

An Alternate Reading of the 2 Corinthians Letter

Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthian church is terribly difficult to understand because it's obviously a situational letter (that is, it was written to deal with a particular situation that existed in that church that required the apostle to respond). But we don't know what that situation was. Expositors nevertheless have done a good job of piecing together the details of the letter with what they surmise was the situation. So we can read the Letter how modern commentaries interpret it, and that is how this Scripture is preached and taught in modern churches.* The problem with that approach is, that particular situation (the one we suppose prompted the letter) doesn't exist today, which makes most of the letter irrelevant to us except as a puzzle to piece together.

Having Bible knowledge may be appealing, but it changes no one. The purpose of Scripture is to transform us. Therefore, I propose another way to read this Letter.** It's what the Spirit might intend for us today, centuries removed from the situation that provoked it. It's a reading that, I believe, is so compelling that we come away a changed person. It's as follows:

The Second Letter to the Corinthians is different from all other Pauline letters. It is intensely personal. Paul opens his heart and pours out the love that's in him—not primarily for the Corinthian church (although that's there and heavy), but for Jesus. Paul is madly, radically, transcendently in love with Jesus. So Paul repeatedly tells of his sufferings. Why? Because the love that Paul has, God's kind of love, means selflessness and voluntary self-sacrifice for Jesus and for the work that Jesus commissioned. Love means deliberately taking risks, real, consequential risks, and suffering. Love entails suffering or it's not love. So Paul models God's kind of love, the love that caused Jesus to submit voluntarily to Roman scourging and the pain and shame of death by crucifixion.

Paul understands that to be united to Jesus means living out His sufferings. It means repeating the experience of being despised, weak, and persecuted so that the Spirit can work thru him. Union with Christ means we're in Him and He's in us. Jesus joins to our spirit so that we're a new creation, a new kind of human creature that relives the life of the Suffering Servant. We are the body of Jesus here on earth, a body that suffers pain and shame. Why? So that good and blessing and life can be imparted to others. And so Paul writes this Letter saying, "imitate me."

Paul ended his First Letter to the Corinthian church with this, "**If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him.**" We American evangelicals suppose that following Jesus means . . . what? I suspect to most of us, being a Christian means agreeing with church doctrine and holding the assurance of being in heaven when we die because Jesus obtained for us the forgiveness of sins. We have no concept, let alone intention of being the kind of person Paul was, or as Jesus is. We have the most minimal concept of what the love of God is. And we never will gain these from the first kind of reading of 2 Corinthians that I mentioned at the outset. Let me make this clear: Christianity is a personal relationship, a mutually loving relationship with the living Messiah/King Jesus. Anything less than that isn't Christianity; it's a human invention.

In this Letter, Paul is not boasting of his much suffering. According to the standard, exegetical interpretation (which I don't deny), Paul is defending his apostle-ship by pointing out that his much suffering is actually evidence of his God-given ministry. His weakness and his sacrifices mean he's imitating Christ, and so his message, his instruction, his Gospel, is from the Lord. His sufferings are evidence of his apostolic authority. By my suggested reading, Paul is essentially saying to the Corinthians *and to us* today: "You need to love Jesus to

* At Corinth, a Roman colony loaded with opportunists, there either came to, or emerged within, the church already riven with factions one or a group who stridently denied Paul's apostle-ship. This threatened Paul's God-given message to the Gentiles, indeed, threatened the Gospel itself, thus necessitating a bold response, which is this 2nd Letter.

** What I offer here is not derived by exegesis and is not intended to supplant it. It is a canonical (or theological) reading of the text. That is, it's an interpretation based on all Scripture, of which this Letter is but one particular. I encourage reading all texts of Scripture this way.

the extent that you suffer loss, as I have.” Paul wants his readers to enter into the radical kind of life that the Gospel puts on offer, a life of selfless, risk-taking, self-sacrificing love. It’s not merely an option for those who may desire to go deeper; it’s what Christianity *is*.

The other sub-themes of 2 Corinthians, viz., reconciliation, generosity, separation, and weakness, are tightly related. These also express God’s kind of love. The entire Letter is really a coherent unity. Let’s look at each of these.

For God, **reconciliation** was costly. It meant the Son had to be humiliated, put to shame, and suffer great pain and a cruel death. For Paul, ministering the reconciliation that Jesus obtained also was costly. When Paul writes to the Corinthians, “Be reconciled,” he is telling them that they too, if they’re going to follow Jesus, will need to enter into the ministry of sharing reconciliation with unbelievers—and that will entail suffering for them too. This age is not the promised, future Kingdom. It’s the Age of the Suffering Servant, and all the servants of Jesus, that is, all who follow Him, will join Him in suffering.

Paul’s command to **separate** from unbelievers is also an expression of love. God is holy, and if we love God we’ll be consumed with the desire also to be holy, that is, to be like Him. Love doesn’t make compromises. Love means we necessarily will guard our soul from any temptation or attempt to engage in evil, so that we are always pleasing to God. Perhaps separation from unbelievers results in loss of some kind; we offer that to God as our love gift.

God is the supremely great Lover. Love means giving of oneself to another person. As Jesus revealed, God is utterly selfless. Paul too was selfless. So giving of oneself in love means being outrageously, radically **generous**. The Son gave of Himself and continues to give of Himself: His very life, His Spirit, His love. We’re not really giving anything unless we give sacrificially, for that’s what love requires. Giving generously to others in need so that they’re helped and blessed is godliness, and godliness is the goal of salvation.

