

Lesson 3: 2 Corinthians 1:23 - 2:6

1) Introduction

- a) As we saw in Lessons 1-2, Chapter 1 began with a defense by the Apostle against certain charges against him by the Corinthians. We recall from those lessons that Paul is not content simply to give them reassurances of his integrity; but instead he spells out a theological basis for his integrity.
- b) What Paul does is completely governed by the Spirit, not by worldly standards or by self interest. His motives were God honoring, not frivolous. They cannot attribute his changes in plans to his capriciousness. His personal whimsy does not propel his apostolic work.
 - i) The world views anyone as strange today who gives theological reasons for his or her decisions.
 - ii) "Worldliness is that system of value and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any given culture that have at their center the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd." (David Wells, *God in the Wasteland*)
 - iii) For some people, their religion is so private, they don't even impose on themselves! Within Western society, to act on religious principles is simply irrational.
 - iv) They change their religious when needed and as needed to match what they want to do. If your religion prevents you from doing what you want to do, then just shop around and change religions.
 - v) Paul's decision making was guided by Jesus Christ. "We desperately need to regain a God-centered view for our own lives, in which what we do is measured by what God has done and will do in and through Christ."
- c) Paul has given them the theological basis for his reliability and now reveals the reason for his failure to make the double visit that he promised in 1 Corinthians 16.

2) The Sorrowful Visit (1:23-2:4)

- a) **Verse 23 (Moreover I call God for a record upon my soul, that to spare you I came not as yet unto Corinth.)**
 - i) Paul sees himself as on trial before the Corinthians and has called for his defense the witness of his own conscience in verse 12. He now calls God as a witness. He says that he did not return as announced out of consideration

for them because he wanted to spare them.

- ii) The gravity of what Paul is saying here is reflected in his willingness to confirm it by a solemn oath. In fact, Paul is so serious about the assertion that he puts his own life on the line -- verse 23 reads "I call God as my witness against my life."
- iii) He does not spell out what he wanted to spare them from, but we can assume that he has in mind some kind of severe chastisement. He had warned them earlier about those who had become arrogant as if he were not coming back to them:
 - (1) 1 Corinthians 4:19-21 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. 21 What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?
- iv) At the conclusion of this letter he warns them when he comes he will show no leniency to those who continue defiantly in their sin (13:2).
 - (1) These persons include those who have not repented of their unclean lives, those who have not withdrawn from their associations with idolatry, and those who have been stirring up the dissension.
 - (2) His reasons for not returning had nothing to do with any wavering in his purpose or fear of being humiliated again. He wanted to spare them from being humiliated and from the severe discipline they deserved.
- v) The false image, popular today, of a dour and sour Paul who regularly thrashes his congregation and bulldozes opponents needs correcting.
 - (1) Paul's bitter battle with the Judaizers in Galatians is mistakenly projected onto all his letters. He takes no joy in frightening, berating, or punishing congregations. Nor is he fond of wrangling or blasting his opponents off the theological map.
 - (2) "For Paul stands in Christian history as a formidable figure. Probably the most popular image of him is that of the controversialist, delighting in the cut and thrust of theological debate, in logic barbed too often with invective, and sometimes failing in patience toward lesser souls. It is quite exceptionally difficult to correct this impression of the apostle, although it is quite exceptionally unfair."
 - (3) Paul understands himself to be their father, and as a father he expects obedience.
 - (a) 1 Corinthians 4:14 "I do not write these things to shame you, but as my

beloved children I warn you."

- (b) Paul tells fathers in Colossians 3:21 not to provoke their children lest they become discouraged, and he practices what he preaches with his own spiritual children.
- (c) That does not mean that Paul condones or ignores their theological errors or ethical lapses, but he treats those errors and lapses as a father would in dealing with his children.

b) Verse 24 (Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.)

