

COMMENTARY

I. AN APOSTOLIC INTRODUCTION: 2 CORINTHIANS 1:1-11

Second Corinthians 1:1-11 comprise the first of the three major parts of the letter, setting the stage for the main body of the letter (1:12—13:10). The letter concludes with a brief conclusion (13:11-13). The words of Paul's introduction to this intensely personal letter to the church at Corinth in 1:1-11 reflect his central concern.

Even as Paul greets the church (1:1-2) and pauses to give praise to God (1:3-11), he touches the nerve that sensitizes the entire letter—the actuality, the integrity, and the character of his apostolic ministry in relation to the Corinthians. The composition of the salutation (vv 1-2), the exchange of the usual or expected thanksgiving for a benediction (vv 3-7), and a report of God’s deliverance of Paul in Asia (vv 8-11) have in mind his strained relationship with the church at Corinth that Paul seeks to reconcile. Thus, the salutation (vv 1-2) already leads us into the substance of the letter as Paul defends his apostleship among them.

A. Paul Greet the Church (1:1-2)

BEHIND THE TEXT

Paul’s salutation, **Paul . . . To the church . . . Grace and peace**, is rooted in Near Eastern epistolary traditions. He follows the form of ancient letter writing prevalent in his day. Paul, however, uses nouns rather than verbs, differing from Greek conventions. The form names the writer, those addressed, and follows with the greeting proper. A typical example of the letter opening appears in a letter recorded in Acts 23:26-30: “Claudius Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings” (v 26; see Acts 15:23).

Paul’s letter to Corinth has an intensely personal tone. But, like all of his letters, it is a communal letter, intended for public use in a religious gathering. That is, his letters were intended to be read when the church met as a community. And not just once; they were to be read time and time again for the instruction and admonition of the congregation (Doty 1973, 24).

The apostle in his letters expands the form of the salutation used in the Greco-Roman period with a distinctly Christian accent (see Rom 1:1-7 and 1 Cor 1:1-3). The Christianized salutation appears throughout the larger Pauline corpus.

The blessing, **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**, is somewhat uniform (Rom 1:7; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Phlm 3). The only exceptions are Col 1:2, which has “God our Father” only, and 1 Thess 1:1, which uses simply the invocation, “Grace and peace to you.”

IN THE TEXT

■ **I** The name **Paul** as the writer of the letter appears only once more in the letter at 10:1, “I appeal to you—I, Paul.” Acts 13:9 refers to “Saul, who was also called Paul.” **Paul** (*Paulos*), as used throughout the NT, is the Greek form of his original Hebrew name “Saul” (*Saulos*).

Born a Hebrew, Paul was from the tribe of Benjamin (Phil 3:5). He en-

joyed the rare privilege of Roman citizenship (see Acts 16:37). This latter status gave him an elite standing in Greco-Roman society. Likewise, as a Pharisaic Diaspora Jew, Paul belonged to the elite of Jewish society (see Greathouse and Lyons 2008, 37-39).

Timothy (see Acts 16:1-3; 17:14-15; 18:5) **our brother** (*ho adelphos*) is named as the cosender, not necessarily coauthor, of the letter as in other Pauline correspondence (Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Philemon). The presence of the definite article (*ho, the*) may indicate Timothy's status as a missionary colleague. The Greek *adelphos* (**brother**) was used in Paul's time as a mutual designation by members of any select community. This usage was a figurative extension of its meaning as a male from the same "womb" (= *delphys*). In the early church, it replaced the term "disciple" (*mathētēs*), used in the Gospels to identify the followers of Jesus.

Other fellow workers like **Timothy**, also named as such, were Sosthenes (1 Cor 1:1) and Silas (1 Thess 1:1). Paul customarily mentioned cosenders in his salutations. He did this partly from courtesy (Phil 1:1; Col 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1; Phlm 1). Timothy was a valued colleague, a Christian **brother**, both of himself and of the Corinthians (1 Thess 3:2). **Brother** for Paul designated a special relationship of respect, support, and care. (In Phlm 16, Paul refers to Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.") Paul's sense of camaraderie with **Timothy** was so strong that he even calls him "my son [*teknōn*] whom I love" (1 Cor 4:17; see Phil 2:22; 1 Tim 1:1; 2 Tim 1:2).

Timothy was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother. After meeting him during his ministry at Lystra, Paul made Timothy's Jewish status official by circumcising him (Acts 16:1-3). Timothy had worked with him in Corinth in the early days of the church's existence (Acts 18:5; 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10-11; 2 Cor 1:19). Now Paul reassures the Corinthians that Timothy shares fully in his pastoral concern for them. He identifies with the apostle in his teachings and admonitions. Timothy's ministry among them is validated, backed as it is by Paul's own apostleship.

