles' were *the* apostles, leaders of the Jerusalem church like James and Peter, this seems unlikely. The context identifies the 'super-apostles' (11:5) as those who have come to Corinth proclaiming 'another Jesus' and 'a different gospel'. In 1 Corinthians 15:11 Paul is emphatic that he and the apostles proclaim the *same* gospel. It seems better to say that the 'super-apostles' were, in fact, the 'false apostles'.^[16]

What, then, was the mission of these newcomers in Corinth? These 'apostles' do not appear to be promoting the circumcision of the Gentiles, as the Judaizers had done ten years earlier, reflected in Galatians. 2 Corinthians does not refer to the Gentile-circumcision dispute. As I have suggested elsewhere, theirs may have been a two-pronged mission, directed on the one hand to Jews and on the other to Gentiles.^[17] The complaint made against Paul in Jerusalem was that he told Jews to abandon Moses, the circumcising of their children and the Jewish customs, and that he did not impose the Jerusalem decree requiring Gentiles to desist from idol-sacrificed meat and eat only kosher-butchered meat.^[18] Quite possibly these carefully phrased criticisms of Paul in Jerusalem represented the main elements of the Judaizing anti-Pauline agenda. On this theory these 'apostles' sought to maintain Jewish Christians in Corinth within the Mosaic covenant and to bring Gentile Christians under the requirements of the Jerusalem decree. These are some of the difficulties for the modern reader. Nevertheless, despite such gaps in our knowledge, the message of the greater part of the letter is clear enough.

I. Explanations: why Paul wrote instead of coming (1:1–2:13)

1. God and Paul (1:1–11)

Events of deep distress to Paul form the immediate background to the second letter to the Corinthians. Corinth and Ephesus, centres to which important missionary labour had been devoted, had become focal points of profound personal difficulty for him. At Corinth he, their father in the faith, had been rebuffed and criticized. In Ephesus a city-wide riot had occurred over his ministry so that it was no longer safe to remain there. Unwelcome in the one and endangered in the other, he went to Macedonia where he began to write his letter. First he greeted his readers and praised God for comforting him in his recent sufferings. Then he proceeded to tell them what had happened since his ‘painful’ visit to Corinth and to explain why he was writing instead of returning immediately. As in his other letters Paul introduced near the beginning what would be a major theme throughout, in this case his experience of suffering.

1. The apostle to the church (1:1a)

By his opening words, *Paul, an apostle ... by the will of God*,^[1] Paul pointedly reminds the Corinthians, some of whom were questioning his authority, that he is not an apostle by self-appointment but *by the will of God*. From their point of view he had been but one of a number of notable ministers who had visited Corinth. Apollos and Cephas (= Peter), perhaps in their own ways more impressive than Paul, had been in Corinth more recently and had created, no doubt unintentionally, their own factions within the church.^[2] Even more recently a group of ministers had arrived whom Paul neither names nor identifies, but who had actively opposed his teaching and influence among the Corinthians.^[3] Understandably some of the Corinthians were wondering why Paul thought his relationship with them was special.

For his part Paul based his claim to be an apostle on the Damascus Road event when the risen Christ appeared and instructed him: ‘I will send (*apostellō*) you ... to the Gentiles.’^[4] Fundamental to Paul’s ministry, therefore, was the ‘revelation’ (*apokalypsis*) of God, received near Damascus, that Jesus the Son of God had commissioned him to evangelize the Gentiles.^[5] Paul’s complete loyalty to Christian ministry over many years, even though he had been a leading persecutor of the church, led the ‘pillar’ apostles James, Cephas and John, at a meeting in Jerusalem, to recognize, formally, that Paul ‘had been entrusted (*i.e.* by God) with the gospel to the uncircumcised ... an apostolate (*apostolē*) to the Gentiles’.^[6] Paul’s sphere of ministry among the Gentiles, and therefore among the Corinthians, was assigned to him by God (10:13). His right to exercise a ministry among them, both by letter and by physical presence, was not based on empty demand but arose out of the ‘authority the Lord gave us for building ... up’ the Corinthians (10:8; 13:10). Paul, therefore, was *an apostle ... by the will of God*, as he often stated.^[7]

At the beginning of the letter Paul is establishing his apostleship as a point of contrast with these newly arrived ministers who, apparently, also presented themselves as ‘apostles’ (11:13). They based their claim on ‘letters of recommendation’ (3:1) as demonstrated by supposedly ‘superior’ displays of gifts, superior, that is, to Paul’s gifts (11:5–6; 12:11–12). Paul described them as ‘false apostles (*pseudapostoloi*) masquerading as apostles of Christ’ (11:13). The opening words of this letter indicate Paul’s concern to impress upon the Corinthians his credentials as a genuine apostle of Christ. It is striking that while the *basis* of Paul’s apostleship was Christ’s Damascus Road call, the *evidence* he gives in support relates to his lifestyle—a lifestyle characterized by the sacrifice of Christ expressed in apostolic ministry. Although he could point to the existence of the Corinthian church as a ‘letter of recommendation’ and refer minimally to mystical and miraculous elements in his ministry,^[8] his chief self-characterization was in a life of hardship, conflict and weakness as the bearer of the word of God focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus. While the source of Paul’s authority was Christ, his authority was attested not by marvels or mysteries but, as Barrett helpfully puts it, ‘in the pattern of death and resurrection stamped upon his own life and work’. Sacrifice and self-giving were for Paul, as they remain for us, indispensable evidence of genuineness as Christian believers.

This letter also comes from Paul’s colleague Timothy who is, by contrast, referred to as *our* (lit. ‘the’) *brother*, or fellow Christian. This should remind us that, although Timothy was a missionary and a Christian leader, he was not an apostle of Christ. Although there may be no harm in using the word ‘apostle’ metaphorically of certain Christian leaders today, it is unhelpful to use the word in a theological sense apart from those to whom it is applied in the New Testament. Some ministers today, like Paul’s opponents in Corinth, also call themselves ‘apostles’ to reinforce their authority over churches. It is preferable to limit the use of the word ‘apostle’ to *the* apostles within the apostolic age.