- i) Paul was not being heavy-handed, but just the opposite. His decision not to come was a decision of humble restraint. He refused to exercise his own authority among them even though that would have meant his own vindication. Rather than fight for his own reputation, his purpose was to work with them for their joy.
- ii) The statement that he wanted to spare them touches upon two issues in this letter, his love for them and his authority over them.
 - (1) Some in Corinth may have protested that Paul did not love them. From his perspective, however, it was an act of love to refrain from coming to Corinth to dish out punishment.
 - (2) Also, stating in this way that he wanted to spare them assumes that he has authority over them. If he could spare, he also has the authority to punish.
 - (3) But he is sensitive to how they perceive him exercising this authority.
 - (a) He has suggested that had he come he would have been forced to exercise his authority and punish the guilty parties. He backtracks, however, to make it clear that he has no desire to dominate them or control them.
 - (b) There are many today who have set themselves up as the grand religious leaders or theological gurus who have dominion over the faith of others. But not even the Apostle Paul had dominion over anyone else's faith.
 - (c) Ephesians 4:4-6 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 **one Lord**, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.
 - (d) Apostles (and certainly preachers and elders) are not lords over the church. Only Jesus is Lord. Paul has no business and no intention of taking on that role for himself.

- iii) Paul does not browbeat the Corinthian church like an unbending dictator or manage their lives like a meddling parent. He believes in persuasion, not coercion, which is why he writes letters.
- iv) How he uses his authority over the congregation is one of the things that distinguishes him from the interlopers we will meet later who do act as overlords (11:19-20). They are similar to the false shepherds described by Ezekiel.
 - (1) "You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally" (Ezekiel 34:4).
- v) Paul exercises considerable restraint because he wants to work "with" them, not "on" them. His goal in this letter is to help the Corinthians make the necessary corrections themselves. He does not want to destroy the congregation's responsibility. They must learn to stand on their own.
- vi) Some translations have Paul affirming that they stand firm in the faith ("because you stand firm in the faith"), while others interpret the statement more as a general principle ("because it is by faith you stand firm.")
 - (1) With the second translation ("because it is by faith you stand firm."), Paul is telling them how to stand firm. They do not stand firm because of Paul's control as lord over their faith but by their faith in Jesus as Lord.
 - (a) Paul is saying, "You have your existence as Christians by faith, and your Christian existence in faith is determined by no man, but by God only."
 - (2) But if the first interpretation is correct ("because you stand firm in the faith") then does it pose a difficulty with 13:5, where Paul writes, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you --- unless, of course, you fail the test?"
 - (a) Could Paul write both these lines in the same letter? Some contend that Chapters 10-13 are a separate letter written at a different time when he did not believe that the Corinthians stood firm in the faith.
 - (b) The other translation is preferred because an affirmation of their faith does not fit the context of his argument here. But if this rendering is correct, it does not mean that this statement does not belong in the same letter as the challenge in 13:5.
 - (c) Paul knows that he is dealing with an audience alienated from him, and he does not want to antagonize them from the outset before they have heard his argument to the end. The contentious issues over which he must chastise them are reserved for the conclusion of the letter. There we learn that the

faith of some in Corinth is not strong.

c) Verse 1 (But I determined this with myself, that I would not come again to you in heaviness.)

i) As we try to unravel the events that led to this letter, we are forced to make certain inferences from the text. And one such inference comes from the word "again" here in verse 1.

(1) Verse 1 suggests that Paul had previously come to them in heaviness. We know that could not have been his first visit when he came to first preach the gospel, and we know from later in this epistle that his next visit would be his third visit (12:14 and 13:1). Thus, there must have been a painful second visit before this letter was written.

(2) What happened to make it so painful? We will be given some clues to answer that question here in Chapter 2 and later in Chapter 7 when Paul returns to this topic. Verse 5, which we will study in just a moment, suggests it may have involved a painful confrontation with someone. In 7:12, when Paul returns to this topic, he suggests the letter was prompted by someone "who had done the wrong." Whatever the event, it caused Paul to change his plans.

ii) A high concentration of *pain* language dominates verses 1-5.

(1) The noun "pain" appears twice and the verb form appears five times in verses 1-5. The noun "grief" appears three times in the letter, and the verb "to grieve" appears in seven times. The majority of the usages of the word in Paul's letters occur here in 2 Corinthians.

(2) If Philippians is known for the predominance of the word "joy," 2 Corinthians should be known for the predominance of the word "pain." The Corinthians were definitely his problem children.

iii) Paul may have in mind being humiliated by them, but he did not simply want to avoid another humiliation by this upstart church.