Even as Paul greets the church in **Corinth** (vv 1-2; see 1 Cor 1:1-9; Phil 1:1-11) he plunges into the major issues of his letter. He takes his stance in the very first phrase, **an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God**. Paul's self-designation as an **apostle** (*apostolos*) is a pivotal term in the letter, both positively and negatively (11:13; Martin 1986, 2).

Here Paul focuses his readers' attention affirmatively on his office as **an apostle of Christ Jesus**. His role came **by** (*dia*) or **through** the efficient cause of **the will of God**. This is phrased exactly as in Col 1:1 (BDAG 2000, 224). The office of apostle, according to Mark 6:7, originated in the decision of Jesus to select twelve of his disciples for a special mission. These "he sent . . . out" (*apostellein*) as bearers of his own authority to preach and to heal (Matt 10:1-7; Mark 6:7-30; Luke 6:13; 9:1-6).

Jesus sent these apostles out as his representatives, indeed as himself: “He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who rejects me rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). Apostles serve as trusted “ambassadors” (2 Cor 5:20) with the full authority of the one they represent. Their dignity and worth lay not in themselves but in the one who sent them (Barrett 1970, 13). In the background is the OT “sending” (Exod 3:10; Judg 6:8, 14; Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3). The Jewish aphorism, “The one sent by a man is as the man himself” (Hafemann 2000, 44) reflects a Hellenistic-Jewish background for the Christian apostolate.

In the NT, there is a sense of identity between Jesus and those he commissions. They both do God’s will and act in behalf of God. When they proclaim the gospel in Jesus’ name they actualize his presence. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus, the apostolic office was renewed with the gift of the Spirit. As witnesses to Jesus and the resurrection, apostles totally relied upon the Holy Spirit first given at Pentecost (Acts 1:6-8, 15-26; 2:4, 32-33; 4:33; 5:29-32). Paul uses the term “apostle” to refer to the original Twelve and to his own sense of calling. He also extends the designation to include others of God’s honored envoys—missionaries, “those sent on a mission,” whose authority depended on the churches that sent them.

Paul, who feels a need to assert his credentials in **Corinth**, “was deeply, thoughtfully, and passionately convinced of his call to be an apostle” (Barrett 1970, 35). Paul knew himself to be **an apostle**. He fails to designate himself an apostle only in the prescripts of 1 Thess 1:1; Phil 1:1; and Phlm 1. But he uses the term five times more in 2 Corinthians (8:23; 11:5, 13; 12:11, 12). He grounds his claim to the title by virtue of his personal encounter with the risen Lord. He equates the appearance of the Lord to him with the appearances of the risen Lord to the other apostles (1 Cor 9:1-2; 15:5-8).

Paul was convinced that he had been directly commissioned by Jesus to bear witness to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-9, 15-16; 22:12-21; 26:15-18, 22-23; 1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:15-16). He describes himself as “set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). He validates his apostleship by appeal to his role in founding the Christian community in Corinth: “you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord” (1 Cor 9:2).

It appears that Paul viewed God’s call to him as “a renewal of God’s will for the salvation of the Gentiles, giving him a place in the history of salvation” in continuity with Isaiah and Jeremiah (see Gal 1:15-16 with Isa 49:1-6 and Jer 1:4-5; and Acts 26:12-18 with Jer 1:7-8; Isa 42:6-7, 16; and 61:1. Munck 1959, 24-27). Paul’s apostleship has an eschatological (i.e., related to the end times) dimension; his ministry belongs to God’s future kingdom action that was inaugurated by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Although Paul was not a witness of the earthly life of Jesus in exactly the same sense as the Twelve (Acts 1:21-22; Luke 1:2), he had entered wholeheartedly into the stream of early Christian tradition concerning Jesus (1 Cor 11:2,

23; 15:1-11). **Paul** took care to live in fellowship with the apostles of Jerusalem in order to protect the authenticity of the churches he founded (Gal 2:1-10). He became one with the original apostles in their shared commitment to the story of Jesus as the only foundation and content of his preaching.

Thus, Paul's apostleship was unique in character: "one abnormally born . . . the least of the apostles" (1 Cor 15:8-9). His apostolic sense of mission originated solely in **the will of God** (2 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1; 2 Tim 1:1; see Gal 1:1). Paul saw himself as a "chosen instrument" (Acts 9:15) whose call came by divine revelation uncorrupted by human initiative (see Gal 1:11-17).

