When Pastor-Church Relationships Get Complicated: Paul and the Corinthians

— Martin Williams —

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In 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 Paul provides us with a catalogue of the many sufferings he endured as proof of his apostolic pedigree as one who embraced the way of the cross throughout his ministry. Paul begins with a generalised statement of his sufferings in v 23: “with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death.” He pictures a life overflowing with perpetual, incalculable sufferings. Then in verse 27 he summarises the overall experience of his apostolic lifestyle as: “in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure”—which recollects immense suffering over a period of years. Nevertheless, this catalogue of sufferings was not the sum of it. His greatest suffering rested in his pastoral heart (vv 28-29):

And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

The words, “and, apart from other things,” indicates that his catalogue of sufferings was illustrative not comprehensive. John Chrysostom believed that this wasn’t even the half of it.¹ Certainly his anxiety over the churches was his greatest suffering of all. “This was the chief thing of all, that his soul too was distracted, and his thoughts divided,” says Chrysostom.²

More than that, no church caused the apostle more stress and anxiety than the church at Corinth. Paul’s known missionary years span approximately the years of AD 47 to 57. Before that the years between his Damascus Road

¹ John Chrysostom, Homilies on Second Corinthians, Homily 25.
² John Chrysostom, Homilies on Second Corinthians, Homily 25.
conversion and his first missionary journey are relatively unknown. The years following his decade of missionary work, AD 57-64, were mostly spent in various prisons. Strikingly, Paul’s rocky relationship with the Corinthian church occupied seven out of those ten known missionary years (from AD 50-57), especially the latter years (AD 55-57).³

The purpose of this article is to examine Paul’s complicated and at times heart-breaking relationship with the Corinthian church. We are going to take a chronological approach as a way of understanding the dynamics of Paul’s relationship with this church over those seven years.⁴ Such an approach will provide us with a remarkable window into the heart of Paul the missionary and pastor. It will also provide us with valuable insight into how Paul could persevere with such a difficult church over a long and difficult missionary career.

1. Paul and the Corinthians: A Seven-Year Tale

Part I: AD 50-52

1. Paul Founds the Church at Corinth
   (Acts 18:1-17)

Paul’s arrival in Roman Corinth during his second missionary journey is narrated in Acts 18:1-17 and is amplified at points by Paul’s own reflections and reminiscences in 1 and 2 Corinthians.⁵ Paul had probably travelled the 80 kilometres from Athens to Corinth by foot.⁶ He had only recently suffered a severe beating (Acts 16:23)⁷ and imprisonment in Philippi (vv 19-24), and

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⁵ See Barrett, “Chronology for Paul and the Corinthians,” 113.
barely escaped similar treatment in Thessalonica and Berea (Acts 17:1-15). Paul tells us that he arrived in Corinth “in weakness and in fear and much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3). Paul’s fears were allayed by a vision from the Lord in which the exalted Christ assured him of safety and fruitfulness in ministry (Acts 18:9-10).  

Arriving in Corinth, Paul met some kindred spirits, Priscilla and Aquila, Christian Jews who, Luke tells us, had “recently” (προσφάτως) been expelled from Rome “because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome” (18:2). The expulsion of the Jews from Rome, confirmed by the Roman historian Suetonius, took place in AD 49. Their “recent” expulsion “from Italy” (ἀπὸ τῆς Ἰταλίας) pinpoints their arrival in Corinth to AD 49 or 50, and Paul’s just after that, probably in AD 50. Acts 18:3 indicates that Paul lodged with the two fellow tentmakers, most likely working in the shop below

8 Acts 18:9-10: “And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, ‘Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.’”

9 Luke tells us that on arrival in Corinth Paul intentionally “found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them, and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade” (18:2-3).

10 Suetonius, Claudius, 25: “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.” Most historians believe that Suetonius has both misspelled the name “Chrestus” and misunderstood the event. The man involved was not “Chrestus” (a common misspelling) but “Christus,” and the disturbance was not caused by “Christus” directly but was over “Jesus Christus.” For a defense of of the identification of Chrestus as Christus see R. Riesner, Paul’s Early Period (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 157-201. For a contrary view see E. A. Judge, The First Christians in the Romans World, WUNT 229 (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 445-449. Witherington, Acts of the Apostles, 539-44, has a full discussion on this decree.