(1) After all, the Corinthians' failure to live according to their Christian calling or their deserting the true gospel of the cross and resurrection for a false, but more glittering, gospel of success dispensed by false apostles would have caused him the greatest pain.

(2) Paul changed his plans to spare them, not to spare himself.

d) Verse 2 (For if I make you sorry, who is he then that maketh me glad, but the same which is made sorry by me?)

- i) Some interpreters divide this sentence in two: "For if I make you sad, who then will make me glad? Certainly not the one who has been plunged into sorrow by me!"
 - ii) Others interpret it as: "For if I make you sad, who would be left to make me glad but the one I caused to be sad?" I favor this second interpretation.
 - iii) Paul's love and affection for the church in Corinth really comes out in this verse. They are a source of joy to him, and when their relationship is out of sorts, his pain is multiplied. They need him -- but he also needs them. They are a source of comfort and joy to Paul -- they make him glad. And, he suggests in this verse, there were few if any other congregations with which he had such a relationship. Their rejection of Paul must have been incredibly painful to the Apostle.
- e) Verse 3 (And I wrote this same unto you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from them of whom I ought to rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy is the joy of you all.)**
- i) Paul sent a letter in place of a visit. Which letter is this?
 - (1) We know that Paul wrote possibly as many as four letters to the Corinthians, and some commentators argue that he wrote five or more.
 - (a) Epistle A is the letter referred to in 1 Cor 5:9 in which Paul warned them not to associate with sexually immoral people. We do not have this letter. (It is not a "lost" epistle because that would suggest God intended for us to have it. There are no lost books of the Bible.)
 - (b) Epistle B is First Corinthians.
 - (c) Epistle C is this letter referred to in verses 3-4, usually called the sorrowful letter. Some commentators consider 2 Corinthians 10-13 to be this letter, others 1 Corinthians, and others another letter that we do not have.
 - (d) Epistle D is 2 Corinthians. Some commentators divide it into two separate epistles: Chapters 1-9 and 10-13.
 - (2) I reject the idea that 2 Corinthians is a patchwork of separate letters, but we will consider that topic when we study Chapters 10-13. That premise, however, leaves us with two options for this sorrowful letter of verses 3-4 - - either it is First Corinthians or it is a letter that we do not have (and were not intended to have).
 - (a) I think the evidence generally points away from the sorrowful letter being First Corinthians.
 - (b) In the next verse, Paul describes the letter as having been written "out of

much affliction and anguish of heart" and "with many tears." We just spent six months studying that letter in detail, and while it does have some strong language in it, the description in verse 4 seems (to me anyway) much too strong to apply to First Corinthians. Most of that letter deals with Paul's answers to questions they had raised, and includes his beautiful discourses on love and the resurrection. The greetings at the end also seem to contradict the idea that the letter was written with many tears and affliction and anguish.

(c) Here is what I think happened:

(i) Paul goes to Corinth and begins the congregation there as described in Acts 18. He then leaves for Ephesus as described in Acts 18:19.

(ii) Paul writes Letter A later referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9 ("I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators.")

(iii) While in Ephesus, he hears a report and receives a delegation from Corinth.

(iv) Paul sends First Corinthians in response to that report.

(v) Paul receives further reports, and pays them a painful visit -- his second visit to Corinth. Some conflict occurs that causes him to return to Ephesus.

1. This second visit occurred between his departure from Corinth after a sojourn of 18 months (Acts 18:11, 18) and his three month stay there before he traveled to Jerusalem (Acts 20:3).

(vi) Paul sends the sorrowful letter. It was likely delivered by Titus.

(vii) Paul leaves Ephesus and waits for Titus in Troas and finally meets him in Macedonia. Titus brings good news from Corinth. His sorrowful letter had its intended effect.

(viii) Paul writes Second Corinthians.

(ix) Paul goes to Corinth -- his third visit -- and stays there over the winter before proceeding via Macedonia to Jerusalem with the collection.

1. Paul refers to his upcoming third visit in 2 Corinthians 12:14 and 13:1. It is difficult to place a second visit between his first and the writing of First Corinthians, which further suggests that the sorrowful letter (written after his second visit) is not First Corinthians.

