

Bible Study #12

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Background for Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians

Intro to 2nd Corinthians

- Last class we finished a detailed study of Paul's First Letter to the *Corinthians* which basically responded to the problems discussed in a letter from Cleo who was a member of the *Corinthian* church
- *As we will see, 2nd Corinthians* is actually the **4th letter Paul writes** to the *Corinthians* after his initial visit and establishment of the *Corinthian* Church in 52 AD
- The *Catholic Commentary of Sacred Scriptures: Second Corinthians* presents the Historical Context of 2nd *Corinthians* in the following **seven stages**:

Stage 1

- **Paul founds the Church in Corinth in 51 AD**
 - Acts indicate that Paul spent 18 months in *Corinth* during his founding visit and succeeded in establishing a community of believers consisting of Gentiles (the majority) and Jews
 - This church proved to be a vibrant but perplexing community which seemed to have a penchant for misunderstanding Paul

Stage 2

- **Paul sends his first letter to *Corinth* between 51 and 53 AD**
 - We learn from 1st Cor 5:9 that Paul had most likely written **an earlier letter (which was lost)** in which Paul urged the *Corinthians* not to associate with immoral people
 - Apparently, some in the community misconstrued his words to mean that they were to avoid contact with outsiders
 - This may have been the source of the question about whether or not to divorce unbelievers (1 Cor 7:12-16)

Stage 3

- **Paul sends the 1st Corinthians letter from *Ephesus* via his delegate Timothy in the spring of 54**
 - Sometime after this Paul wrote **his second letter** which is presently **known as** the canonical **First Corinthians**
 - In this letter Paul responds to oral reports about divisions (1 Cor 1:11) and scandalous behavior within the community (1 Cor 1:1-6:20; 11:2-34)
 - It also responds to the issues raised in a letter from *Cleo*
 - He wrote this letter from *Ephesus* to exhort the Church in *Corinth* to strive for unity (1 Cor 1:10); to become one of the members of the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-27)

Stage 3 (Cont)

- He also sent Timothy to *Corinth* to remind the community of all he had previously taught them (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10)
- Unfortunately, this did not resolve the issues
- Most likely Timothy quickly came back to *Ephesus* with some sobering news which we cannot adequately reconstruct

Stage 4

- **Paul makes an emergency visit to *Corinth* in early summer of 54 AD**
 - This was a **visit** he later describes as “**painful**” (2 Cor 2:1)
 - That this visit was urgent and unexpected is suggested by the fact that he **changed the travel plans** which he had discussed in 1 Cor 16:5-7
 - Instead he decided to go directly to *Corinth* from *Ephesus*
 - This **second visit** ended in an **unpleasant incident** with a person he later refers to as “the one who did the wrong” (2 Cor 7:12)

Stage 4 (Cont)

- Again we are left guessing what happened
- The most common scholarly opinion is that a member of the community slandered Paul, calling his apostolic authority into question
- Paul abruptly left *Corinth* and returned by sea directly to *Ephesus*

Stage 5

- **Paul sends a tearful letter via Titus in late summer 54 AD**
 - Upon returning to *Ephesus* Paul decides to send another letter to the *Corinthians*
 - This letter was penned out of much affliction and anguish of heart and many tears (2 Cor 2:4)
 - Again, this **third piece of correspondence**, known as the **“tearful letter”** is no longer in existence
 - We know the gist of it from various references to it in *2nd Corinthians*
 - In it Paul express his love and concern for the community as well as to convey his sense of pain as he was upset that the *Corinthians* had not come to his defense at the time of the nasty incident

Stage 5 (Cont)

- He entrusted the delivery of this letter to Titus and charged him with gauging the community's response
- Upon hearing this letter the *Corinthians* were cut to the heart and many of them meted out a sever punishment (ostracism) to the person who had offended Paul (2 Cor 2:6; 7:11)
- They also grieved and hoped to see Paul again (2 Cor 7:7)
- Paul had directed Titus to return to him via a circuitous northern land route probably because he planned to leave *Ephesus* and move north to *Troas*
 - This departure is discussed in Acts 19:13-20:3

Stage 5 (Cont)

- Paul was anxious to receive news from Titus, so he decided to cross over to *Macedonia* to meet him along the way (2 Cor 2:12-13)
- The two found each other somewhere in *Macedonia*, perhaps in *Philippi*, before the winter of 54-55 AD
- There Titus relayed the *Corinthian's* heartfelt response to Paul' letter, which brought great joy and consolation to Paul (2 Cor 7:6-7;13)