2. The church of God (1:1b)

What would the Corinthians have understood Paul to mean when he addressed them as *the church*? For many today the word means either a religious building or Christianity as an institution. Paul’s readers, however, would have understood *church* (*ekklesia*) as an everyday term for a gathering of people or, more technically, for an official assembly such as a parliament or court. Both meanings can be illustrated from Acts 19, where on the one hand there is reference to an ‘assembly’ of the people of Ephesus (verse 41), and on the other to the ‘legal assembly’ of the city council (verse 39). Clearly the Corinthians would have read Paul’s words as being directed to the ‘gathering’ or ‘assembly’ of Christians in Corinth.

But what did Paul mean? The word *ekklēsia* occurred frequently in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint,^[9] which Paul usually quoted. There it was used of great ‘gatherings’ of the people of God, for example when ‘all the tribes of Israel stood before the Lord in the assembly (*ekklēsia*) of the people of God’.^[10] As the people of Israel met, it was in the awareness that they ‘stood before the Lord’. Similarly, King David addressed Solomon with the words: ‘I charge you before the whole assembly (*ekklēsia*) of the Lord, and in the audience of our God.’^[11] In the New Testament Stephen spoke of God’s gathered people as ‘the congregation (*ekklēsia*) in the desert’ for whose sake Moses received ‘living words’ from the angel of God.^[12] In addressing them as ‘the church of God’ Paul meant the Corinthian believers to understand that in their gathering together they were all that the gathered tribes of Israel had been—the church of God, no less. If to us *church* means a religious building or institution and to the Corinthians it simply meant an assembly of any kind, to Paul it meant specifically ‘an assembly’ of God’s people in God’s presence to hear God’s word.

It may be observed that the substance of this letter is encapsulated within the first verse: ‘the apostle ... to the church’. Here on the one hand is the church; here on the other is the apostle who now addresses it. The question is: Will the church at Corinth submit to the authority of the apostle Paul? There is no doubt that Paul claimed such authority,^[13] and it seems that the Corinthians ultimately followed Paul, not the intruding ministers. The very survival of his letters is evidence of that.

The question for the next generation of Corinthian Christians, and indeed for us today, is: Are Paul’s letters authoritative outside the immediate period in which he lived and wrote? Are they ‘Scripture’ for us? Was he right in claiming this authority?

Let me suggest two reasons for accepting Paul’s authority today. First, he did not write his letters merely for the immediate circumstances of the addressees. He directed that his letters were to be read in churches other than those to whom they were addressed.^[14] The formal and weighty nature of Paul’s letters suggests that he expected them to benefit readers beyond the immediate recipient group. Secondly, Paul’s Christ-given authority over the Gentiles existed as much in physical absence through his letters as in physical presence through his preaching.^[15] There can be no doubt that the original apostles regarded Paul as an apostle and his writings as Scripture.^[16] From post-apostolic times his letters were recognized in the churches as part of the canon of Scripture, alongside the four gospels and the Old Testament. While in these distant times his intention is not always clear to us, we are no more free now than the Corinthians were then to behave and do as we choose. The writings of Paul, then, declare a gospel to be believed and yield principles of behaviour to be followed in both the first and the twentieth century.

In addressing his readers as *saints* Paul does not imply that they were exceptionally heroic or devout, as we infer from the word, but rather that they were, in God’s eyes, his ‘holy people’.^[17] The Bible speaks of ‘saints’ as quite ordinary people whom God graciously regards as special to him through their faith-commitment to his Son Jesus. Moreover, God not only treats believers as holy, he actively makes them so by the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the inner recesses of their lives, conforming them to the pattern of Christ.^[18]

In addition to the gathered congregation in Corinth, the capital, the letter-writer also greets readers *throughout* (the province of) *Achaia*. While the narrative of the Acts^[19] and the two letters provide considerable data about Christianity in Corinth, knowledge of Christians in the wider province is limited to a few brief references.^[20] Certainly the Corinthians in themselves were unworthy to be regarded as the *church of God* or as *saints* or ‘holy ones’. We have only to consider their unloving and even immoral behaviour set out in the first letter.^[21] Even more seriously, this present letter shows them to be interested in the ‘other’ Jesus as presented by the false apostles (11:3–4). Despite this Paul does not disown them as Christians or repudiate their profession of church membership.

Subsequent Christians have not always been as charitable as Paul. There have been many instances where differences over tiny or obscure points of theology have led to bitter division, with one group unchurching the other, in the name of doctrinal purity. The church in Corinth fell far short of the standards of belief and behaviour many since that time have demanded. Nevertheless Paul addresses the Corinthians as *the church of God*, as God’s ‘holy ones’, and teaches and exhorts them to behave as if they were.

3. Paul’s prayer (1:2)

It was a convention in ancient letters for the writer to express pious wishes for the health and well-being of his readers, invoking the names of the gods. Although he observed this practice in the form of his greeting, the apostle introduced the distinctively Christian hope that his readers will enjoy *grace and peace* which come *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Nevertheless, the words used here by Paul do not have any special force in this letter, since they are found in identical form in greetings in six other letters.^[22] In brief, the peace for which Paul prays is that blessed enjoyment of harmonious fellowship with God our Father enjoyed by those who have taken hold of his *grace* or graciousness shown them in the birth and death of *the Lord Jesus Christ* (8:9; 6:1).

