

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Early Church Writings
Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians
July 1, 2020

Name, authorship

1. Paul writes to persuade the Corinthian church, which he had founded, to maintain its exclusive relationship with him as an apostle and with the gospel of Jesus he proclaimed.
2. After an earlier dispute with the Corinthians about Paul's fund-raising for the Jerusalem church, a new group of missionaries – apparently distinguished by exception rhetorical and spiritual gifts—has led church members to reject Paul's leadership and message.
3. Paul reacts by restating his historical relationship with the Corinthian church, explaining the travels that have taken him away from the, and rearticulating the style of leadership and the singular message that characterize his gospel and that distinguish him as a true apostle of Jesus.

Structure

1. Not a single letter, but a combination of at least 3 letters from Paul to the Christ-community in Corinth.
 - a. Most common divisions are chapters 1-7, 8-9 and 10-13, though probably not in that sequence.
2. Provides a glimpse into Paul's continuing relationship to one of his communities
3. Paul founded the Corinth community about year 50 and spent a year or two there.
4. Paul had written another letter (1Corinthians) and had received one from him.

Content –

1. Paul refers to “a painful visit”- refers to another letter written in “distress and anguish” and “with many tears”.
2. In 1st section (chapters 1-7)- Paul's tone is not combative and there is radiant and luminous language
 - a. May have been written last
 - b. They reflect a past conflict which seems to be more or less resolved; conflict is not the dominant theme
 - c. Central affirmations:
 - i. The ministry of the Spirit (which is life in Christ, the new covenant) is superior to the ministry of death in tablets of stone.
 - ii. Metaphor of “unveiled faces” – veil that lies over our minds and continues with the good news that in Christ it is set aside.
 - iii. Comparison between the blindness of “this world” and the light of Jesus Christ (4:1-6_
3. Chapters 8-9 – seem to be another letter – and are all about collection Paul is taking up for the Christ-community in Jerusalem.
 - a. Concerns a “collection for the saints” – Paul was raising money from his largely Gentile communities for the impoverished Christian Jewish community in Jerusalem.
 - b. He appeals to their generosity, grace, bounty, sharing and fairness
4. Chapters 10-13
 - a. Many think these were written earlier than the other sections.
 - b. Paul defends himself against teachers who have come to Corinth and sought to understand him and his messages. Some of the Corinthians had been persuaded by them and had become critics of Paul.

- c. Paul attacks the teachers as “super-apostles” and false apostles.
- d. Paul then lists his sufferings as an apostle
- e. Describes an “out-of-body state of consciousness and traveling to another layer or level of reality – “third heaven” and “Paradise” – this is all part of Paul’s defense of his credentials as an apostle and interpreter of Jesus

Paul’s argument – two-fold

1. He challenges his opponents’ desire that the Corinthians observe those elements of Jewish law that distinguish Jews from Gentiles (dietary regulations, circumcision).
 - a. Paul characterizes the law as an aspect only of the “old” and deficient covenant that God made with the Jews – a covenant superseded by the “new” covenant for those who believe in Jesus.
2. Paul strives to buttress his apostolic status.
 - a. As opposed to the missionaries, Paul portrays himself as humble and lacking in oratorical skill.
 - b. He argues that his weaknesses are signs of his strength and his gospel
 - c. Paul depicts his opponent’s actions as self-promotion, rather than promotion of the gospel.
 - d. Paul’s iconic message: in Christ, weakness is power.
3. Letter ends with an anxious appeal for reconciliation.

Recurring motifs

1. The relationship between affliction and consolation (1:3-11) is the backbone of the arguments in 4:7-1, 4:16-5:10 and 12:7-10.
2. Paradox of power in weakness informs the whole letter.
3. Offers no extended reflection on any specific idea taken from Judaism, however, his declarations regarding the nature of God reflect common Jewish liturgical themes, and his depiction of his personal heavenly journey (12:2-11) evidences a type of heavenly ascent familiar from Jewish writings of this same time.