Stage 6

- **Titus reports new problems in the winter of 54-55 AD**
 - Titus' report was **not all positive** and sunny
 - A few ominous clouds still remained
 - Apparently not all the members of the community agreed with the punishment imposed on the “offender”
 - Titus also, most likely, informed Paul of the arrival of other “missionaries” who criticized Paul’s appearance and lack of eloquence
 - They accused Paul of hiding behind the “severe and forceful” letters he wrote (2 Cor 10:10)

Stage 6 (Cont)

- Some in the community also claimed to have superior apostolic credentials than Paul as they brought with them “letters of recommendation” (2 Cor 3:1)
- They also boasted of their pedigree and spectacular exploits such as visionary experience (2 Cor 11:22-12:6)
- They contrasted this with Paul’s way of life as marked by suffering; his preaching focused on the cross (1 Cor 2:2); and they asked how such a lifestyle and gospel show forth the power of the resurrection
- Titus also told Paul that the community participated in a collection for the *Church in Jerusalem*

Stage 7

- **Paul sends 2nd Corinthians via Titus in the spring of 55 AD**
 - Paul sends his **fourth letter** to the Church of *Corinth* known as canonical ***Second Corinthians***
 - After spending the winter of 54 -55 AD in Macedonia Paul came to *Corinth* for his **third visit**
 - Before his arrival he needed to accomplish several things:
 - He decided to clear the air over recent events by explaining his change in travel plans and reasons for sending the tearful letter
 - He sought to defend his way of being an apostle, a new way marked by self-giving love patterned after the love embodied by Jesus

Stage 7 (Cont)

- He also wanted to convey his joy over the response of the Corinthians **to his third letter**
- He ended by offering to forgive the offending member and encouraged the community to reach out to this person and receive him back
- Paul felt confident about the *Corinthians'* renewed enthusiasm for him
- He also decided to go on the attack against the intruding missionaries whom he dubbed as “super-apostles” by exposing the foolishness of their boasting

Stage 7 (Cont)

- Finally, he wanted to warn those who persisted in their sinful ways so that he could deal with them severely
- He sought to exhort the members of the community to attend to their own character rather than challenging his
- From this letter (2nd Corinthians) we can see that Paul **bases his own self-defense on the character of Jesus**, whose entire life was marked by faithful obedience to God in giving himself in love for the sake of others

Transition

- We will now return to **Acts 19** as Paul prepares to make his 3rd journey to Corinth overland

Acts 19

- As we discovered earlier in Acts Paul spent **three years in Ephesus 54-57 AD** where he was able to present “his message” to most of the *Province of Asia*
- It was Paul’s strategy to begin his missions in large cities and then use them as a base from which new converts could fan out and bring the gospel to surrounding areas
 - Look at the Seven Churches of Asia discussed in the letter to the Colossians and the Book of Revelation that existed by the end of the 1st century (Rev 1:4;11)*

Acts 19 (Cont)

- We saw in **Acts 19: 11-12** how God performed some extraordinary miracles through the hands of Paul including people being healed by touching his handkerchiefs or aprons as well as **exercising evil spirits**
- Remember that Paul wrote his letters to the *Galatians* and *1st Corinthians* during his stay in *Ephesus* *

Acts 19 (Cont)

- **Acts 19:13-20** *“Then some of the **itinerant Jewish exorcists** undertook to pronounce the name of the Lord Jesus... So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.”*

Throughout the history of Judaism there were pious rabbis, like Elijah and Elisha, who raised people from the dead

There were prophets, judges and other special people throughout Salvation History in the Old Testament who were enabled by God to do special things

We should not be surprised to find these Jewish exorcists doing what they could to counter the effects of demons in the first century

Acts 19 (Cont)

- Jewish exorcism was a well-known career among rabbis at that time
- In this instance some of these rabbis attempted to exorcise some of the demons using the name of Jesus
- Since they were **not Baptized Christians**, they had no idea of what they were doing, and they only used his name because they had seen what had happened to those who had been baptized
- So, some of these rabbis attempted to exercise demons in the name of Jesus to see what would happen
- But as discussed, things did not work out so well for them

Acts 19 (Cont)