(x) Thus, Paul wrote four letters: two of which we have and two of which we do not have.

ii) We learn from 2 Corinthians that Paul had four motives in writing his

sorrowful letter.

(1) 1. He wrote so that his next visit would bring joy instead of pain (2:3).

(a) In 13:10 he says he writes these things in 2 Corinthians while he is away from them so that he will not have to use a heavy hand when he is present.

(b) If they respond obediently, his visit will bring joy. This joy is more than good cheer over a happy reunion. Joy for Paul is related to submission to God's will, which in turn advances the gospel and brings glory to God.

(2) 2. He wanted them to know of his love (2:4; see 3:2; 12:15; 1 Cor 16:24).

(3) 3. He wanted to test their obedience (2:9).

(4) 4. He wanted to bring about the effects of Godly sorrow and reveal his own care for them in the sight of God (7:11-12).

iii) "The many attempts to discover the painful letter preserved somewhere within the Corinthian correspondence have not been successful. The letter has disappeared, and we can only guess its contents."

(1) Certainly it contained some blunt and serious rebuke (7:8-9).

(a) 2 Corinthians 7:8 For even if I made you sorry with my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it. For I perceive that the same epistle made you sorry, though only for a while.

(2) "Ministers who have given long years of service to their congregations and have become targets of sniping by a vocal minority or casualties of callous treatment can understand and sympathize with the bitter anguish Paul must have felt in dealing with the Corinthians. In spite of receiving a serious and humiliating rebuff from the Corinthians, Paul refused to forget the Corinthian church."

(3) He confronted them in a letter. Sometimes confrontation is the clearest proof of love.

(a) It is easier to gloss over the problems with others, to cover them up, to pretend that they do not exist, or to write problem people off and terminate the relationship. Paul refused to do any of these things and tenaciously tried to restore the bond by confronting the problems directly.

iv) Mentioning joy and pain picks up the earlier contrasts between affliction and consolation.

(1) As God provides consolation in the midst of affliction, Paul is sure that God will bring joy out of a painful relationship. Therefore, Paul expresses

his supreme confidence in them despite the seriousness of the problems.

- (2) He wrote the earlier letter with confidence that it would have its intended effect and can now write with even greater confidence after hearing from Titus about their remorse and repentance (7:9). As they share his sufferings and consolation (1:7), he expects them also to share his joy (7:7).
- f) **Verse 4 (For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you with many tears; not that ye should be grieved, but that ye might know the love which I have more abundantly unto you.)**
- i) Paul is not stoical about the pain the dispute caused him. He does not try to hide his emotions. He had felt deeply their affection for him, and the apparent withdrawal of that affection had wounded him all the more deeply.
- (1) He wrote from great psychological affliction and anguish and through many tears. It was not simply personal hurt that caused the tears. He wept over those who were ethically impure and over those who have veered from God's will.
- (a) Philippians 3:18 For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ.
- (2) Discipline is never painless --- for the one who delivers it or the one who receives it. Paul is neither iron-hearted nor iron-handed. His love for them motivated his actions entirely. If they were grieved, he leaves no doubt that he was grieved more.
- (3) Paul insists that the grief he caused them was the surest sign of his love. He gives them direction and rebukes them as a loving father would.
- ii) In spite of being the object of the Corinthians' abuse, Paul, like a good father, continues to seek their best interests and responds to their impudence with sacrificial love.
- iii) In summary, Paul gives three reasons why he did not return to Corinth as originally planned.
- (1) He has mentioned his near-death affliction in Asia (1:8-10) which would have prevented him from coming.
- (2) He implies that the sovereignty of God controls his agenda (1:12) and that he responds to the will of God for the glory of God (1:20).
- (3) He now explains that he was anxious to avoid another painful visit that would only worsen the situation and make reconciliation all the more

difficult (1:23-2:4).

3) Forgiveness of the Offender (2:5-13)

a) Verse 5 (But if any have caused grief, he hath not grieved me, but in part: that I may not overcharge you all.)