4. Blessed be God (1:3–7)

If in his opening sentences Paul follows the established letter-writing format, in the next five sentences he observes another convention, also christianized, the Jewish blessing of God. Those who attended the synagogue of that time would

pray, 'Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers.'²³ The re-shaping of this prayer, now directed to 'the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ', gives some indication of the impact of Jesus as the Son of God on early Jewish Christian believers like Paul and Peter.²⁴ The christianization of both the greeting and blessing as expressions, respectively, of Greek culture and Jewish religion, are evidence for the profound conversion to Christianity of the Hellenistic Jew, Saul of Tarsus. As with so much else in this letter, what he writes here is a direct commentary on his own personal circumstances. In the midst of acute suffering (1:8–9) Paul had experienced the comfort of God, and for this he devoutly declared his blessing on *the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort* (verse 3). He was also locked in a fierce debate with the Judaizing 'apostles' who proclaimed what Paul calls 'another Jesus'.²⁵ It was important for him to establish at the outset that God, the God of the Old Testament and of the Jews, was *the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ* (verse 3). God is to us the Father of Jesus and also 'our Father' (verse 2). Let those Corinthians who were succumbing to the Judaizing influence understand that God is able to be known as *Father* only as they acknowledge Jesus to be God's Son and their *Lord*. Their understanding of Jesus' relationship with God profoundly affected their own relationship with God. To reject Jesus as Lord would be to repudiate God as Father.

Paul's blessing of God is tightly packed with interlocking ideas, three of which we now examine.

a. Christ's sufferings carry over to us

In writing the *sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives* (verse 5), Paul is teaching that some kind of solidarity exists between Christ and his people. Jesus foresaw that both he and his followers would suffer. God would 'strike the shepherd,' he said, 'and the sheep will be scattered.'²⁶ He was referring not only to the events of the evening of his arrest but also to the scattering of his followers throughout the whole period until his return. Moreover, he taught that he and his followers were one in ministry both received and withheld. Referring to the future withholding of food, clothing and care from his 'brothers' the disciples, he said, 'Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'²⁷ Paul had good reason to understand this. After Paul had heaped suffering on the believers, the risen Lord asked him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'²⁸ This understanding of the solidarity of Christians with Christ in his suffering is by no means confined to Paul. Peter told his readers in Asia Minor to 'rejoice ... as you participate in the sufferings of Christ'.²⁹ The messianic age began with the coming of Jesus; but it is an age marked by sufferings—his own and those of his people.

In this short paragraph the verbs and nouns for *comfort* (which presupposes suffering) occur ten times, for *trouble* three times and for *suffer(ing)* four times'. Directly or indirectly, suffering is referred to seventeen times in five verses! But to which suffering is he referring? Paul had in mind, in particular, what he called *troubles* (verse 4). The Greek word contains the idea of 'pressure', the 'pressure' which he felt as a result of his ministry. Paul's challenge to idols and idolatry in Ephesus brought upon him such an oppressive sense of burden that he expected to die as a result of the experience (1:8–9). His insistence on sincere repentance among the Corinthians led him to write to them 'out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears' (2:4; cf. 7:8–10). While Paul doubtless was as prone to money worries, health problems and relationship conflicts as other people, faithfulness to Christ and to the ministry were the chief source of his *troubles*.

b. God comforts us

God is *the Father of compassion* (verse 3), which means he is a compassionate Father as well as the source of all compassion. Moreover, he is *the God of all comfort* (verse 3) something which reminds us of God's call to Isaiah to 'comfort, comfort my people' (Is. 40:1). That this may be a picture of motherly tenderness is implied by God's words through Isaiah: 'As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you' (Is. 66:13). The God of the Greeks, by contrast, was quite indifferent to human pain. This deity, which merely existed, possessed no knowable qualities and exerted no influence in the world. The God who is revealed in the Bible, however, has knowable qualities (*the God of all comfort*) and is active in his creation (he *comforts us*).

If God is the source of mercy and comfort, Christ is the channel through whom these things come to us. It is *through Christ* that *our comfort overflows* (verse 5). This means, as in all our relationships with God, we seek *comfort* and *compassion* in the name of Jesus, that is, as Christian believers. Whatever doctrines about Jesus the newcomers were teaching, the apostle made it clear that while all good things have their origin in God, they come to us through Christ. Thus he taught that not only the 'new creation' and 'reconciliation' (5:18) but also 'comfort' and 'compassion' come to us from God, through Christ

c. We are to comfort others

These verses teach us that Christian believers are united both with Christ and with one another. On the one hand, both troubles and comfort come to us through Christ; on the other, *we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God* (verse 4). The comfort we receive from God through Christ we are both to give to and receive from one another. God's comfort, therefore, is not to terminate on the one who receives it. God comforted Paul by the coming of Titus to Macedonia (7:6), just as Titus had previously been comforted by the Corinthians (7:7). Paul in turn will comfort the Corinthians (verse 6), God's comfort thus having come full circle, from the Corinthians, through Titus to Paul, back to the Corinthians.

The intimacy of relationships in and between the New Testament churches is striking. Because the members knew one another they were able to give and receive comfort. In modern churches we often shrink from those relationships through which the comfort of God could be imparted. How are we to comfort others? Clearly we need to care about others and to

be sensitive to their feelings and emotions, to ‘rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn’.^[30] Modern counselling methods stress the importance of paying serious attention, with full eye-contact, as people speak to us. There is, moreover, a helpful emphasis on identifying the emotions, including depression. If we would be used by God to comfort and encourage, we must be prepared to listen without interruption so as to allow others to express to us their deepest feelings. While all Christian ministry must be directed ultimately to the mind and the will, it will frequently begin with the emotions.

Power and weakness, which together represent the unifying theme of this letter, are hinted at in this opening paragraph. All believers, like Paul and the Corinthians, suffer the weakness of *troubles* through their Christian service. Nevertheless the power of God in his mercies and *comfort* meets us at our point of need. Great though our sense of weakness may be, the power of God is always greater. Some ministers today unhelpfully raise the hopes of their people by promising them immediate health and prosperity, as their due portion from God. These promises appear to be tailor-made for a society whose need for instant gratification is unprecedented in history. Paul, by contrast, soberly refers to his readers’ *sufferings*, and he promises, not immediate healing and success, but God’s *comfort* which they will experience as they patiently endure (verse 6).