11 The Greek word is σκηνοποιός, which LSJ translate as “tentmaker.” See also Bühner, “σκηνοποιός,” EDNT, 3:252; Bock, Acts, 579. Michaelis, “σκηνοποιός,” TDNT, 7:394, suggests that “[i]t is thus more probable that Paul and Aquila were “leather-workers” or “saddlers” and that as such they manufactured tents, for which there was considerable use in antiquity. For the view that this word refers to a “maker of stage properties,” see BDAG, 928.
during the week, and “reasoned in the Synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” (v 4).

After the arrival of Silas and Timothy from Macedonia, most probably with financial support from the churches there,\(^\text{12}\) Paul was able to devote more time to the preaching of the word “testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus” (v 5). This more intensive witness to the crucified Messiah, however, provoked such opposition from the Jews that Paul was forced to leave the synagogue (v 6). He did not have to go far, however. According to verse 7 he moved next door into the house of a God-fearer by the name of Titius Justus. His home became the meeting place for “the church of God that is in Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2). In addition to Paul himself and Aquila and Priscilla, Luke and Paul mention the following people who made up this newly established church: “Titius Justus, a worshiper of God” (in whose home they met, Acts 18:7),\(^\text{13}\) “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household” (Acts 18:8a), “And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8b). To this we can also add: “The household of Stephanas [who] were the first converts in Achaia” (1 Cor 16:15), and “Erastus, the city treasurer” (Rom 16:23). Paul Barnett estimates that:

With Paul and his coworkers Silas and Timothy there were at least four households (of Aquila and Priscilla, Titius Justus, Crispus, [Erastus,] Gaius and Stephanas). Each household probably had retainers and slaves in addition to family members, perhaps twelve to fifteen in all. By these estimates the church had at least eighty members.\(^\text{14}\)

Barnett suggests that “that the church membership had swelled to at least 150-200 by the time Paul wrote 1 Corinthians five years later.”\(^\text{15}\) According to Luke “[Paul] stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among


\(^{13}\) This is probably the same man who is referred to as Gaius in Rom 16:23 and 1 Cor 1:14). Thus his full name was probably Gaius Titius Justus. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 350, suggests that “Titius” and “Justus” where, respectively, his Roman *nomen* and *cognomen* and that “Gaius” was his *praenomen* (see also Barnett, *The Corinthian Question*, 27; for a contrary view see Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, 549-50).


them” (Acts 18:11). As he left, Paul had every reason to be encouraged in the work there. The church at Corinth was established, and, as far as we can tell, stable and flourishing.

2. Paul Travels from Corinth to Antioch via Jerusalem
   (Acts 18:18-23)

After seeing the church well established, Paul left Corinth (probably in the spring of AD 52) with his friends Priscilla and Aquila, and crossed the Aegean Sea to Ephesus. Paul then left his friends in Ephesus while he travelled to Jerusalem (Acts 18:22). According to the Western text of Acts 18:21, Paul was eager to reach Jerusalem in time for “the coming feast in Jerusalem” (most probably Passover [April, AD 52]). After fulfilling his obligations there, he greeted those at the Jerusalem church and then headed north to his home church in Syrian Antioch. After spending time with friends there, Paul returned to Ephesus.

3. Apollos and Peter Visit
   (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Cor 3:6; 9:5)

The Visit of Apollos (Acts 18:27-19:1): Sometime after Paul left Corinth, Apollos, the gifted Jewish Christian from Alexandria, described by Luke as “an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (ἀνὴρ λόγιος...δυνατὸς ὃν ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς, Acts 18:24), visited Corinth as well. It seems that the coming of Apollos soon after Paul was a major contributor to the breakdown in the relationship between Paul and some of the members of his church. One author suggests that the slogans in 1 Cor 1:12, “‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow...

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16 See Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 255.
17 The Western text of Acts 18:21 reads: δεῖ με (δὲ D*) παντως τὴν εορτὴν τὴν (ημεραν D) ἐρχομένην ποιήσαι εἰς Ἰεροσολύμα (D Ψ 614. 1175. 1505 m gig w sy17).
“Cephas,’” are to be understood a “declarations of independence from Paul.”

It seems that the many of the Corinthians were greatly impressed with his gifts and so a clique devoted to Apollos developed. And so after Apollos left Corinth (for whatever reason) it seems that the Corinthians were keen for Apollos to come back to them (1 Cor 16:12):

Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.

