

The Offender and the Offence in 2 Corinthians 2:5 and 7:12

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Dr Kruse, who teaches at Ridley College, Melbourne, is the author of the new volume on 2 Corinthians in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. In this essay he develops at fuller length the case which he puts forward in the commentary for identifying the 'offender' in 2 Cor. 2:5 and 7:12 with the incestuous person of 1 Cor. 5.

The reconstruction of the historical background of 2 Corinthians is a task which is fraught with many difficulties. Historical reconstruction depends upon conclusions reached on literary questions, while these in turn require certain decisions about historical matters. One of the most important historical questions relates to the nature of the opposition to Paul which is reflected in the epistle. This opposition appears to have had two distinct phases, which are reflected in chapters 1-7 and in chapters 10-13 respectively. In the former Paul responds joyfully (and perhaps prematurely) to a crisis resolved, while in the latter he responds to a far more serious crisis, which at the time of writing was nowhere near resolution. The purpose of this article is to explore the nature of the opposition reflected in chapters 1-7, in particular to discuss the identity of the 'one who has caused pain' (2:5), later described as 'the one who did wrong' (7:12). However, before this is done it will be helpful, perhaps, if what can be deduced about Paul's contacts with the Corinthians between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians is set out. It was in this period that the offence was most likely committed.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

There is general agreement among recent commentators concerning the sequence of events in Paul's relations with the Corinthians between the writing of 1 and 2 Corinthians.¹ It may be set out as follows:

- (a). Paul sent Timothy from Ephesus to Corinth (1 Cor. 4:17;

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16:10, 11). We do not know what transpired while Timothy was in Corinth, but we do know that Paul eagerly awaited his return. It is evident that by the time 2 Corinthians was written Timothy had returned to Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:1) and that the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians had passed through a very difficult period.

- (b). When Timothy arrived back in Ephesus he brought disturbing news of the state of affairs in Corinth. This made Paul change the plans for travel he had outlined in 1 Corinthians 16:5-9. instead of journeying through Macedonia to Corinth and then on to

¹ Cf. e.g. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper & Row, 1973), 5-10; W. G. Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Abingdon, 1975), 286, 287; Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* (Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1984), 54, 55; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Augsburg, 1985), 16-18; Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, 1986), xxxiii, xxxiv.

Jerusalem, he sailed directly across to Corinth. It was now his intention, after visiting the church there, to journey north into Macedonia and then return again to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem. By so doing he hoped to give the Corinthians 'a double pleasure' (2 Cor. 1:15, 16).

- (c). However, when Paul arrived in Corinth from Ephesus he found himself the object of a hurtful attack (2 Cor. 2:5; 7:12) made by an individual, while no attempt was made by the congregation as a whole to support Paul (2 Cor. 2:3).
- (d). It was a very painful visit, and one that the apostle did not wish to repeat, so he changed his travel plans once more, and instead of returning to Corinth after the projected journey into Macedonia, he made his way straight back to Ephesus (2 Cor. 1:23; 2:1).
- (e). Back in Ephesus Paul wrote his so-called 'severe' letter to the Corinthians. This letter is probably no longer extant (though some have suggested that it is preserved in whole or in part in 2 Corinthians 10-13). It called upon the church members to take action against the one who had caused Paul such hurt, and so to demonstrate their innocence in the matter and their affection for Paul (2 Cor. 2: 3, 4; 7:8, 12).
- (f). It is not clear who carried the 'severe' letter to Corinth. It may have been Titus. In any case it was from Titus, returning from his visit to Corinth, that Paul expected news of the Corinthians' response to this letter. Paul was apparently fairly confident of a positive response. He expressed his confidence to Titus before the latter left for

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Corinth (2 Cor. 7:14-16), and may have even asked Titus to take up with the Corinthians the matter of the collection (2 Cor. 8:6).