If Paul's apostolic authority was questioned, he saw the issue as not about his own person but about the cause of God, who commissioned him "by Jesus Christ" (Gal 1:1). As **an apostle** Paul was the servant of his message—"the message [*logos*] of the cross" (1 Cor 1:18). So whenever Paul found it necessary to speak authoritatively to his churches, he stressed his apostolic authorization by the Lord as he began his letters. Paul's apostolate, as evidenced by his correspondence, consisted in a twofold task. His primary function was to found churches. His secondary responsibility was the pastoral care of these churches (Thrall 1994, 80).

Paul identifies those addressed in this letter as "the church of God in Corinth" (1 Cor 1:2; 12:13-27). This community of Christian believers was the localized manifestation of the body of Christ, the Universal Church. **Church** (*ekklēsia*) in its other eight appearances in 2 Corinthians is used in the plural (8:1, 18, 19, 23, 24; 11:8, 28; 12:13). This seems to indicate that the various local gatherings of believers somehow belong together. Here Paul combines the local (1 Thess 1:1) and the generic (1 Cor 10:32) uses of the word **church**. That it is **the church of God** separates it from the Greek political assemblies, which also called themselves *ekklēsia*. This modification of the standard, everyday use of the term, identifies the **church** as belonging uniquely to **God**. With **the church of God** Paul gives the church at Corinth the same title of honor that he gave the church at Jerusalem (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13).

The letter address also mentions **all the saints** in the independent senatorial province of **Achaia**. This province was established in A.D. 27 under the Roman emperor Augustus (Harris 2005, 133). This Roman province comprised the whole of ancient Greece. Thus, Paul's address embraced believers not only in **Corinth**, in the port of Cenchrea, and in Athens, but probably also other believers living beyond the environs of these cities (see 9:2; 11:10; Rom 15:26; 1 Cor 16:5).

All the saints (*tois hagiois pasin*) or **all the holy ones** indicates simply "all Christians," the believers throughout or "in the whole" (*en holēi*) of the area. The NT never uses this expression to refer to a spiritual elite within the church. This NT meaning of **saints** (Acts 9:13; Heb 6:10) was particularly characteristic of Paul (Rom 8:27; 1 Cor 6:1). The traditional Pauline corpus contains thirty-six of the term's fifty-two NT occurrences. Interestingly,

“saint”/“holy one” is never used in the singular to refer to an individual Christian. In the singular it refers only to the person of Jesus (Mark 1:24; Luke 1:35; 4:34; John 6:69; Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30; 1 John 2:20; Rev 3:7). Only together can believers be called **saints**. The **saints** are the church as called by God and set apart for his service, and thus they are God’s **holy ones**.

The Corinthian readers are not called **saints** because they have realized the full implications of the name. They are so designated simply because they authentically belong to Christ as a body of believers. In the NT the term designates those who belong to the new covenant community by virtue of the sacrificial death of Christ (Heb 13:12). They are a holy people only “in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:2, 30; Phil 1:1). Their vocation is to belong wholly to God (Rom 1:7) and to serve him unreservedly (Rom 12:1-2). The effective agent of this life is the Holy Spirit (Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 3:16-17; 1 Pet 1:2). It is their possession by the indwelling presence of God that marks them as his people.

The Holy

The roots of the language of the holy are in the OT. Israel is first called a holy people as a nation set apart by divine election. That is, God called them, distinguishing them from the rest of the peoples of the ancient world. The second reason Israel is called a holy nation arises from their national life, whose mission is to be a distinctive witness to God (Martin 1986, 3).

The first emphasis of “the holy” is on purity of relationship with God in Christ. But essential to it is ethical action. The two go together in the actual lives of those who belong to God. This is because the ethical quality of their relationship to God must answer to the character of the God to whom they belong (1 Thess 2:10-12; 1 Pet 1:14-16). So in the view of the church, to be “saints,” God’s holy ones means nothing less than to be like Christ (1 John 2:6; 3:2-3).

■ **2** The greeting proper, **Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** (v 2), is Paul’s favorite. Paul exchanges the colorless Greek greeting *charein* (Acts 15:23)—“Hello”—for the rich *charis*—**grace**. He unites this allusion to God’s gracious initiative in Christ (see 2 Cor 8:9) with **peace**, the customary Jewish greeting (see 2 Sam 18:28). Paul immerses both traditional greetings in Jesus Christ (Martin 1986, 4; Harris 2005, 135).

In the Greek OT, the LXX, **peace** (*eirēnē*), translates *shalom* (Dan 4:1, “May your peace abound,” NASB). The basic sense of the Hebrew term is comprehensive well-being, seen as a gift of God. Paul uses the Greek equivalent to describe the spiritual well-being of believers (see Rom 5:1-2; Phil 4:7).

Paul clearly indicates the Christian overtones of his twofold greeting by stressing the singular origin as **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**. It is significant that Paul does not repeat the preposition **from** (*apo*). Its omission indicates that **God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** jointly form a single source of divine grace and peace (Harris 2005, 136).