- As a practical matter this should stand as a warning for us should we hear about someone being involved in any form of exorcism - stay away from it!
- The command of these exorcists, including the seven sons of *Sceva*, a Jewish high priest, were not grounded in faith in Jesus and they had no access to the power of His name
- Instead they were **trying to use His name as a kind of magic formula**
- The reports of their humiliation brought renewed esteem for Jesus' name among Jews and Greeks

Acts 19 (Cont)

- It also caused many converts to renounce their magical practices and even publically burn a number of their books worth 50,000 silver pieces
- This anecdote illustrated the powerful impact the gospel is beginning to have in Ephesus *

Acts 19 (Cont)

- **Acts 19:21-22** *“Now after these events Paul resolved in the spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem,... And having sent into Macedonia two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, he himself stayed in Asia for a while.”*
 - **Paul resolves in the Spirit to leave *Ephesus*** and visit his newly founded churches on European soil in *Macedonia* and *Achaia* before he returns to the mother church in *Jerusalem*
 - This decision parallels Jesus’ decision to go to *Jerusalem* for his passion, and like Jesus, Paul will be arrested and suffer in the Holy City
 - Thus Paul is imitating the Lord’s Passion
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Acts 19 (Cont)

- He also **feels constrained by God's will to visit *Rome***
- As we will see the *Book of Acts* will end with Paul in *Rome* under house arrest but continuing to proclaim Jesus and the Kingdom of God with complete assurance and without hindrance
- In preparation for his return to *Macedonia* Paul sends two of his assistants, Timothy and Erastus, ahead of him while he spends a little while longer in the *Province of Asia*

Acts 19 (Cont)

- The Greek word used here for “**helpers**” is *diakonous* also translated as “**deacon**”
 - In that day the title for the various holy orders were often interchangeable between deacon, priest or bishop
 - *Diakonous* – Deacon
 - *Presbuteros* – Elder or the one who looks after you
 - That does not necessarily mean that Timothy was a deacon as he could have been a bishop at this point
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Acts 19 (Cont)

- **Acts 19:23** *“About that time there arose no little stir concerning the Way.”*
 - But, before he has time to leave *Ephesus* a serious disorder breaks out concerning “the Way”
 - Here we see Luke using an artful understatement, “not a little disturbance”
 - And he refers to Christianity as “the Way”
 - Mark refers to the exodus of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem for his passion as “the Way”

Acts 19 (Cont)

- **Acts 19: 24-41** *“For a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen.... And when he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.”*
 - *Demetrius* was really upset because Paul is converting many of the pagans from worshiping their idols to the worship of the one true God
 - So *Demetrius* as a good businessman gathers together all the people in his trade and points out how Paul’s preaching is bad for business
 - His concern was more economic than religious

Acts 19 (Cont)

- He warns his fellow craftsmen of a twofold danger
 - The business of making idols will be discredited and they will lose their livelihood
 - It will mean a loss of credibility for the temple of the great **goddess Artemis** (which was *Ephesus's* claim to fame)

This led to a large gathering which turned into a riot seeking to have Paul put in prison

It is not clear who this *Alexander* that the Jews pushed forward was as it does not seem that he was a Christian

But the Jews were known for rejecting idolatry, so it did not matter

- Finally, the town clerk manages to calm the crowd

Acts 20

- **Acts 20:1-3** *“After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples and having exhorted them took leave of them and departed for Macedonia...as he was about to set sail for Syria, he determined to return through Macedonia.”*
 - Having narrowly escaped the violent mob in *Ephesus* **Paul and his team continue their travels by sea and land**
 - Here we see Paul’s concern for the well-being of the communities he founded
 - First, he summons his disciples for a pep talk and encourages them to hold fast to their newfound faith in Christ

Acts 20 (Cont)

- Then he **sets sail for *Macedonia*** where he continues to provide many words of encouragement to the churches he founded in *Philippi, Thessalonica* and *Beroea*
- It appears that **he spent three months** bolstering the churches in *Athens* and *Corinth*
- Most likely it was during this time he wrote his ***letter to the Romans*** from *Corinth*
- As he is about to sail to Syria, he discovers a plot by some of the Jews who organized a conspiracy against him

Acts 20 (Cont)

- To evade this plot he changes his travel plans again and decides to travel overland by way of *Macedonia* rather than using the most direct route by sea
- Luke lists seven of Paul's travel companions, who come from many of the churches recently founded by Paul
- At this point we will leave *Acts* again and look at an overview of Paul's ***Second Letter to the Corinthians***