- (g). Paul had made plans to meet Titus in Troas, so he left Ephesus and made his way there. He found a wide open door for evangelism in Troas, but because Titus had not yet come, and because he was so anxious to meet him, he left and crossed over into Macedonia hoping to intercept Titus on his way to Troas (2 Cor. 2:12,13).
- (h). When Paul reached Macedonia he found himself embroiled in the bitter persecution which the churches of Macedonia themselves were experiencing (7:5; 8:1, 2) and this only compounded his anxiety.
- (i). When Titus finally arrived Paul was greatly comforted (2 Cor. 7:6, 7), the more so when he heard from him of the Corinthians' zeal to demonstrate their affection and loyalty to their apostle by punishing the one who had caused him such hurt.
- (j). Paul responded to this good news by writing another letter, our 2 Corinthians (or possibly 2 Cor. 1-9). He said how glad he was that their response both to the 'severe' letter and Titus' visit had justified his pride in them, especially seeing that he had boasted about them to Titus before sending him to Corinth (7:4, 14, 16). He also went to great lengths to explain the changes to his travel plans (1:15—2:1) and why, and in what frame of mind, he had written them previously such a 'severe' letter (2:3, 4; 7:8-12). Although Paul was overjoyed because the Corinthians had acted so vigorously to clear

themselves, nevertheless he urged them now to forgive and restore the offender 'to keep Satan from gaining the advantage' (2:5-11).

THE IDENTITY OF THE OFFENDER AND HIS OFFENCE

Most of the ancient commentators, with the exception of Tertullian, agree that the offender was the incestuous person of 1 Corinthians 5:1, and that his offence was maintaining an incestuous relationship with his step-mother. This view was held by almost all subsequent commentators until the twentieth century, and is still espoused by a number of modern scholars.²

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Another modern suggestion is that the offender was the guilty party against whom the Corinthians were taking legal action (1 Cor. 6:1-8),³ but this view has few supporters. A third view is that the offender was an outsider who infiltrated the Corinthian congregation and his offence was to launch a personal attack against the apostle during the interim visit.⁴ Finally, many commentators have been content to leave aside the question of the offender's actual identity, simply regarding him as an unknown person who, for some unknown reason, mounted an attack against the apostle.⁵

This article reopens the question of the identity of the offender, arguing that the view of the early commentators may be the best after all (i.e. that he was the incestuous person spoken of in 1 Cor. 5:1), as long as the nature of his offence (i.e. that reflected in 2 Cor. 1-7) is understood differently. While the argument of this paper supports the old identification of the offender, it does not assume, as many of the earlier proponents did, that 1 Corinthians is to be identified with the 'severe' letter.

It will be argued that the offence was a personal attack mounted by the incestuous man against Paul and his authority as an apostle, especially his authority to exercise discipline in the church. The following overall sequence of events is suggested:

- (a). Paul received an oral report from either members of Chloe's household (1 Cor. 1:11) or from Stephanus, Fortunatus or Achaicus (1 Cor. 16:17) saying that one of the members of the Corinthian congregation was living in an incestuous relationship with his

² Among recent scholars who hold this view are: Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1962), 59-65; G. W. H. Lampe, 'Church Discipline and the Interpretation of the Epistles to the Corinthians', *Christian History and Interpretation*, eds. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge University Press, 1967), 353-354; Alan M. G. Stephenson, 'A Defence of the Integrity of 2 Corinthians', *The Authorship and Integrity of the New Testament* (Theological Collections 4, S.P.C.K., 1965), 86; D. R. Hall, 'Pauline Church Discipline', *Tyndale Bulletin* 20 (1969), 3-26; Niels Hyldall, 'Die Frage nach der literarischen Einheit des zweiten Korintherbriefes', *ZNW* 64 (1973), 305, 306.

³ H. Windisch, *Der zweite Korintherbrief* (Meyer, Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1924), 237-239—not available to me at the time of writing, but cited in Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 237.

⁴ C. K. Barrett, '*HO ADIKESAS* (2 Cor. 7.12)', *Essays on Paul* (S.P.C.K., 1982), 108-117; *2 Corinthians*, 7, adopts this view and further identifies the offender as one of the 'pseudo-apostles' whom Paul castigates in 2 Cor. 11:12-15.

⁵ This is the majority opinion today supported, e.g., by Alfred Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC, T. & T. Clark, 1915), 54,55; R. H. Strachan, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 70; F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (New Century Bible, Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1971), 184, 185; Bultmann, *Second Letter* 47, 48; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 168.

stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1). The apostle wrote, strongly rebuking the church for its attitude to this

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blatant sin, and calling upon the congregation to take disciplinary action against the offender. He was to be delivered to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:2-5); to be driven out from among the believers (1 Cor. 5:7, 13).