5. God is a deliverer (1:8–11)

The ‘sufferings’ and ‘troubles’ of the previous paragraph are now to be expanded upon. He relates to the Corinthians the terrible ordeal he had experienced back in Ephesus and explains how God had delivered him.

a. *Hardships in Asia*

Paul calls what occurred in Ephesus *the hardships we suffered in ... Asia*, something he amplifies further as having been *under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure* (verse 8). Here the picture is of a ship being weighed down as by the ballast, or of being ‘crushed’ (RSV). Those who have experienced or are familiar with depression will feel that Paul’s imagery has a modern psychological ring to it. Two qualifying phrases add to the severity of the description. The first, *great* (Greek, *kath’ hyperbolēn*) means, by implication, ‘that which exceeds’ or ‘surpasses’ description. The second, *far beyond our ability to endure* (Greek, *hyper dynamin*) is literally ‘beyond (our) power’. The whole phrase could be paraphrased as: ‘We were indescribably, beyond the limits of our power, brought down into the depths.’

We have discussed this phrase in detail for two reasons. First, Paul’s words describe his state of mind at the time of writing so graphically that they warrant a more extensive treatment. Secondly, Paul will use the three key ideas (‘power’, ‘weight’, ‘indescribable’) in important later passages, where, however, he will turn them upside down so as to indicate the surpassing ‘power’ of God, the ‘indescribable’ glory, and the ‘power’ of Christ perfected in weakness.^[31]

Naturally we would like to know precisely what had happened to Paul in Asia for him to write *we despaired even of life* (verse 8), and *we felt the sentence of death* (verse 9). The verb *felt* (RSV ‘received’) translates the Greek perfect tense, suggesting that the death sentence had already been passed but was not yet executed. Various ‘death sentences’ have been suggested; for example, serious illness, an Ephesian imprisonment, and the riot in Ephesus.^[32] The latter appears the most likely. Was it the case that the silversmiths’ conspiracy made Paul realize that his ministry would always bring him into conflict with those whose livelihood depended on the religious beliefs his gospel committed him to reject? Moreover, wherever he went, the Jews conspired against him,^[33] so that later in the letter he wrote both of ‘danger from my own countrymen’ (*i.e.* Jews) and ‘danger from Gentiles’ (11:26). Our suggestion, and it must remain a suggestion, is that from the experience in Asia, he knew it was only a matter of time before the various forces pitted against him would succeed. By the goodness of God, however, Paul had received a reprieve: *God delivered us from such a deadly peril* (verse 10).

b. *Deliverance*

If Paul had received *the sentence of death* he had also come to *rely on God* (verse 9) and to set his *hope* on God (verse 10). The Greek verbs are in the perfect tense, indicating events in the past with continuing consequences. Thus the ordeal in Asia, whatever it was, still impinged on Paul while also stimulating ongoing reliance and hope in God. We may say that the new, deep awareness of death was accompanied by a new, deep trust in God.

Through the experience of utter helplessness Paul had come to a new appreciation of the power of the God *who raises the dead* (verse 9), referring, that is, to God’s recent deliverance of Paul. The God on whom Paul relied was the living God, the God who continues to act now. He was not only the God who ‘raised the Lord Jesus’ (past tense) and who ‘will ... raise us’ (future tense) (4:14; 5:15), he is also the God who continues to raise the dead (present tense), that is, metaphorically, to deliver his people from dire circumstances (verse 9). It is good that the great saving acts of God in the historic resurrection of Jesus and the coming resurrection of believers have been set in the creeds of the church. It is, however, very easy to regard this God as remote and distant from our present situation, to think of him as the God of theology and not of reality. Ministers-in-training need to be taught about the God of yesterday and the God of tomorrow. But if they lack personal confidence in the God of today, how will they help their people in the manifold crises of life? In the same way, practising pastors must not shrink from the problems encountered by their people. Rather, they must draw their people into a deeper confidence in God who will comfort and sustain them. In writing that the experience in Asia was to make him *rely ... on God* (verse 9), Paul shows us that God’s power reached even into those evil circumstances to draw Paul into a deeper relationship with himself.

Paul’s confidence that God *has delivered us* and that *he will deliver us* again (verse 10) refers both to God’s ultimate deliverance in the great resurrection and also to God’s interim deliverance from day-to-day problems. Paul did not separate the God of the creeds from the God on whom he depended each day. Intellectually inclined Christians tend to

emphasize the former, and experience-oriented Christians the latter; but for Paul there was no contradiction. The interim deliverance has caused Paul to trust God more deeply for the final deliverance when he will raise his people from the dead.

We should remember, however, that God's 'deliverances' in this life are always partial. We may recover from an illness, but there is no way to sidestep our last enemy, death. We are inextricably tangled in the sorrow and suffering of the world, whose form is passing away.^[34] Only in the resurrection of the dead is there perfect deliverance.

c. Prayer

It is no accident that the references to God's deliverance of Paul and to prayer are placed side by side. The God who *raises the dead* (verse 9) and who *delivered Paul from such a deadly peril* is responsive to prayer. As the Corinthians are united in prayer for Paul they are said to be *helping* or '*working together*' with God (verse 11), though there is no suggestion that God is dependent upon human help or prayers.^[35] Nevertheless, Paul envisaged that *by your prayers* the blessing of deliverance from peril would be *granted* so that *many* would *give thanks* to God. Although he had now come to Macedonia he still faced danger. The Corinthians were powerless to help, being hundreds of miles away, yet Paul was confident that God, through their united prayers, would do what they in themselves could not do—deliver Paul from trouble. The words in *answer to the prayers of many* stand in the original, literally, as 'out of many faces',^[36] which may perhaps be understood as the beautiful picture of many faces upturned to God in thanksgiving.

This brief sentence refers both to *prayer* and to *giving thanks*, indicating the important and close connection between them. Prayer to God for specific needs is rightly followed by thanksgiving; indeed the one is incomplete without the other. According to Furnish, 'petition no less than thanksgiving is rooted in a profound trust in the power and goodness of God'.

Modern man is so blinded by his technology and his own sense of power that he regards prayer and thanksgiving as weak, useless and a joke. The reality, however, is that everybody is at the mercy of social, political and economic forces. The apprehension that human omnipotence is in fact an illusion is a precondition to the discovery, or rediscovery, of the power of God and of prayer and thanksgiving. Paul's helplessness in the face of strong forces led him to experience, doubtless through prayer, the power of God to deliver him.