Interesting notes/theological statements

1. The typical salutation which Paul uses reminds the Corinthians that Paul was appointed by (through) the will of God. Paul’s status resembles that of Hebrew prophets, appointed directly by God. In rabbinic Judaism, the status of rabbi is a product of an individual’s study and personal commitment, a process in which anyone can (and is encouraged) to engage.
2. Paul blessed God for rescuing him and consoling his afflictions – this is important because Paul emphasizes God’s mercy and compassion – these are divine traits which appear especially in the psalms and prominently in Jewish liturgy, which refers to God as “Father of mercies”
3. “who consoles us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God – we pay the consolation, blessing forward.
4. 1:9- we felt that we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead – he who rescued us ... will continue to rescue us ... think about the psalms, how often the psalms of lament include a portion of recalling the saving acts of God – to remind themselves or God – that God is faithful and will continue to rescue us.
5. 1:14 – Day of the Lord – the 2nd coming of Jesus- the phrase is Amos (5:18-2) evokes fear of judgment, not the welcome of vindication. How do you hear this phrase from your perspective?

6. 2:5-13 – themes of forgiveness and consolation – are both Jewish virtues. Judaism demands that people request forgiveness from neighbors they have wronged and requires consoling the needy
7. 2:17- For we are not peddlers of God’s word like so many, but in Christ, we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. This is an incarnational perspective – (sent, standing in) – 3:2—“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ” ---- they will know we are Christians by our love – and St. Francis “preach the gospel always, use words sometimes”
8. 3:4 “Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter, but of spirit, for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”
9. Imagery of the treasure in clay jars- idea that weakness and suffering signal God’s empowering presence. In Jewish tradition – suffering and affliction in the absence of sin is evidence of God’s love.
 - a. Recognition that the treasure of the gospel always comes to us in clay jars, earthen vessels – that is, through us.
 - b. The jars, the vessels are not the treasure; the gospel is. Anything “earthen” can at best be a sacrament, a mediator of the sacred.
 - c. Clay jars cannot be mended, must be discarded
10. Development of the idea of a “judgment day” – “For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil. Also, in the next set of verses, he speaks that Christ is not counting our trespasses against us – how does this make sense to you?”
11. Generosity – 8:11—“it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has – not according to what one does not have ... it is a question of fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

Questions/ideas to ponder

1. Paul states a strong case for the new covenant superseding the old covenant – “how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! And is believing the old covenant was about condemnation and the new covenant about justification.
 - a. How could we think of this differently, so the old covenant is not discarded with the new?
 - i. Rabbinic Judaism, in Isaiah, looks at this as former things will become secondary to new things at coming of Messiah. All history will be eclipsed, but not forgotten.
 - b. Could there be a thread that connects the two covenants?
 - c. When you have experienced a transformative moment/event, often much is radically changed, but not everything; or the essence of something remains but there is a new expression. Can you think of an example of that in your own life? How could your experience be applied to Paul’s thinking?

2. Paul explores the imagery of the veil, how Moses covered his face because it was transfigured (shining) after speaking with God. Paul interprets this as Moses putting the veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. Paul states that only in Christ is that veil set aside.
 - a. How has your belief in/experience of/life lived out in Christ opened your mind and heart to the glory that is the Risen Christ? What does this even mean?
 - b. Paul speaks about the great freedom that comes with the veil being lifted. When have you experienced this sense of liberation or freedom as you have learned or experienced God in a deeper or profound way?
 - c. What parts of your life might you want to release or to offer up to this freedom from something “old”.
3. Paul offers some very comforting words about the relationship between the body (which is temporary) and our inner nature which is being renewed day by day – and is eternal. He mentions in 5:4 – “we wish to be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life”. This is a pretty stunning statement – I believe saying that our life journey is to move deeper into our eternal life and away our mortal life and it is God who has given us the Spirit to guarantee this can/will happen.
 - a. What changes have you noticed in people who are ending their mortal life that relate to their spiritual life? How does the growth of their spirit appear to us?
 - b. Often people become more introverted in their souls as they age; they become quieter, more settled and centered, more introspective – all of which I can see as “evidence” that they are growing closer to their eternal life. And often in hospice, the person completely separates their spirit from their body prior to their physical death. This can be very hard moments for their loved ones. How might you be able to recognize this transition and hold it in prayer, knowing that it is not “away from you” but rather movement toward their holiness and eternal nature.
4. Paul states clearly that we are to live not for ourselves but for him (Christ) who died and was raised for us.
 - a. If you were to reflect upon your day today, identify one way that you lived for Christ today, not for yourself. (In other words, when did you experience kenosis, the self-emptying love that gets ourselves out of the way of the movement of Love within us).