- (b). When the Corinthians received Paul's letter they failed to carry out immediately the disciplinary action for which he had called (there is no evidence to the contrary in the extant correspondence).
- (c). When Timothy arrived in Corinth, having been sent there by Paul from Ephesus (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10, 11), he found the offender both undisciplined and unrepentant. Timothy returned to Ephesus and reported this state of affairs to Paul.
- (d). When the apostle heard the news he made his second visit to Corinth. Paul too found that the offender had not been disciplined, and the latter, being quite unrepentant, mounted a strong personal attack against Paul and his apostolic authority, especially his authority to discipline him. In his attack the offender made use of criticisms of Paul's ministry voiced by Jewish Christian intruders who were lurking in the background.⁶ The members of the church did not come to Paul's defence as he expected they should have (2 Cor. 2:3), so he felt it wise to withdraw from the situation and return to Ephesus.
- (e). From Ephesus he wrote his 'severe' letter (2 Cor. 2:3, 4; 7:8, 12) in which he rebuked the Corinthians for their failure to come to his defence, and demanded that the one who was guilty (not only of incest, but now also of rejecting the authority of the apostle) be disciplined by them. This letter may have been carried by Titus to Corinth, but whether this was the case or not, it was from Titus returning from Corinth that Paul anxiously awaited news (2 Cor. 2:12, 13)
- (f). When Paul met up with Titus in Macedonia he learned from him that the church had finally taken disciplinary action against the offender who presumably had subsequently repented of his misdeeds.
- (g). The apostle now became concerned for the repentant offender, and urged his readers to forgive and comfort him lest it be Satan alone who should gain the advantage in the end (2:6-11).

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- (h). Aware that the Jewish Christian intruders (whose criticisms had been used as 'ammunition' by the offender in his attack) were still lurking in the background, Paul included a number of statements defending the integrity of his mission and showing how, through all the ups and downs of it, the Lord still led him in triumph (1:8-14;

⁶ The suggestion that the offender made use of the criticisms voiced by the intruders does not have as a necessary corollary the notion that the intruders were allying themselves with the offender, or that they condoned his incestuous behaviour.

2:14—7:1). Finally, feeling the situation had improved sufficiently, Paul raised again the matter of the collection, urging his readers to complete what they had begun a year ago (chs. 8, 9).

ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR

In support of the identification of the offender and his offence suggested above the following points can be made; First, it is clear that the problem of immorality persisted in the Corinthian church throughout the period of Paul's written communications with it. The 'previous' letter contained an exhortation to avoid contact with immoral men, by which Paul meant any one who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality' (1 Cor. 5:9-1). When the apostle wrote 1 Corinthians the problem of immorality was manifesting itself in both the behaviour of the incestuous man (1 Cor. 5:1, 2) and the use of prostitutes by others (1 Cor. 6:15-20). When Paul wrote his final letter to Corinth he was still concerned about the problem of immorality in the church (2 Cor. 12:21). The persistence of this general problem in the church before and after the sin of incest shows that the atmosphere was present in which the incestuous person could have opposed, rather than have submitted immediately to, the discipline which Paul demanded.

Second, it needs to be realized that there are no indications that 1 Corinthians, which contained the demand for disciplinary action against the offender, actually induced the church to carry through that action. It is possible, therefore, that when Timothy arrived in Corinth he faced an unrepentant offender and a church still hesitating to carry through the action Paul had demanded. This is, admittedly, an argument from silence, but any assumption that 1 Corinthians did induce the church to act rests on the same basis.

Third, 2 Corinthians 2:5 describes the offender as the one who has caused pain 'to you all'. In 1 Corinthians 5:6-8, where Paul speaks about the effect of the incestuous man's sin, he reminds his readers that 'a little leaven leavens the whole lump'. It was impossible for the church to allow the continued presence of the unrepentant incestuous person in their midst without all its

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members being corrupted to a certain extent as well. There is, then, this possible link between the leavening of the whole lump Paul warned of in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and the harm done to all by the offender spoken of in 2 Corinthians 2:5.