- i) Paul now turns to the specific incident that provoked his grief and sudden departure without rehashing what happened.
 - (1) The Corinthians obviously do not need Paul to tell them what happened, and dredging up the unhappy details might awaken the old feelings of anger again. The wounds are still healing, and rehearsing the events that caused them serves no purpose.
 - (2) Unfortunately, the lack of particulars leaves us later readers, far removed from the situation, somewhat in the dark.
- ii) Paul's tact leads him to speak about a specific situation in ambiguous generalities as he avoids naming the person or describing the nature of the indignity. The anonymous person had repented, and now Paul only identifies the transgression euphemistically, "if anyone has caused grief," and identifies the person in a veiled way as "the one who did the wrong" (7:12).
- iii) Naming names and specifying the crimes and punishment would only unleash more grief by bringing more shame on the one who has now repented and has been sufficiently punished.
 - (1) The same delicacy emerges in the way Paul refers to Onesimus in his letter to Philemon. He avoids mentioning the unmentionable --- Onesimus's desertion. He uses a pun to describe Onesimus's (a name that means "useful") former "uselessness" (v. 11). Instead of plainly saying that Onesimus ran away, Paul describes his absence with a passive voice, suggesting that God's hand was involved, "He was separated from you for a little while" (v. 15). He broaches the subject of Onesimus's past misdeeds with a conditional sentence, "If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything" (v. 18). Paul does not explicitly ask Philemon to forgive his slave, but the general tone of the letter assumes that he should adopt a forgiving attitude.
- iv) His goal here is to bring healing, not to recount the events to prove how right he was. Instead of criticizing the culprit, he describes his own grief, what happened to him, and how this plays out in his sufferings for the gospel. But modern readers would like to know who the offender was and what his offense was.
- v) To ascertain who this miscreant was, we must first compile the evidence

available.

(1) Clue #1. The offense does not seem to be a theological error since Paul does not mention doctrinal issues. Nevertheless, some kind of theological misconception may have been at the root of the problem. The gravity and seriousness of Paul's response supports this view. At the very least, we know this person was guilty of rebellion against an Apostle of Jesus Christ, which in itself is a very serious theological error.

(a) Paul's lengthy discussions of his afflictions throughout the letter and his statement that they only understand him in part (1:14) suggests that the individual and others in the community failed to appreciate the path of suffering Paul follows as the apostle who preaches Christ crucified. This misunderstanding may have fed the conflict.

(2) Clue #2. A single individual committed the offense, but somehow the Corinthians were implicated (2:5).

(3) Clue #3. We can infer something about the offense from Paul's insistence that he was not hurt as much as the Corinthians were (2:5), that he had already forgiven the offender (2:10), and that the man's action was a direct slap at Paul. Whatever it was, it was serious enough to force Paul to leave and to dispatch the letter of tears.

(4) Clue #4. The offense affected the whole community in some way. Originally, the Corinthians may not have recognized the full gravity of what had happened, or they may have covered in silence. Like many bystanders in conflict situations, they may have wanted to melt into the background or bury their heads in the sand and wish that it would all go away.

(a) When Paul needed defenders to stand up for him, he stood alone like Jesus did when his friends denied him and fled.

(b) 2 Timothy 1:7-8 For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. 8 Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me His prisoner, but share with me in the sufferings for the gospel according to the power of God.

(5) Clue #5. Paul's statement in 2:10, "If there is anything to forgive," may imply, as some suggest, that the issue concerned simply a personal conflict with Paul rather than a moral lapse or theological error.

vi) But Paul's theological response suggests that the offence was more serious than simply a personal verbal affront such as name calling.

(1) This person rejected Paul's authority. His rebellion against the apostle makes it likely that he belonged to the minority of members who were

socially advantaged and financially better off.

