

Unit 2 Introduction

The Challenge of 2 Corinthians

Introduction

Second Corinthians is praised by preachers and commentators alike for its deep dive into the life and ministry of the apostle Paul, concise and memorable theological statements about God, and spiritual instruction on matters both moral and practical. The book provides much for the Corinthians and those who teach the book to consider. What emerges from a full reading of the book is that there is much more to these issues than meets the eye. In this interesting letter to a church dealing with conflict, opportunity, and a variety of opinions about leadership, Paul presents one of the most Christ-centered challenges in the Bible.

The Challenge of 2 Corinthians

Second Corinthians, often understood as a defense from Paul to people who misunderstood him and continually challenged his ministry, is actually one of the more interesting theological treatises on ministry and making Christian disciples in the Bible. The material at hand presents a theological challenge to the reader and to those of us who are charged with teaching the good news of Jesus Christ. The challenge that emerges is not a way to defend oneself against enemies, nor a set of easy answers to church problems from popular sources, but rather a call to theological reflection on the life and ministry of our Savior as we face the real issues and conflicts of serving Christ together in the church. The challenge of 2 Corinthians is of immense importance: To first and always consider Christ and the unique fullness of His story as we face the challenges, disputes, and moral questions that will inevitably arise as we live our lives for Christ together in His church.

Two things must be remembered as one considers the challenge of teaching Corinthians. First, 2 Corinthians reminds us that life together in church is not always easy. The gospel brings its own demands and living as a Christian is difficult. The gospel requires conversion and transformation and this generates in individual lives and in churches a new set of problems. What Paul and the Corinthians encountered was not unique. The message of the letter calling the Corinthians to discipleship based on the example of Jesus who sacrificed His glory and was crucified on the cross echoes across time and in our churches today. Put a cross in a room and someone will find a way to convert it to the ladder to success. Preach freedom in Christ and someone will take every liberty and use their forgiveness of sins to take advantage of others and commit more sins. Invite people from all walks and ethnicities of life to eat together around a table and you will sometimes find strained silence and circles of people sitting together in segregated groups. Evil never sits idly by

and gives in to godliness. Paul's response to the issues in Corinth is a call to consider Christ as the way to healing and reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21). It is of supreme importance that we face our conflicts and difficulties in the church—and do so considering Christ.

Second, as we teach we must remember that Corinth was a tough place to minister. Some churches, like the one in Corinth, create their own problems. The difficulties Paul deals with in 2 Corinthians came from within the church's ministry and the preachers who followed him. Paul spent 18 months of his ministry in the Jewish sector of the city. His efforts were sufficient to begin several house churches and make converts, but not successful enough to provide an abiding stability in the Corinthian spiritual environment. Visiting the city at least four times and writing several letters, one of which was a "severe letter written with...many tears" (2 Corinthian 2:3-4), Paul addressed the issues leveled against him. The complaints about the preacher were usual: he did not have the authority to tell Christians what to do, he was not rich or successful, he was an unimpressive public speaker, and his message of imitating the lowly Christ was inferior to the message of the "super-apostles" who claimed to know more about salvation and the Scriptures than Paul (2 Corinthians 11:5). Taken together, these issues made Corinth more than a tough place for Paul's ministry. The spiritual competition created by these criticisms infiltrated the church and robbed it of its unity. Paul notes that his critics were arrogant, divisive, confusing, and sectarian pulling the church apart from within and attacking him personally. Rather than shrinking from these attacks, Paul offers his challenge to the church: When we have divisions of opinion, "Let us first and always consider Christ . . ." as we work together to resolve our conflicts.

Understanding the Challenge

When teaching 2 Corinthians, it is important to remember three keys to understanding that Paul's challenge to the church was to always look to Christ, whose meekness and servanthood stands as the universal model for our discipleship.

