



Second Corinthians

Second Corinthians 6-7: Interpolation

Chapters 6 and 7 bring to a close the meditation on Paul's ministry and his relationship with the Corinthians and the return to the practical considerations of Paul's travel plans, last reported at 2:13. They also contain, as already noted, a section that many scholars suspect is an intrusion or interpolation into the text. The probable interpolation took place when the segments of various letters that make up 2 Corinthians were brought together, most likely after Paul's death.

The Final Exhortation to the Corinthians (6:1–13, 7:2–4)

The meditation on Paul's ministry ended in 5:19–21 with a climactic proclamation about the heart of the Gospel and Paul's role in it. In Christ God is reconciling the world to Godself and Paul is an "ambassador" (5:20) of that message. Reconciliation is in the air for all the reasons and with all the implications that Paul had spelled out in the previous chapters. What remains is to make a final appeal to the Corinthians to accept the olive branch and in the process to accept Paul himself. As he will indicate, he has good grounds for thinking this appeal will be received, but it does not hurt to have Paul's own personal statement about his hopes.

The appeal for reconciliation is made directly in 6:11–13 and 7:2–4. Before making that direct appeal, Paul prepares the way with an exhortation not to "accept the grace of God in vain" (6:1). Scripture (Isaiah 49:8) comes to Paul's aid in declaring that the moment is now (v 2). The scriptural text speaks of the day of salvation; but Paul is focused not on some eschatological event, but on the restoration of his relationship with the Corinthians that he hopes will take place now. In this climactic moment Paul deftly defines once again his own ministry, at the same time calling the Corinthians to share in the values and attitudes that Paul claims as his own (vv 3–8). These verses recall by now familiar themes, that Paul is beset with adversity, but not devoid of hope. Death and life, sorrow and joy, poverty and wealth coincide in paradoxical ways in his life (vv 9–10), because that life reflects the paradox of the cross, where suffering and glorious reconciliation combine. Living by that paradox produces the virtues that Paul claims for himself and hopes for in the Corinthians, "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love" (v 6).

In the heart of his appeal (vv 11–13), Paul describes his own condition in graphic terms. Paul's image is quite graphic and strikingly concrete: "We have spoken frankly to you; our heart is

wide open to you” (v 11). Yet Paul’s message is clear. In humble love he begs for the Corinthians’ forgiveness. Though he knows the Corinthians have been upset by and reserved toward him, he asks them to open their hearts to him as he has to them (v 13). He asks them to receive him and denies having caused injury (7:2). He does not want to offend; he knows that they love one another (7:3).

The expression that concludes his appeal strikes a more positive note and prepares the way for the good news of the final passage about Paul’s travel plans. Paul has, he says, great confidence in and comfort from the Corinthians (7:4).

The Interpolation: A Severe Warning (6:14–7:1)

The tone abruptly and unexpectedly changes with a harsh admonition not to be “mismatched with unbelievers” (6:14). Reinforcing the admonition is a series of antitheses, between justice and injustice, light and darkness, Christ and Beliar (a name for Satan found in the Dead Sea Scrolls), believer and unbeliever.

The concern expressed here has not been part of Paul’s discourse about his ministry or his relationship with the Corinthians in the general context of 2 Corinthians. It does recall concerns expressed in some of his earlier advice to the community, such as his call to “clean out the old yeast” (1 Cor 5:7), or, more concretely, not to “keep company with sexually immoral persons” (1 Cor 5:9–11). An image that Paul used in 1 Corinthians 6:19 to frame his concern about the moral purity of the community resurfaces here. As the last of the series of antitheses, Paul contrasts the “Temple of God” with “idols” (2 Cor 6:16). As in 1 Corinthians the implication is that the community, like the Temple, is a space to be kept holy by keeping it free of “unbelievers.”

In 1 Cor 6:9 Paul noted that the advice not to keep company with certain types of people was something that he gave in his first, lost letter to Corinth (Letter A). The similarity in theme of this portion of 2 Corinthians to what was apparently in Letter A is the basis for thinking that this paragraph belongs to that letter.

The conclusion of the “fragment” (7:1) appeals to another term, “holiness” that also looms large in Paul’s earlier discourse with the Corinthians (1 Cor 1:30; 6:11; 7:14). It too belongs to the same general metaphorical realm of the Temple and its holiness with which he framed his argument in 1 Corinthians.

Why the fragment came to be placed here is worth pondering. Its concern with preserving the character and mission of the community certainly strikes a different note from the general context and its plea for reconciliation. Perhaps an editor was concerned that too much emphasis on the effort to effect reconciliation endangered the rigor of the community’s moral stance.

Travel Plans (7:5–16)

Earlier in the letter Paul described the situation from which he was writing. He planned a visit to pass through Macedonia and visit Corinth (1:16). He expected to meet his emissary to the Corinthians, Titus, in Troas, in northwestern Asia Minor. The meeting did not happen and so Paul went on to Macedonia (2:13). He picks up the story here, reporting that he suffered some unnamed tribulation in Macedonia (v 5), but also met Titus (v 6). What Titus delivered was good news of consolation. The Corinthians had not turned their backs on Paul but were open to reconciliation.

Throughout the first seven chapters of 2 Corinthians Paul has interwoven words of reflection, appeals to the Corinthians, and apologetic remarks about his own work as an apostle. The same combination marks this final section. As soon as he tells the Corinthians that he has heard good news from Titus, he launches into another apology for the harsh letter that he had previously sent (Letter C), part of which we have suggested survives in 2 Cor 10–13. Paul acknowledges the pain he caused and refuses to repent for it (v 8), for it had a positive outcome. The sorrow caused by the letter apparently caused a change of attitude, or repentance, on the part of the Corinthians (v 9).

Paul works several changes on the theme of positive sorrow. Using his typical antithetical style, he contrasts the sorrow that is somehow “godly” with mere earthly sorrow. One sorrow results in penance and salvation, the other in death (v 10). He then offers a catalogue of the effects that he believes his letter and the godly fear it produced had on the Corinthians: “earnestness, eagerness to clear yourselves, indignation, alarm, longing, zeal” and even “punishment.” Some of these effects, though with a positive result, do not seem particularly pleasant! In any case, the Corinthians proved to be “guiltless” (v 11); the ultimate effect of their response was positive for Paul.

A final note of apology marginalizes the effect of the focus of Paul’s tearful letter on the individual who caused him the most grief and whom Paul had forgiven earlier in the letter (2 Cor 2:5–11). The issue was, says Paul, larger than their personal conflict (v 12).

All of the nastiness is now behind us, says Paul in conclusion. Titus, the emissary, is joyful and so is Paul (v 13–16).