- (2) He apparently wielded some power in the community and misused it in a cutthroat attempt to wrest a following from those loyal to Paul by shaming him in some way.
 - (3) It is also likely that he may have spiraled free from moral constraints in arrogantly exercising the freedom he assumed for himself in the name of Christ.
 - (4) This person may also have resisted Paul by treating his coworker Timothy with contempt and may have tried to stir up resistance against him during his absence.
 - (5) Who was this person? There is an ancient (or traditional) view and a modern view on that issue.
- vii)** The majority of ancient commentators identified the offender as the man guilty of living with his father's wife in 1 Cor. 5:1-5.
- (1) Paul insisted that the Corinthians discipline the man by evicting him from their fellowship because he was a corrupting influence.
 - (2) He previously had instructed them not to associate with those who were immoral, but the Corinthians apparently ignored his instructions for some reason (1 Cor. 5:9-11).
 - (3) Paul's belief that this man's sin gave the whole community a bad reputation (1 Cor. 5:2) may explain why he says that he caused pain to all of you (2:5).
 - (4) Paul refers to the involvement of the whole church in disciplining and restoring the one who did wrong (2:9; 7:12), which conforms to his admonition for them to discipline the man in 1 Cor. 5:4-5.
 - (5) Satan is also mentioned in both texts. In 1 Corinthians they are to exercise discipline by delivering the offender to Satan; in 2 Corinthians they are to keep Satan from gaining an advantage over them by forgiving the offender, by accepting him back into their fellowship.
 - (6) A reference to Christ also appears in both texts: "In the name of the Lord Jesus" (5:4); "in the face of Christ" (2:10).
- viii)** The majority of modern commentators emphatically reject identifying the offender with the man guilty of incest in 1 Corinthians 5.
- (1) One says that this view "is now almost universally, and rightly,

abandoned," and another argues that "under no circumstances" can it be right. Why do they reject this view?

- (a) First, some argue that the gentleness and reserve with which Paul treats the offender does not seem to match the offense of incest, even if he had repented.
- (b) Second, deliverance for the destruction of the flesh (1 Cor 5:5) would seem to involve something more drastic than a brief suspension from the church gatherings. If Paul relented and reversed himself on the stern punishment, it might add to the impression that he vacillates or is too meek when dealing with sin.
- (c) Third, Paul says he forgives him before they have (2:10). This statement suggests that the man committed some personal injury against Paul, but there is no indication from 1 Corinthians 5 that the incestuous man directed any insults Paul's way.
- (d) Fourth, how could Paul say that he had forgiven someone who sank to such depths that even pagans considered his behavior abhorrent? How could Paul say "if there was anything to forgive" (2:10) if he has in mind such a sin?

ix) Interpreters have therefore proposed other candidates for the offender.

- (1) Some have claimed it was the man who was taking legal action against another in 1 Cor. 6:1-8.
- (2) Others argue that it was an outsider, one of the pseudo-apostles who had been meddling in the church's affairs.
 - (a) The visitor "claimed superior rights for himself, challenged the apostle's position, belittled his authority." Since Paul shows greater concern for the church than the individual (2:9), they reason that the individual was an outsider. That the Corinthians demonstrated their innocence to Titus and punished the offender suggests that they did not fully share in the guilt. If they were pure in the matter (7:9), he argues, then they argue the offender must have been an outsider.
 - (b) But Paul's call to restore the offender would make no sense if he were an outsider. Nor would it be likely for an outsider to be overwhelmed by grief and to desert the faith if the Corinthians were to reject him in some way. It is also hard to explain why Paul would feel such compassion for an intruder who has caused the congregation such harm.
- (3) Another commentator makes the intriguing suggestion that the offender was someone who stole money designated for the collection.
 - (a) The individual denied the charges, and Paul was somehow implicated. The Corinthians did not entirely believe Paul's side of the story, resulting in the

embarrassing confrontation.