2. Reply to Corinthian criticism (1:12–22)

In popular novels nothing ever goes wrong for the hero. He strides through each episode of the story with success after success. It is not like that for ordinary people in real life; it was not like that for Paul. Because he did not return immediately to Corinth, as he had indicated he would, the Corinthians now regard Paul as a double-minded man, unable to stick to his plans. One senses in these words of Paul that nothing he can say will be able to change the Corinthians' opinion about him. And yet from his viewpoint he had the best of reasons for changing his plans and honourable motives for doing so.

1. The Corinthian criticism (1:12–17)

The defensive nature of his words reveals that Paul was under strong criticism from the Corinthian church, or a section of it. They felt that he had *conducted himself badly both in the world and also in his relations with them* (verse 12). Specifically in question were his *sincerity* and *wisdom* (verse 12), and they alleged that what he had written to them was difficult to *understand* (verse 13). No less serious was their belief that Paul was a vacillating, *worldly* man ready to say Yes and No *in the same breath* (verse 17).

What had Paul done to provoke this hostility in Corinth? Their complaints arose from the changes Paul had made to his plans to come and see them before he finally withdrew from the Aegean region. Originally,^[1] when the churches of Corinth and Ephesus were relatively stable, he had written that his withdrawal plan would be Asia → Macedonia → Achaia → Judea. But after writing 1 Corinthians it was necessary to make an unscheduled 'painful' visit (2:1) to Corinth during which he said that he would return to them before going to Macedonia (verses 15–16). However, instead of coming back to them immediately, he wrote a letter (1:23; 2:4), and reverted to his original plan to go first to Macedonia and then to Achaia. Looking at things from the Corinthians' standpoint, Paul had made major changes to his plans and could be seen to be a vacillating man whose behaviour reflected a *worldly* rather than a godly wisdom. But is this fair to Paul?

While there is no claim that the apostles were other than sinful, fallible humans, there were a number of factors about Paul's circumstances which explain and justify his behaviour. First, it became apparent by the time he left Corinth that the problem which occasioned his visit was still unresolved. If one visit failed, would another, hard on the heels of the first, achieve anything further? Back in Ephesus he may well have reasoned that a letter and time for the Corinthians to think things over might be a better approach. As it happened the (lost) letter to the Corinthians did bring about a resolution to the problem (7:5–16).^[2] Secondly, a crisis had occurred in Ephesus which put his life at risk and which necessitated his withdrawal (1:9).

Although Paul refrains from saying so, it may have been the Corinthians who were in the wrong in this matter. Instead of showing loving concern for him in his grave difficulties in Ephesus they had written him off as unspiritual and vacillating. We do well to avoid such ill-formed and unkind opinions as shown by the Corinthians. Let the facts first be gathered and explanations provided before firm opinions are reached. Then, if something bad has occurred, let our response be tempered with the meekness and gentleness which Paul said was the mark of his ministry (10:1). These

considerations are advanced to explain Paul's actions. But what does he say?

2. Paul's response

Paul's reply, when reduced to basics, is that he has interrogated his *conscience* (verse 12) in prospect of *the day of the Lord Jesus* (verse 14), when, as he states elsewhere, 'the Lord ... will expose the motives of men's hearts' ³. The testimony of his conscience is that, on that day, Paul will be shown to have behaved both in the world at large and towards the Corinthians with holiness and *sincerity that are from God* (verse 12). These motives have been operative, his conscience tells him, both in the former (lost) letter as well as in the present one. He had written so as to be understood, which *in part* he was; he now writes with the intention that the Corinthians *will understand fully* (verse 14). Their questioning of his motives is ill based. When the great and coming day arrives and everything is revealed he is confident that they will be *boast* of him.

The word *boast*, which is common in this letter, ⁴ has an ugly and un-Christian ring to it. It must be remembered, however, that boasting of achievement was common among both Gentiles and Jews. As a matter of convention successful Roman soldiers commemorated their victories in wall paintings and in epic narratives. Jesus' parable of the Pharisee in the temple tells us of the man's confidence in his religious deeds. ⁵ Paul's opponents, the visitors in Corinth, appear to have boasted of their credentials and experiences to legitimize their mission; they 'are boasting in the way the world does', he writes (11:18). In using their style, but boasting rather of 'weakness', (12:9), of the 'Lord' (10:17), and, in this case, in *God's grace* (verse 12), Paul is actually inverting their practice and throwing it back in their teeth. So far from revealing arrogance, which indeed it does in his critics, Paul's boasting actually reflects his humility before the Lord. In particular the apostle is concerned to show that his motives, irrefragable as they are, do not arise from within himself, from *worldly wisdom*, but from *God's grace*. Barrett comments that 'out of the theology of the grace of God emerge, as gifts from God himself, the ethical virtues of *simplicity* and *sincerity*. This is the foundation of Paul's argument in this paragraph; and it ought to be recognized by the Corinthians themselves.'

3. God is faithful to his promises (1:18–20)

Continuing his defence, he turns now from his written to his spoken message (verses 18–19) which is, in summary, that *God is faithful* to his promises. Paul is affirming the same confidence in God as expressed by spokesmen from earlier generations, for example Balaam, who asked of God: 'Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil?' ⁶ Clearly Paul shared Balaam's belief in the faithfulness of God to his word. The numerous promises of God, given through the mouths of many prophets at different times and places, ⁷ all converge like so many lines at one point, the Son of God whom Paul and his companions now proclaim. There is no ambiguity, *Yes* and *No*, about the Son of God. It is as if God is saying 'Jesus Christ, my Son, is my "yes" to every promise I have ever made. He fulfils everything I have ever said.' From God's side, as well as from ours, everything is focused upon Christ and it is for this reason that the prepositions *in* and *through* are so important. Because God's promises come true *in* Christ, we say the *Amen* (Hebrew, 'it is true') *through* Christ to the glory of God (verse 20). Christ is the 'go-between'. God speaks to us *in* Christ and we, who have received the message, speak back to God *through* Christ. The apostle is teaching us that we may approach God by no other path and glorify him by no other means. Sin prevents us approaching God in our own right; but we may draw near *through* Christ.