Compare this with the two preceding verses where Paul has to encourage the Corinthians to receive Timothy, perhaps indicating that the Corinthians are not as keen to have him come (1 Cor 16:10-11):

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you...let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace.

Reading between the lines, the situation seems to be something like this.

You have just spent 18 months planting a new church, consolidating it, and strengthening relationships. And as you head off to plant a new church, the very charismatic and passionate John Piper comes along and spends some time at your church and people just full in love with him. He then leaves and a little later Don Carson decides pay your church a visit. And now as a result factions have arisen in your church with some saying “I follow John Piper,” while others are saying “I follow Don Carson.” You start feeling a little intimated by this. So you decide

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21 As Witherington, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 316, n. 11, points out, this request probably came through the Corinthian’s letter to Paul (this is in keeping with the other instances of Περὶ δέ (“now concerning...”) in 1 Corinthians (see 7:1, 25; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1, 2).

22 Witherington, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 316, suggests that “Paul fears that Timothy will be treated with disrespect, since he is Paul’s envoy and there are ongoing tensions in the Corinthian community, with one group championing Apollos, another Paul, and perhaps other apostoloi are being lionized as well.” See also Barnett, The Corinthian Question, 138-41.
to send one of your interns to the church with a personal PowerPoint presentation from you, and they write back saying, “No thanks, we would rather have John Piper back.” Well, that is the situation that Paul is now facing.²³

**The Visit of Cephas:** Well, things just get worse for Paul. The eloquent and learned Apollos had been in Corinth and now sometime later (perhaps around AD 54) Corinth was favoured with a visit from the great apostle Cephas himself, along with his wife (1 Cor 9:5).²⁴ And whereas Cephas was the first to see the risen Lord (1 Cor 15:5), Paul was “last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me...for I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle” (1 Cor 15:8-9). The difference between Peter and Paul’s experience of the risen Christ was that Paul did not see Jesus while he was still on earth. And perhaps for some in the church this placed Paul outside the circle of true apostles.²⁵ Barnett writes:

The visits of Apollos and Cephas showed the Corinthians that Paul was not the only preacher or Christian leader. In differing ways the visits of both Apollos and Cephas weakened Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church. Furthermore, their visits were the prelude to the arrival (in c. 55/56) of Jewish preachers some time after Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, whom Paul calls “false apostles” and “super-apostles.” Unlike Apollos and Cephas, however, their mission was to usurp Paul’s place and take over his work altogether. Much of Paul’s second letter is devoted to this greatest crisis and test of his leadership in Corinth.²⁶

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4. Paul Writes “Corinthians A”  
(The “Previous Letter,” 1 Corinthians 5:9-13)

An important window into the state of the Corinthian church at this particular time is Paul’s reference in 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 to a previous letter (which I will call “Corinthians A”) that he sent them:

I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But [I wrote] to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

Evidently, in response to a report from the Corinthians (how, we do not now) that believers in the church were freely mixing with and openly tolerating “sexually immoral people” in their midst who claimed to be believers (“who

27 Not “I am writing” (as the ESV has it; I have placed my change to the ESV in square brackets). The Greek reads: νῦν δὲ ἔγραψα ὑμῖν. There are two main options here. (1) The aorist indicative ἔγραψα could be an epistolary aorist with νῦν ("now") having a temporal sense: “but I am now writing to you” (see ESV; NRSV, NIV [2011]; Thiselton, First Epistle to the Corinthians 413; Rosner and Ciampa, First Letter to the Corinthians, 217; Witherington, Conflict and Community in Corinth, 160). Wallace, Greek Grammar beyond the Basics, 562, explains: “This is the use of the aorist indicative in the epistles in which the author self-consciously describes his letter from the time frame of the audience” (Wallace does not list our text in his discussion; see also BDF 334§ who list 1 Cor 5:9 but not v 11). (2) The second option, the one that is accepted here, is that νῦν has a logical reference (as things now stand,” BDAG, 681) and the aorist verb form (perfective aspect referring to the past letter as a whole) refers to the previous letter: “but I wrote to you” (“but rather I wrote to you,” RSV; “but actually I wrote to you,” NASB). A. Robertson and A. Plummer, 1 Corinthians (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914) point out that “[h]ad the apostle meant the νῦν to be temporal and the verb to refer to the present letter, he would have written γράφω, as in iv. 14 [“I do not write these things (γράφω ταῦτα)...”]” (see also Garland, 1 Corinthians, 187; Barnett, The Corinthian Question, 76).
bears the name of brother,” v 11), Paul wrote them a letter (referred to in 1 Corinthians 5:9 and 11, but now lost), forbidding the church to have any association with such people. This letter, sometimes referred to as “the previous letter,” we have designated “Corinthians A.” Most scholars agree that it has not survived. It seems that the many of the Corinthians had misinterpreted this letter as meaning that they should not associate with immoral people outside the Christian community. If they did this they would have to withdraw from the world altogether. Instead he clarifies in 1 Corinthians that they were not to associate with those who claimed to be believers who had flagrantly immoral lives. In fact in the previous verses (5:1-8), Paul has just commanded the church to expel one such person form the congregation (5:1-2):

> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.\(^{28}\)

It seems on the one hand that the Corinthians failed to show impartiality by disciplining this man who was guilty of incest because of his social status and wealth.\(^ {29}\) While on the other hand they appeared to judge people outside of the church and as a result withdrew from fellowship with them (vv 9-10, 12), they failed to judge the insider when that was their very task.\(^ {30}\)

\(^{28}\) For a helpful discussion on this verse and its Corinthian setting see Winter, After Paul Left Corinth, 44-57.

\(^{29}\) See Winter, After Paul Left Corinth, 57; Garland, 1 Corinthians, 185.

\(^{30}\) See Winter, After Paul Left Corinth, 57.
Part III: AD 55

5. Delegates from Corinth Visit Paul in Ephesus
(1 Corinthians 1:11-12)

At some point during his ministry in Ephesus, Paul received:

1. reports from some from “Chloe’s household” about the ugly factionalism in the church (1:11-12),

2. a letter composed by the Corinthian congregation requesting clarification on a number of subjects relating to personal and congregational life (7:1), and

3. an official delegation of three men (Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus) who had come from Corinth to deliver the Corinthian’s letter to Paul (16:17-18).

6. Paul Writes “Corinthians B” (1 Corinthians) and Sends it Back with the Delegation

In response to these reports, Paul wrote the letter we know as 1 Corinthians (which we will designate “Corinthians B”) and sent it back presumably with Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (possibly in the spring of AD 55). When Paul sent off this letter he expected to follow it up some time later with a personal visit. Paul had hoped to remain “in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Cor

31 See Harris, Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 67.
32 Paul had hoped to remain “in Ephesus until Pentecost” (1 Cor 16:8). After Pentecost he would cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, visit the churches there, and then make his way south to Corinth and “spend the winter” with them (1 Cor 16:5-6). Meanwhile he sent Timothy ahead of him exhorting the Corinthians to “put him at ease among you” and then to “help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me,” presumably with a report on the Corinthians’ response to his letter (1 Cor 16:10-11). But after sending the letter Paul modified this plan a little: he now decided he would visit the Corinthians twice, once on his way to Macedonia and then again on his way back from there. After that he would set sail for Judea with the collection for the believers in Judea who were experiencing severe famine (2 Cor 1:15-16).
16:8). After Pentecost he would to cross the Aegean Sea to Macedonia, visit the churches there, and then make his way south to Corinth and “spend the winter” with them (1 Cor 16:5-6).

7. Paul Sends Timothy for a Follow-Up Visit  
(1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10)

In the meantime Paul sent Timothy to Corinth in order to see if the Corinthians had complied with Paul’s letter (1 Cor 4:17; 16:10). He exhorted the Corinthians to “put him at ease among you” and then to “help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me,” presumably with a report on the Corinthians’ response to his letter (1 Cor 16:10-11).

8. Paul’s “Painful Visit” to Corinth  
(1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Cor 2:1-11; 13:2; 12:14)

While we have no record of Timothy’s report to Paul, events that transpired lead us to assume that Timothy brought back disturbing news of the state of affairs in Corinth. As a result Paul immediately set sail for Corinth (probably sometime in the summer or fall of AD 54). It was his intention, he informs the Corinthians, that after visiting them, he would then journey north into Macedonia and then return again to Corinth on his way to Jerusalem for a

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33 In 2 Cor 4:17 we read: “That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church.” 2 Cor 16:10: “When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am.” 2 Cor 16:10 is actually framed as a third class condition: ἕαν δὲ ἐλθῇ Τιμόθεος, βλέπετε (“if Timothy comes, see to it...). Porter, *Idioms*, 262, explains that “[a] third class conditional with ἕαν and the subjunctive, in distinction to a first class conditional, is more tentative and simply projects some action or event for hypothetical consideration” (See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 696-99). Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1330, says that “the indefinite construction refers to the uncertainty not of the event, but of his time of arrival” (see also Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 32). Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 758, is probably right in suggesting that “[t]he vagaries of travel in the ancient world may have caused Paul to express himself in this way, since he cannot predict the timing of his arrival” (see also Fee, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 821). Understood in this sense ἕαν is close to ὅταν (16:3, 5) and means “whenever he comes.”