Paul understood that **weakness** before God is a form of love. If we love God, we’ll trust Him with our lives. So we can take risks for the sake of sharing the Gospel, trusting God that what happens to us and the outcome of the venture is His will and His doing. We don’t need to be skilled in apologetics or rhetoric or psychology or Bible knowledge. We need only determine to express God’s love by living out and sharing the Gospel and leave to God the consequences, even if what results is persecution. And if we die because of it, great reward awaits. Weakness really is a belief that God is sovereign, and we love Him for that.

Paul’s great concern is, The Corinthian people need to be in love with Jesus and pursuing Christ-likeness out of love for Him, and serving Him in love, as He commanded, taking risks and suffering because of it. So in this letter, Paul modeled true Christianity so that they would imitate him.

This alternate reading of Paul is not aberrant. It’s exactly what Peter stated in his 1st Letter. Think about what he wrote in 2:19, for example, that what we suffer because of our love for Jesus and our identity with Him, we offer to God as our love gift to Him. And God receives it as that, a love gift. In this way, we reciprocate Jesus’ loving suffering for us. In this way we worship the Lord. And this statement: We share or participate in Jesus’ sufferings (1 Peter 4:13). To be a follower of Jesus is to love Him, and love necessarily entails suffering. Suffering expresses the reality of our union with Christ.

The really “good news” of the Gospel is that we’re *in Christ*. We were in Christ at Calvary, and so died to sin. We were in Christ at His resurrection and ascension, so we have His eternal life. We are seated now with the exalted Christ in the heavenlies, having His righteousness, in the very presence of God. And so, we participate also in His being rejected, humiliated, and His sufferings as we continue His life and mission here on earth.

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Something else: Reading between the lines, Paul evidently is alarmed that if the Corinthian church were to reject his apostle-ship, they would be essentially rejecting his authority. And that would be disastrous—for them and for Christianity. In my alternate reading of this Letter, I generalize this issue to include our attitude

toward *all* Scripture. We have in today's churches (including our evangelical ones) a crisis of authority. Authority means that God requires that we submit to His will. Requires! He will enforce the issue, that is, hold us accountable. Grace doesn't mean we're no longer responsible to God for how we are or how we live. To the contrary, if we receive the gift of salvation, we have a heightened responsibility to be godly. That means, necessarily, knowing and living out the teachings, values, commands, and revealed will of the Lord. He has authority over us, and that authority dwells in the Word, in Scripture.

A very great danger confronts us. We moderns are imbued with an exaggerated sense of freedom, that we're not obliged to submit to the will of anyone other than ourselves. This is (what else?) paganism. As Creator, God has absolute authority over us. He gave us life, He maintains our life, and He has clearly revealed that He will one day judge us. We're responsible to Him, like it or not. The risk, as I see it, is not so much that we'll deliberately disobey God (although that happens!) but that thru indifference or smugness in our religion, we ignore Him. And that is tragic.

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So now someone will argue: "God has blessed us in America with freedom of religion so we don't have to suffer because of our faith. As an American, it's my right to enjoy a comfortable life. What you're presenting here makes no sense to me whatsoever." And I respond to this by asking how anyone knows (or *can* know, for that matter) that the freedoms and rights that we have in America are God's doing and not Satan's. The devil after all is able to read the Bible. And in Deuteronomy 31:20, the Lord predicts that when we're comfortable and prosperous, we'll abandon our love for Him and drift into idolatry. That this is a reality for the church as well as the ancient nation of Israel is evident in Revelation 2:4. Wealth and freedoms are *exceedingly* dangerous to our faith, to a large extent because of the deceptiveness of it. Paul voluntarily, out of love, surrendered his rights and identified as a slave to Christ. And with Apostolic authority, he instructs us, "**imitate me, as I imitate Christ.**"

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Why is God's love so hard to understand? Why is it so hard to grasp what God's love expects? We have God's self-revelation (in the Hebrew Scriptures) so we know who He is and what His will is for us. And we are on this side of Golgotha, so we know (in the Greek Scriptures) what God has done in sending the Son to earth to redeem us. We have the advantage of a full and complete revelation of God's love for us and the greatly increased expectation of our love for Him in response. Yet, the awareness of it all doesn't affect us, in spite of all the superb expository Bible preaching we're exposed to. Jesus' compelling words to the Church in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 don't grip us, don't frighten us, don't change us. "It's OK with me if Jesus suffered and died for me, but I'm not going to let that make me want to do the same or anything like it for Him. I've got what I want, the assurance of being in heaven. Now I've got my life to live." Modern American Christianity is (at best) morally and spiritually comatose.

What's needed desperately—and *soon*—is a revolution of love in our churches. A revolution of love for Jesus and of love for others in need, especially for those who don't know Jesus and are marching in lethal lockstep to an eternity in hell. Paul has modeled for us what that love should look like. It's now for us to take him seriously and become lovers like him. God doesn't mock us. He doesn't demand something He knows we can't do. The same Spirit that enabled Paul to express God's selfless kind of love is available to us. We *can* do it if we desire to.

The problem, of course, is that our desires lie elsewhere. They reside in a modern world of a thousand delights and interests, all of which are a stench to God. We're personally responsible for that and have to deal with that ourselves. May we then humble ourselves and commit to a life of love. It is, after all, why we're here.