Since Christ is the fulfilment (God's *Yes*) to all of God's numerous promises, it follows that the Old Testament, where the promises are made, really makes sense only when read with Christ in mind. Christ is the end to which the Old Testament is pointed, the goal toward which it moves. ⁸ To read the Old Testament without reference to Christ is like reading a mystery novel with the final chapter torn out. All the clues are scattered throughout the story, but without the finale no-one could be sure of the explanation of the mystery or the identity of the one in whom all interest has been aroused. The gospel of the Son of God, as proclaimed by Paul, is the final chapter of God's story, which explains all, and without which everything which precedes remains enigmatic and 'up in the air'.

Paul shows us, in passing, what he thought of the old covenant. In defending his ministry against those who, having rejected the new covenant, sought to bring the Corinthians under the old, it would have been easy enough for Paul to over-react and reject it altogether. A little later he will say that the old is now fulfilled and outshone by the new covenant of Christ and the Spirit (3:7–11). Nevertheless the new covenant occurs only because of the promises made by God under the old covenant. ⁹ In our attitudes to the old covenant there are two extremes to avoid. On the one hand we may not treat the old as if the new covenant has not superseded it, as the newcomers were doing. On the other, we are not at liberty to dispense with it from our canon of Scripture as Marcion the Gnostic did a century later. What Paul teaches us is that the one God binds the new to the old covenant in one continuous self-disclosure which began in the book of Genesis and which reached its final and glorious revelation in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

4. God is loyal to his people (1:21–22)

Paul turns from the promises of God in the remote past to the present experience of the Corinthians. If God has proved faithful to his ancient promises he has also proved faithful in his present dealings with the Corinthians. Speaking to them as people who have heard and responded to the message of the Son of God, he assures them that God himself will keep them in their relationship with Christ. The word for *makes ... stand firm* was used in business law to signify a seller's guarantee

to honour a contract. God is the guarantor of our life-long relationship with the Son of God. The present tense shows this to be no short-term guarantee but a permanent one.

What Paul looks forward to is the time when God will bring us into the physical presence of Jesus at the resurrection of all believers (4:14). The faithful God who is ensuring that we remain Christians until then gives us, in the meantime, the Holy Spirit who is described as a *seal* and a guarantee (verse 22).

The *seal* in antiquity was an impression made on wax by a special instrument (also called a seal) to indicate the ownership of a document. We continue to attach the company seal to important legal documents. The presence of the Holy Spirit within us is a seal of ownership. We should remember that we do not belong to ourselves but to God.^[10] The 'guarantee' in Paul's day was a deposit or down-payment in pledge of payment in full. In modern Greek this word is also used of an engagement ring, which retains the idea of a guarantee or pledge of some greater thing which is yet to come. The greatest thing we look forward to is being gathered together with Christ at the resurrection (4:14), and to being transformed into the likeness of Christ in the meantime (3:18; 4:17).

How do we know we have the Holy Spirit dwelling in our hearts? In most (stable) families a child has the sense of belonging to his parents in their family. He not only bears their surname but also has an awareness that he is their child and they are his father and mother. Through the Holy Spirit God conveys to us the awareness that he is our Father and we are his children.^[11] Only through the Holy Spirit do I have this filial awareness and confidence. Do I understand that God is my Father? If I do, then this is the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within my life. The God who was faithful in keeping his promises made under the old covenant is also faithful and active in keeping me in relationship with Christ, and as a reassurance of his fidelity, he has given the Holy Spirit as a *seal* of ownership and guarantee of completed contract. The apostle will have much more to say about the Holy Spirit who is fundamental to the ministry and experience of the new covenant (3:3, 6, 17–18).

Paul does not explain where God's activity ends and ours begins. Elsewhere he teaches that while 'God works in' Christians, they must at the same time 'work out (their) salvation'.^[12] This passage in 2 Corinthians, then, relieves us of no responsibilities. Rather, it sets before us the faithful activity of God in keeping us in our relationship with Christ. So far from allowing slackness, this is intended to encourage a deepening relationship with Christ in the confidence that God is the source and the guarantee of that relationship.

We have now come almost to the end of Paul's first chapter of this letter. What he has written has been both autobiographical and theological. He has explained what has happened to him since he last saw them while also defending himself from criticism and misunderstanding. Yet he has also spoken about God in relationship to himself, and it is important to focus attention on this, since it might otherwise be misread. He does not write as an academic theologian but as a practical missionary and evangelist. He writes nothing about God which he has not experienced first hand in the realities of hardship and the crucible of suffering. Paul was afflicted; but God comforted him (verses 3–4). His life was, and continued to be, in danger; but God rescued him and would rescue him again, in answer to the prayers of the Corinthians (verses 9–11).

Now, in defending his own integrity, Paul has reminded the Corinthians that they are and will continue to be Christians because of the faithfulness of God. The God who made the promises has faithfully kept them in the coming of his Son, and it is this God who has 'commissioned' Paul and his companions to proclaim Jesus Christ the Son of God, in whom the Corinthians now believe. It is God who is keeping them in their relationship with Christ, though the Holy Spirit given as a *seal* and guarantee.

The God who was faithful to his promise is also loyal to his people. Paul is a minister of this faithful God and of his new covenant. Let the Corinthians understand that, despite their criticisms of him, he too is faithful to them and loyal in his dealings with them.

While we should make every effort to keep to our arrangements and undertakings, occasions sometimes arise, as they had with Paul, where unforeseen circumstances make it difficult or impossible to do so. The harsh and critical attitudes of the Corinthians warn us how easy it is to react with only partial knowledge or with bitterness. Clearly our relationships to our friends, unlike those of the Corinthians, should be marked by sympathy, understanding, kindness and generosity.

3. Why Paul changed his plans (1:23–2:13)

During his recent emergency visit to Corinth Paul had told the Corinthians that he would pay them a return visit in the near future. Due to the force of circumstances, however, he had written them a letter—the so-called 'sorrowful' letter. He would now visit them at the end, not the beginning, of his itinerary. The change of plans certainly looked bad. Paul's reasons for delaying his return were, to put it briefly, to avoid further pain in his relationship with them.