- (4)** The majority of commentators assume that the guilty party was some unknown person, likely a recent member, who led a revolt against Paul.
- (5)** When Paul arrived on his second visit, he likely thought the problem in 1 Cor. 5 had been resolved. After all, he had given explicit instructions in his letter. But perhaps this very person met Paul as soon as he arrived, and confronted him, with no one rising to Paul's defense. Paul may have left immediately -- not to spare himself -- but to spare the Corinthians from the punishment they were due and the punishment he was perfectly able to deliver.
- x)** Modern readers can only guess what happened and how this anonymous "certain one" has grieved Paul and the church, but scholars may have been too quick to dismiss the man mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 as the prime candidate for the one who caused the rift.
 - (1)** Paul's call in 1 Cor 5:5 for a church to carry out such extreme disciplinary measures is unique in his letters. It would be strange if Paul never broached the subject again or failed to commend the Corinthians for obeying his instructions regarding this grievous offense had they done so.
 - (2)** Paul had warned the Corinthians that he was prepared to come to them 'with a rod' if they did not heed what he said (1 Cor 4:21).
 - (a)** This threat occurs immediately before his insistence that they discipline the man who is living with his father's wife (1 Cor 5:1-5).
 - (b)** It is possible that Paul attempted to follow through on his threat and was rebuffed by the church either overtly or, more probably, by their inaction. Paul's exercise of authority apparently caused resentment, and led to this event.
 - (3)** There is no way to know the whole story behind the incestuous man's behavior, but it is probable that one who defied the mores even of pagans and sinned so terribly would not have submitted meekly to the discipline urged by Paul.
 - (a)** He had somehow gained the community's support so that they apparently took some twisted pride in his sin ("you are puffed up," 5:2) instead of grieving over the immorality. It is unlikely that the offender would surrender that support without a fight.
 - (b)** This man is also the most likely candidate to hold a grudge against Paul and to chafe over his interference. He may have resisted Paul's efforts to get the church to take action against him by engaging in a campaign to undermine Paul's authority and mocking him to his face

when he visited.

- (c)** He would have been likely to resort to the Roman custom of publicly ridiculing enemies with invective to humiliate them and divest them of their friends.
 - (i)** The fear of public humiliation ran deep in Roman and Greek society. In a society generally unsympathetic to losers, there was no middle ground, no benefit of doubt. Failure almost always meant the destruction of a man's status and reputation in public estimation, sometimes temporarily, often permanently. Paul's call for punishment of this man would have devastated the man's honor in the congregation.
 - (d)** He also would have the most to gain from courting the attentions of the false apostles. The church's failure to take up for their apostle in this acrimonious confrontation suggests that this man probably wielded some influence. It is quite likely that he was wealthy and influential and possibly was the host of a house church. Naturally, the church would be reluctant to discipline such a man whatever his sin.
- (4)** If the incestuous man was indeed the one who brought grief to the church, Paul's letter apparently steeled their nerve and gave them the theological discernment to take action.
- (5)** Paul wanted him expelled from the fellowship in hopes that the shock would force him to change his fleshly orientation. Now that the individual has repented, Paul worries that they not allow Satan to gain advantage (2 Cor. 2:11). Satan has had him long enough; Paul wants him forgiven and restored or excessive sorrow might overwhelm the man. Paul knows that Satan will try to undermine the reconciliation and forgiveness.
- (6)** Although the sin of incest did not wrong Paul, he identifies himself so closely with the church that any wrong directed against it directly affects him.
- (a)** He writes in 11:29: "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (see also 1 Cor. 12:26: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it").
 - (b)** Paul takes it personally when sin shakes the Christian community. But an additional offense occurred after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians when he made the personal visit. The man apparently publicly rebuked him and attacked his teaching, which caused Paul to cut short his time in Corinth.
 - (c)** Paul mentions the one who was offended in 7:12. Most assume that if the offender was the man guilty of incest, then the one who was

wronged was his father although he is not mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:1-5, But it is more likely that the one wronged was Paul, and this connection is hard to square with the original offense of incest. But Paul may not be referring in 7:12 to the original wrong but a subsequent event. He may have in mind an incident that occurred when he made his painful visit and provoked the severe letter. Ultimately, his primary concern was not this offense but the breakdown in his relationship with the church.

xi) "While a case can still be made for the incestuous man as Paul's nemesis, final certainty eludes us. We simply cannot know and must therefore examine the text, not to establish what happened but to discern its enduring theological and ethical implications."

xii) It is frequently difficult for those who are not directly involved in personal disputes in churches to see how they also are directly affected.

(1) Church disputes affect everyone whether or not they are personally involved. They damage the entire congregation. In this instance the dispute had repercussions even on people in Troas.

(2) If the offender was the incestuous man, his very presence in the congregation exposed them to his spiritual contagion. Paul understands the offender's mistreatment of him also injured the entire congregation.

xiii) At the heart of the conflict was the offender's self-interested behavior, which clashed with Christian morality and the spiritual welfare of the church.