Fourth, once Paul knew the church had taken severe disciplinary action against the offender, he began to be concerned that the individual involved might be overcome with excessive sorrow. Therefore he urged the Corinthians to reaffirm their love for the offender, forgiving and comforting him, so that Satan might not gain the advantage in the situation (2 Cor. 2:6-11). It will be remembered that in Paul's original demand for disciplinary action he called upon the church to 'deliver this man to Satan' (1 Cor. 5:5). There is here another possible link suggesting that the offender of 2 Corinthians 2:5 and 7:12 is to be identified with the incestuous man of 1 Corinthians 5:1. Paul, who has demanded that the man be delivered to Satan in the first place, now presumably seeing that he has been brought to repentance, wants him forgiven and restored so that it is not Satan alone who at the end of the day gains the advantage (by depriving the church of one of its members indefinitely).

Fifth, this identification enables us to take seriously the indications that the offence caused injury to Paul as an individual on the one hand, while causing injury to the congregation as a whole on the other. The personal attack made against Paul and his authority accounts for the former, while the offender's continued presence in the congregation while he was still unrepentant accounts for the latter.

Sixth, this identification enables us to account for both the continuity and the discontinuity between 2 Corinthians 1-7 and 10-13. The continuity is seen in the fact that in both chapters 1-7 and 10-13 Paul defends his apostleship and its integrity (but of course the defence is far more pointed in the latter). The discontinuity is seen in the fact that in chapters 1-7 the opposition emanated from one individual and had been resolved by the time of writing, whereas in chapters 10-13 it emanated from a group of 'false apostles' and at the time of writing was far from any resolution. All this becomes understandable once we distinguish the offender mentioned in 2:5 and 7:12 from the opposition Paul confronts in chapters 10-13, while at the same time recognizing that the latter were in the background providing 'ammunition' for the former to use in his attack against Paul. Because the 'false apostles' were there in the background the apostle had to defend the integrity of his ministry even while noting that the offender had been disciplined (cf. 1:12—2:4; 2:14—6:13). The defence

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was repeated and sharpened when those who had been in the background came forward and mounted their own attack against Paul after the congregation had settled the matter of the original defender.

While it is not the purpose of this article to discuss the question of the integrity of 2 Corinthians, it is worth noting in passing that the discontinuity mentioned above lends some support to the view that chapters 10-13 were written after chapters 1-7, and that they constitute a fifth letter of the apostle to Corinth.⁷

ARGUMENTS AGAINST

The arguments against identifying the offender as the incestuous person have been found convincing by many modern commentators.⁸ However, most of these arguments proceed upon the assumption that the offence involved was limited to the incestuous relationship. If the offence is understood as a personal attack against Paul and his apostolic authority made by the not yet repentant incestuous person, many of the objections can be overcome. The major objections are listed below, together with explanations as to how they can be met, provided the offence is understood in the way we have suggested.

First, Paul could not possibly have written in such a positive and conciliatory way as he did in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 if the offender was the incestuous person. Could the apostle who

⁷ That this is probably the case is the view held by most recent commentators on 2 Corinthians. So, e.g. Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 166-172; Barrett, *Second Epistle*, 9, 10, 21; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 30-41; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, xl; C. G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, IVP/Eerdmans, 1987).

⁸ So, e.g., Plummer, *Second Epistle*, 54, 55; Barrett, *Second Epistle*, 89; Kummel, *Introduction*, 283; Furnish, *II Corinthians*, 163-168; Bultmann, *Second Letter*, 48; Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 237.

demanded that the offender be handed over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor. 5:3-5) so quickly change his attitude and plead for his reinstatement?

If we assume that the disciplinary action taken so vigorously by the church had finally brought the offender to repentance, there is no reason why Paul could not have urged that he be forgiven and reinstated. After all the apostle himself remained deeply aware that it was only by the grace of God that his own sinful acts against the church had been forgiven (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:9, 10; cf. 1 Tim. 1:13, 14).

Second, it is unlikely that Paul would regard the sin of incest simply as an injury inflicted by one person upon another. This is

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how he appears to regard the sin of the offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5 and 7:12, whereas in 1 Corinthians 5 the sin clearly affects the whole congregation.

While we admit that the offence was essentially a personal injury inflicted upon the apostle, nevertheless it did affect the whole congregation as well ('But if any one has caused pain, he has caused it not to me [only],⁹ but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to you all' (2 Cor. 2:5). The identification of the offender as the not yet repentant incestuous person enables us to explain both the individual and corporate effects of the offence. Individually Paul was injured by the personal attack mounted against him and by the questioning of his apostolic authority. The church was injured corporately by its failure to support the apostle and discipline the offender, thereby retaining the corrupting influence in its midst.