1. Reasons for not returning (1:23–2:2)

At some point back in Ephesus Paul *made up his mind* (verse 1) not to make another *painful visit* to Corinth. The verb he uses also means 'judged', implying careful consideration in arriving at this decision. He must have known that his failure to visit them would involve serious criticism of his character. Why, then, did he decide not to come?

It was, he writes, to *spare* them (verse 23) further grief (verse 2). Clearly the former visit had involved both Paul and the Corinthians in suffering (2:3), though what specifically had happened back in Corinth is not stated.

Our difficulty is that, while Paul and the Corinthians know what he is referring to, we today do not. The best we can do is to gather the bits and pieces of information in the letter and attempt to reconstruct the situation in Corinth.

It seems that the problem in Corinth had been caused by a particular man, as 2:5–9 suggests: ‘if *anyone* has caused grief, *he* has.... The punishment inflicted on *him* ... forgive and comfort *him* ...’. Paul speaks of ‘the *one* who did the wrong’ and ‘the injured party’ (7:12). Evidently a person in the Corinthian church had committed an act of aggression, immorality or injustice against another person. ¹ Since Paul writes of a ‘majority’ who subsequently punished him (verse 6), we may suppose that a minority supported, and perhaps continued to support, the offender, possibly because he was an influential member of the Corinthian congregation.

Paul had undertaken his unscheduled visit to Corinth in an attempt to resolve the matter. It seems that while the majority agreed with Paul’s views they were not prepared to take any action. This, apparently, was the context in which Paul inflicted ‘pain’ upon the Corinthians, though he does not say what he means. It may be significant that they also distressed him (2:3). Is he speaking of the pain involved in confronting the Corinthians with the need to take serious moral action which they were as yet unprepared to take and which has led to a sense of failure on their part and a sense of disappointment on his? It is difficult to be sure of the details but it seems clear that he is speaking about the pain of damaged relationships between himself and them.

Paul’s method of dealing with this problem is interesting in establishing principles of pastoral relationships. Unlike the newcomers who ‘enslave’ them (11:20) Paul does not *lord it over* the Corinthians (verse 24). Jesus is their Lord; Paul is their servant (4:5), their ‘co-worker’ (1:24). Again, unlike the newcomers, he does not pretend to be self-sufficient (2:16; 3:4–6), but expresses his dependence upon them (verse 2). Although he is their apostle he also belongs to them (1:6).

On his return to Ephesus he came to realize that to revisit Corinth in the immediate future could only lead to more pain—both for them and for him. If the recent visit was unhelpful, would another one prove any different? Perhaps he is reflecting some of the insight of modern industrial relations procedures where, the negotiations having reached an impasse, it is better for the parties to separate for a cooling-off period to get things in perspective. The same principle applies in strained marriage relationships where time for thinking rather than more talking is what is needed. Another visit, he now believed, could only make matters worse.

It is important to understand that he is doing much more than merely explaining and defending his actions. In expressing his dependence on them (verse 2) as one who *works with* them (verse 24), he is stating a fundamental principle of gospel relationships. He is not self-sufficient but dependent; and they are too. Moreover, he is open in disclosing his motives and reasons for not coming, which he says, have been worked out before God (1:23; cf. 1:12). If ‘disguise’ is the mark of his opponents, the false apostles (11:13), then openness is the mark of Paul, an openness which is made possible by the grace of God in forgiveness. If Paul is transparent, then, clearly, so too should the Corinthians be transparent. In embodying the gospel qualities of dependence and openness Paul shows himself to be the great Christian leader and teacher he was, continually modelling a godly lifestyle before the people.

2. The letter (2:3–4)

The letter to which he refers was written from Ephesus, but unfortunately it has not survived. It was delivered by Titus who brought their response to Paul in Macedonia. Paul will also refer to his letter in 7:8–13 where we will make further comments.

It should be noted that Paul wrote in the knowledge that the majority agreed with him (2:3), but were not prepared to take whatever action was necessary to deal with the wrongdoer. He did not write to achieve a fundamental change in their attitude to him or in their opinion of the matter in question. Confident of their loyalty he wrote in an attempt to secure a unified action towards the offender (7:12). Their lack of action against the wrongdoer was a barrier preventing the restoration of relationships between them and the apostle.

It was this restoration that Paul really sought. Their behaviour towards the offender was merely a means to that end (2:9; 7:12). What he wanted was that they *would all share his joy* (verse 3), which could happen only when he and they shared the same moral perspectives in this matter. Paul’s over-riding objective, therefore, was spiritual unity between them and him, a condition of which was a common mind towards the wrongdoer, expressed on their part by appropriate action.

Paul’s lost letter was, apparently, deeply personal. The nature of the offence brought *great distress and anguish of heart* to him. He wrote *with many tears* to express *the depth of his love* for them and *not to grieve* them (verse 4). The writer was torn between his loving concern not to bring pain and his determination not to weaken godly standards for their congregational life.

Again, there is much to learn here about qualities of spiritual leadership which are so deeply needed at every level of church life. As we look at the whole passage (1:23–2:4) we see that Paul does not lord it over or dominate them; he works ‘with’ them (1:24). He loves them and tells them so (2:4b). Though they do not act in the way they should, he does not condemn them; he weeps with them (2:4a). He needs their ministry to him and tells them he needs it (2:2, 3a). He does not hold back from admonishing them (2:3). He is open about his motives and reasons, which he discloses to them (1:23). Our church life would be greatly enriched if, in our relationships with one another, Paul’s principles of spiritual leadership were followed.