(1) When Paul learned of the offense, he protested loudly. His protest inflamed the offender's resentment, and he in turn protested against Paul. When Paul arrived in person, the offender took the initiative to make his feelings known publicly to try to shame Paul in some way.

(2) Paul had communicated that this offense was not a private matter but something that involved the entire church. The dispute therefore reached the point of critical mass with this public confrontation. It would either escalate or be defused.

(3) Escalation could lead to an explosion that might permanently destroy the relationship between Paul and the church. Paul had no intention of coercing the Corinthians to fall into line because that would defeat his purpose to develop churches capable of making mature Christian decisions on their own without constant supervision (see 1 Cor 6:1-6). To keep the situation from creating an irreconcilable rupture, he retreated.

(4) Paul had no intention of sacrificing core Christian values, however, for the sake of an uneasy peace. Nor would he ever give up on the church. A

letter --- even a stinging letter --- was better than open confrontation because it gave him an opportunity to lay out the issues from a theological perspective. The ultimate goal was to bring about a peaceful resolution, not an unholy compromise.

(5) The final outcome had to be one fitting for those who were baptized into Christ and bore his name. Paul's wisdom in taking this tack was vindicated by the Corinthians' positive response. They rallied to Paul's defense and chastised the guilty person, as we will see in Chapter 7.

b) Verse 6 (Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many.)

i) Paul's concern about the punishment of the offender presents the picture that church members presided as judges over the person involved and pronounced a sentence (see 1 Cor 6:1-11).

ii) Paul does not specify what the punishment was.

(1) "It could not have been a simple reprimand, because the wording here shows that it has some enduring aspect or consequences, which can-and, Paul believes, ought to-be now discontinued."

iii) The reference to the majority therefore implies that not all concurred with the action and may reveal that the church is split, perhaps around different house churches.

(1) Either a minority still rejects Paul's authority, or they may think that this is a personal matter between Paul and the individual that should not involve the church.

(2) Possibly "ultra-Paulinists" might regard the penalty as inadequate and want to take even stronger measures.

(3) It may be only an innocuous reference to a congregational vote "without any emphasis on those who might have dissented from the decision, whether they supported a harsher sentence or a more lenient one." Paul says that he has confidence in "all" of them (2:3), not just his supporters. But Chapters 10-13 suggest that Paul knows that some resistance still exists in the church.

iv) Paul has no interest in retribution and does not want them to be punitive. The goal was reached when the man repented, and consequently the punishment need not continue.

(1) This passage should disabuse people of the image that Paul was rigid,

combative, and harsh in dealing with his churches.

- (2) Why on the sorrowful visit didn't Paul just strike this guy dead? Wouldn't that have fit better the image that so many people have today of the Apostle Paul?
 - (3) "We are accustomed to conceive of the apostle as always armed for warfare, sheathed in logic, and bristling with arguments." We meet here a Paul who is humble, tolerant, forgiving, and full of tenderness. In fact, his forbearance may be one of the Corinthians' criticisms of Paul. In person he is too humble and too meek. They misinterpret these traits as weakness (2 Cor 10:10).
 - (4) His encouragement to forgive may be taken by them as another of Paul's shortcomings. Someone in Corinth who believed, as most did in this Roman culture, that one proved one's mettle by completely demolishing any opposition, might accuse Paul of feeble vacillation by shifting from the role of prosecutor to the role of defender with a tender plea for clemency.
 - (5) If it is a sign of weakness, it is the weakness that comes from living out the cross. Paul has no desire to overwhelm his opponents, not even those who may have grievously injured him. When his antagonist is down, he asks everyone to join together in helping him up. He never wishes to rout those who are guilty of sin but always wants to edify (see 13:10).
- v) Paul therefore tries to prevent the affair from deteriorating into a win-lose situation. Paul asserts that the punishment has been sufficient, and it is now fitting that they forgive and restore the individual. His call for forgiveness changes an "I win, you lose" situation to one where brothers in Christ win and Satan loses. The brother is won back to Christ and not lost to Satan.