The phrase **our Father** may allude to the Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:9). The title **Lord** (*kyrios*) frequently identifies Jesus in the letters of Paul. Importantly, it is the word consistently used in the LXX as the equivalent for the covenant name of Israel's God, Yahweh.

FROM THE TEXT

The opening verses of the letter assume the form of a greeting and certainly function as such. In an encouraging manner, *Paul loads his "Hello" to the church with spiritual freight*. With a play on words, the apostle has replaced the everyday greeting (*charein*) of Greek culture with the most magnificent of all Christian words, "grace" (*charis*). To top it off, from his Hebrew culture he adds the greeting "peace," a wish for spiritual blessing.

In our current competitive, "big ego" culture, with its partisan bickering and destructive enmity, Christians are graced with the ability to "bless" in the most informal and casual of human contacts. Because of who we are—people who live in obedience to the indwelling Spirit of Christ—our "Hello, how are you?" need not be a merely superficial courtesy. We can bring with it the full meaning of the gospel, even the presence of Christ! This is our privilege. Let us exploit it in the spirit of prayer even as we sign the credit slip at the check-out counter.

In the content of Paul's greeting, he reveals to us authentic insights into the essential character of (1) *God's messenger*, (2) *God's people*, and (3) *God's message*.

First, *we are God's messengers*. Although we are not first-century apostles, we, too, by our Christian confession are "sent" into the culture of our time as the incarnated presence of the risen Christ. By the grace of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit, our presence becomes *his* presence! This is "the will God" for us, by God's intention our lives are "purpose driven." As called by God, we are not self-made men and women. Here is both the starting point and the goal of our very existence, a divine calling that holds us steady through the beguiling soft breezes and oppressive hard winds of life. We do possess authority, but one not inherently ours. It is the Holy Spirit at work in and through our lives bearing witness to Jesus (John 16:14-15; 20:21-23).

Second, *we belong to God's people*. We are bound together with the folk in Corinth and beyond as people of the same God (1 Cor 8:6). As a family first before we are an institution, we belong to each other. As my longtime colleague Reuben Welch put it in his popular 1982 book on 1 John, *We Really Do Need Each Other!*

As those who live under one Lord (Eph 4:4-6), our differences do not divide us. The course of centuries, the geography that puts great distances between us, the diversity of cultures, our racial peculiarities, and even our treasured denominations dare not essentially divide us. As people of the same un-

changing God, we are united, local, universal, and historical. Or, as the Nicene Creed puts it, we are “one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

Simply because we belong to this holy God, we are a holy people “in Christ.” We are “saints,” as Paul calls us. We are literally “the holy ones.” This is not because each of us as individuals has fully grown up into Christ. But when we are all added up together, we exhibit “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13) to all who have eyes to see! (Ps 135:16; Isa 6:10).

Third, *we possess God's message*. Paul's greeting, his prayerful wish for his readers, sums up the Christian message with two of the grandest terms in all of Scripture. When we translate **grace** and **peace** into theology, they speak to us of our “justification” and our “sanctification.”

Grace speaks of our reconciliation to God “in Christ.” It underlies the whole of our Christian existence. **Peace** holds out the promise of the wholeness that is the goal of reconciliation. Together they comprehend life's ultimate purpose and fulfillment. “Grace,” wrote James Denney, “is the first and last word of the Gospel, and peace—perfect spiritual soundness—is the finished work of grace in the soul” (1943, 5:721; see Col 3:15).

B. Paul Praises God for His Comfort (1:3-11)

1:3-11

BEHIND THE TEXT

According to the pattern of the Hellenistic letter, a thanksgiving or prayer to a deity usually follows the opening salutation. Here in vv 3-11 the thanksgiving takes the form of a blessing (v 3, *eulogētos ho Theos*). Thus, Paul begins: **Praise be to the God** or “Blessed be the God” (NRSV).

Berakah Benedictions

The introductory words and structure differ from the usual thanksgiving. Some interpreters call it a benediction, or a doxology, referring more strictly to vv 3-7. A more precise suggestion is the designation of a “congratulatory benediction.” Here speakers praise God and congratulate the recipient of the gift (as in Exod 18:10; McCant 1999, 29-30). Another designation, stressing its background, calls it “a synagogue benediction.” An example is “Blessed art thou, O Lord our God and God of our fathers, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob” (Barnett 1997, 67).

Paul's *berakah/eulogētos* language and the content is influenced by OT worship and Jewish liturgy (O'Brien 1977, 11, 233-38). Perhaps, this is due to the expectation that the letters would be read in the Christian congregation assembled for worship (Martin 1986, 7). But here the Jewish *berakah* is obviously Christianized.