Third, it is incredible that Paul would say that he had insisted on the punishment of the incestuous person merely to test whether the Corinthians were obedient to him in everything (2 Cor. 2:9); or that he would say he had written the 'severe' letter only so that their zeal for the apostle might be revealed (2 Cor. 7:12).

This objection is very telling if the offence is understood to have been restricted to the incestuous relationship. However, once our understanding of the offence is adjusted so that it is seen to have been essentially a personal attack against Paul and his authority as an apostle, the objection loses much of its force. When Paul suffered that attack the Corinthians did not spring to his defence as he might have hoped. Nevertheless the apostle remained convinced of their loyalty to him, and had even boasted of it to Titus (2 Cor. 7:13b, 14). So while it was not 'merely' to test the Corinthians' obedience that Paul called again for disciplinary action against the offender, his call was motivated in part by the desire to prove that obedience. Similarly, while Paul's purpose in writing the 'severe' letter was not only so that the Corinthians' zeal for their apostle might be revealed, this was certainly part of it.

Fourth, the punishment of the incestuous person for which Paul called in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 was permanent, whereas the punishment meted out to the offender mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 was only temporary in nature.

⁹ The word 'only' is included here to indicate, as the general context, and in particular v. 10, make clear, that Paul is not denying that he has suffered injury, but affirming that he was not the only one to have done so — the congregation as a whole has suffered as well.

While the punishment Paul called for in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 does appear to be of a permanent nature, there is no reason to assume that genuine repentance on the part of the offender would not have induced the apostle to call for a cessation of that punishment. To do so would, of course, be entirely consistent with the gospel Paul proclaimed; a gospel which affirmed God's readiness to justify the ungodly.

Fifth, the salvation of the incestuous person Paul had in mind in 1 Corinthians 5:3-5 was ultimate, whereas that he had in mind for the offender in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 was to be experienced in the present.

This is, of course, an accurate observation, but the implicit objection to the view espoused in this article can be overcome once the repentance of the offender which we are assuming is seen as a new 'ingredient' in the situation. Thus the apostle, confronted initially with a blatant offender, and having little encouragement to believe that he could be brought to repentance, hoped only for the person's ultimate salvation 'in the day of the Lord Jesus' (1 Cor. 5:5). However, once the offender had been brought to repentance following the 'severe' letter and the rigorous disciplinary action taken by the Corinthians, Paul saw the possibility of a full reinstatement and urged his readers to act accordingly.

Sixth, Paul's concern, in calling for the punishment of the incestuous person in 1 Corinthians 5, was for the purity of the church (to be achieved by the expulsion of the offender), whereas his concern in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 is for the unity of the church (to be achieved by the reinstatement of the offender). These divergent concerns suggest different situations and different offenders.

Once again it is sufficient to point to the repentance of the offender as the new 'ingredient' in the situation. This is enough to account for the shift in the apostle's concerns.

Seventh, in 1 Corinthians 5 Satan appears as the agent who is to execute the judgement pronounced by Paul in the name of the Lord Jesus over the incestuous person, but in 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Satan is portrayed as a threat to the unity of the church. These very different perceptions of the activity of Satan suggest that Paul is dealing with different situations and different offenders.

Yet once more the new 'ingredient' in the situation is enough to account for the difference. While the incestuous person was still unrepentant Satan is seen as an agent of punishment, but once repentance has been brought about Satan is seen in the more

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usual way as one who seeks to undermine the work of reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

The argument of this article has been that the offender mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2:5 and 7:12 is best identified with the incestuous person mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5, provided that the offence involved is seen to have been a personal attack against Paul and his apostolic authority on the occasion of the latter's interim visit to Corinth. It has been assumed that the

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disciplinary action taken by the church in response to Paul's demands in the 'severe' letter succeeded in bringing the offender to repentance.

While the objections that have been raised against this identification can be dealt with satisfactorily, it must be admitted that the arguments presented in this article fall short of positive proof. However, the suggested identification is plausible and does enable us to make good sense of 2 Corinthians as a whole.

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