3. Forgive the man (2:5–11)

This matter, whatever it was, had been the cause of spiritual suffering for the whole Corinthian congregation and doubtless also for Paul, deny it though he may (verse 5). And the cause of all this suffering has been just one man! What is the apostolic method of dealing with difficult customers or the openly immoral? So often the responsibility falls on the

unfortunate pastor, so that it becomes a two-way power struggle between the offender and him. Here, however, the *majority* conveyed to the person what was probably the verdict of withdrawal from fellowship from him.^[2] Paul calls it a *punishment* (verse 6). His policy has borne fruit; as a result of his letter the Corinthian church as a whole has dealt with the matter. The members have apparently come to realize that the offender has not only hurt Paul, he has hurt the whole church, such is its corporate nature (verse 5).^[3] The ‘sorrowful’ letter has achieved what the ‘painful’ visit failed to achieve—a clear-cut unified response among the Corinthians (7:11).

The corporate nature of Christianity comes out clearly in the passage. Paul’s words are addressed not only to individuals, but also to the church whose members minister to one another by their gifts.^[4] Lively and open relationships provide the best context for the word of God to work out its purposes among us. This is why the local congregation is so highly regarded and referred to as ‘the church of God’ (1:1).

Therefore he exhorts them to restore the now-penitent man. They are to *forgive and comfort him* (verse 7) and express their *love for him* (verse 8). Further, they are able to reassure him that Paul also forgives him, which he is able to do, despite his deep feelings *in the sight of Christ* (verse 10). This unusual expression may mean the ability to forgive someone only through one’s relationship with Christ. Now that the matter has been resolved it is important that the man should be restored in his relationships with them. Paul’s forgiveness of the man was, he states, *for their sake* (verse 10) that is, *in order that Satan might not outwit us* (verse 11). Satan, who is ever ready to destroy churches, will, in the absence of love and forgiveness, quickly bring bitterness and division. Now that the man has turned from his evil ways it is important that he, and the group who support him, be reconciled through forgiveness with the main body of the congregation.

4. Paul in Troas (2:12–13)

a. *The rendezvous: Troas*

Paul arranged to meet Titus in Troas to hear how the Corinthians had responded to his letter. Since he speaks of coming to Troas *to preach the gospel of Christ* (verse 12), it may be that he had been planning for some time to come there for that purpose. His forced withdrawal from Ephesus had provided him with the opportunity to do so. Troas, then, would be the place to which Titus was to bring the Corinthians’ reply to Paul. (The arrangement appears to have been that if Titus had not come before winter closed the seas to shipping they would meet in Macedonia.)

Troas, although scarcely mentioned by surviving documents of the ancient world, appears in the New Testament as a transit city for travel between northern Greece and Asia Minor, as recent scholarship has shown.^[5] Paul’s earlier visit to Troas had been remarkable for two reasons. According to Acts it was at Troas that Luke joined Paul’s company for the first time, as may be noticed in the change of pronouns from ‘they’ to ‘we’.^[6] It was also at Troas that the ‘Macedonian man’ appeared to Paul in a vision bidding him to ‘Come over ... and help us’.^[7] From Troas, then, Paul and his companions departed to Macedonia, and from there to Achaia, and its capital, Corinth. When Paul writes of saying *goodbye to them* (verse 13), it is clear that there were at least some Christians in Troas.

b. *An open door and a restless spirit*

The ‘opened door’ happily matched his intention in coming to Troas which was (literally) ‘*for the gospel of Christ*’ (verse 12). God opened the door of opportunity at Troas. Other references also speak of God opening doors for Christian ministry.^[8]

Paul, however, was so preoccupied with the Corinthians and their likely attitudes to the letter that he *had no peace of mind* (literally ‘spirit’, verse 13). Although the reason he gives for this restlessness is that he *did not find his brother Titus there*, he means us to understand that concern for the Corinthians was the chief source of his anxiety. This is another example of Paul laying bare his inner emotional life to the Corinthians (*cf.* 1:8; 2:4). It is possible that Paul makes these disclosures deliberately so that the readers will understand the reality of his weakness, as opposed to the dazzling image of powerful self-sufficiency projected by his opponents. He wants people to relate to him as he is (12:6b), and to understand that if he prevails it is not in his own power, but God’s (4:7; 12:9–10). This has something to say to the minister or church leader who is tempted to engage in image-making as practised by media-conscious advertisers and politicians. For Paul, integrity (4:2) and reality, even reality about weakness, were fundamental to the gospel.

His zeal for the gospel brought him to Troas, but his passionate concern for the Corinthians kept him from staying there, despite the opportunities for preaching the gospel which now existed. Significantly, Paul revisited Troas a year later when finally withdrawing from the region. On that occasion he remained for seven days.^[9] Perhaps God kept the door open?

c. *My brother Titus*

While Paul regarded all believers as ‘brothers’, some enjoyed a special relationship with him. Epaphras, for example, who evangelized the Colossians, is spoken of as ‘our dear fellow-servant’.^[10] Titus, in all probability converted through Paul, enjoyed a close relationship with the apostle. He will refer to him as ‘my partner and fellow worker’ in his labours among the Corinthians (8:23). God had given Titus, like Paul, a deep and affectionate concern for the Corinthians (8:16; 7:15).^[11]

In this letter Paul reveals how dejected he had been—in Ephesus (1:8), in Troas (2:13) and in Macedonia (7:5). When God restored Paul it was by means of the arrival of his good friend Titus and through his encouragement. If we would be used by God to ‘comfort the downcast’ (7:6), it will be important to give ourselves in loyal and encouraging friendship to others. Loyal Christian friends are treasure beyond price; Titus is an admirable model.

Paul's pastoral strategy is illuminating. As well as his public ministry to congregations, it is evident that he devoted special attention to key individuals such as Titus, Archippus, Timothy and Luke.¹² By a sustained one-to-one fellowship Paul was able to multiply his ministry through these able fellow workers. Modern pastors can readily adapt this principle by setting aside a few hours a week for concentrated ministry to key or needy individuals.

What happened next? On arriving in Macedonia, did he find Titus? How had the Corinthians responded to the letter? Having aroused our interest, Paul, for reasons that are unclear, leaves us in suspense. Rather, he will engage in a long digression about the apostolic ministry of the new covenant. Not until 7:5 will he resume his narrative and say what happened when he came to Macedonia.