The first key is understanding our dependence upon Christ as the full revelation of God. Revelation means that we have to be taught and reminded what God is like. If Christ is to be present among us, we must constantly look to His story and mine its depths so that our understanding and love can be transformed. Christ shows strength in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9-10), became poor though He was rich (2 Corinthians 8:9), and allowed us to see the fullness of God in His divine/human face (2 Corinthians 4:6).

The second key is understanding Paul's continual appeal of the

revelation of God's self-giving love and grace in Christ. "Let us first consider Christ..." is a refrain that should guide our considerations of the material. Christ is Savior and Lord. He is also our example and model as we face the issues of Christian discipleship and conflicts in the church. The questions that flow in 2 Corinthians—How should we value our ministers? What offerings should we give our money to? How do we deal with spiritual pride?—find their answers in Christ and His sacrificial love for us. We must find our answers there, too.

The third key is understanding that we must put what we know about Christ and His gospel to work in our churches. Don't give in to an easy understanding of the challenges and issues that confront us. Use the knowledge of Christ found in the faithful witness of the Scriptures to deal with issues of discipleship, ministry, money, and conflict in the church and be gracious. In Christ, we are given grace and understanding so that we may in turn be gracious and considerate Christians. As you begin your study of 2 Corinthians, allow the Spirit to lead you in honest consideration, living as those with the understanding of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Teaching/Preparation for the Challenge

Teaching 2 Corinthians presents its own challenge to the teacher. Teaching the material in 2 Corinthians takes the kind of courage and grace that Paul showed in confronting a church he loved as God does—like a parent who often has to confront a child when dealing with issues of pride and unbelief (2 Corinthians 6:11-18; 12:14). Parents desire only the good for their children. When the child hurts, the parent hurts. When the child needs guidance, even firm guidance, the parent offers it in love and faith believing in the transforming and healing grace of God. Teaching this material well will require that teachers do their work as God does. There is no joy in Paul's letter against the Corinthians. There is, instead the clear, calm assurance that God is at work in the Corinthians and has provided us a way of understanding in Christ that brings every thought and issue into obedience in Him and helps us to discern those that go against the will of God and how we should love and act as Christians (2 Corinthians 10:5).

We must teach issues with confidence and teach about Christ. Use the phrase, "Let us consider Christ..." at every turn in the road as you go. Pray for growth in the hearts and minds of those who hear

the gospel in your teaching and take on the character of Paul who even took great joy in their shared troubles and commended them as they walked together (2 Corinthians 7:4).

Take on the challenge of going deeper in your study. Consider consulting the excellent *New Beacon Bible Commentary* on 2 Corinthians (Kansas City: The Foundry Publishing, 2009) as you teach. It is a masterpiece of exposition and offers practical thinking about deep and rich passages of Christological study. Use this as you consider the difficult portions of the letter. The author's thoughts will lead you to useful insights about what we believe about Christ and how to minister His message and the modeling of faith.

Summary/Conclusion

The challenge of Paul to the Corinthian church is a challenge to "Let us first consider Christ..." in all things and an opportunity for real growth in individual Christians and in the church—growth in understanding, in wisdom, in holiness, and in Christlikeness. Resist teaching the letter as an "issues-oriented" set of easy answers on how to deal with conflict and problems. Resist the temptation to separate the practical from the theoretical. Seek God-shaped answers to the questions of the Christian life.

Take up the challenge of 2 Corinthians. Teach from the conviction that what has been revealed to us in Jesus Christ is the way into greater understanding. Trust God to be at work. Believe, as Paul did, that the old has gone and the new has come. Everyone in Christ is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Believe in transformation and reconciliation. Consider Christ and teach a theology of God's generous grace that works to make us generous Christians. Believe that reminding people about the revelation of the incarnation of Jesus who, though rich, for our sakes took on poverty will lead to sacrificial giving and the consideration of others in all of our conversations. Trust that telling the story of Christ's sacrifice on the cross is the true window into understanding and living into God's glory. Testify to the goodness of Jesus and trust Him to do the work of transforming grace.

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