34 See Belleville, *2 Corinthians*, 17.
second visit (2 Cor 1:15-16).\textsuperscript{35} However, when Paul arrived in Corinth from Ephesus he was the object of a very hurtful attack by an individual there. It seems that a person, quite possibly the incestuous man mentioned in 1 Cor 5:1, was the initiator of this hurtful attack against Paul, as he notes in 2 Cor 7:12: \textsuperscript{36}

So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong [the incestuous man of 1 Cor 5:1?], nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong [Paul], but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God.

Moreover, there was no attempt by anyone in the church to come to Paul’s defence (as 2 Cor 2:3 suggests). F. F. Bruce explains:

The opposition to Paul came to a head, and one member of the church in particular took the lead in defying his authority. The others took no effective action in Paul’s defence, and Paul, deeply humiliated, left Corinth.\textsuperscript{37}

In 2 Cor 2:1 Paul describes it as a “painful visit.”\textsuperscript{38} And so not wanting to repeat this painful experience, Paul changed his travel plans; instead of journeying north to Macedonia and then returning to Corinth for a second visit (2 Cor 1:15-16), he made his way straight back to Ephesus (2 Cor 1:23; 2:1). Paul’s changing of his travel plans left him open to the charge of fickleness and failing to keep his word,\textsuperscript{39} as 2 Cor 1:17 makes clear:

Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” [“I am coming back soon”] and “No, no” [“I am not coming back until much later”] at the same time?\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{35} See Kruse, 2 Corinthians, 23-24.
\textsuperscript{37} Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free, 274.
\textsuperscript{38} BDAG: λύπη, “pain of mind or spirit, grief, sorrow, affliction.”
\textsuperscript{39} See Belleville, 2 Corinthians, 64-65.
\textsuperscript{40} Barnett, Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 102, writes: “They [the Corinthians] did not object then to a changed plan, presumably since it was to their advantage (see on v 16).
9. **Paul Writes his “Corinthians C” (the “Tearful Letter”) and Sends it with Titus (2 Corinthians 2:4; 7:8-13)**

As Carson and Moo note: “From Paul’s perspective at the time, the ‘painful visit’ was a complete fiasco.”⁴¹ Paul left Corinth in anger and frustration. On returning to Ephesus he decided against another visit to Corinth for the time being and instead composed “a stinging letter to the church”⁴² (which we will designate as “Corinthians C,” sometimes called the “tearful letter” or the “severe letter,” 2 Cor 2:3): “For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears.” Paul then sent the letter to Corinth by the hand of Titus (he did not resend Timothy nor go himself since presumably both of their visits had proved problematic). Bruce writes:

> When Titus set off with it, Paul immediately began to be sorry that he had sent it. Its severe tone might produce the desired effect, but it might on the other hand exacerbate the situation.⁴³

This letter demanded they take disciplinary measures against the man who had maligned and opposed Paul so maliciously (2:3-9; 7:8-12). This letter has also been lost. That the Corinthians were not at all impressed with Paul’s visit nor his severe letter is clear from 2 Cor 10:9-10:

> I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong [the severe letter], but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account [the failed visit].”⁴⁴

That they now make a series of complaints—as mirrored by his rhetorical questions—only highlights their moral inconsistency. Some apparently complain that he made his plans ‘lightly’ (impulsively?), others that he made them ‘according to the flesh’—in other words, while his words at the time were ‘Yes, yes’ (‘I am coming back soon’) he really meant ‘No, no’ (‘I am not coming back until much later’). This last accusation, when considered alongside the suspicion that Paul wrote his letters for devious reasons (v. 13), suggests that these accusers had quite negative attitudes toward the apostle.”

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⁴² Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 274.
⁴³ Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free*, 274.
⁴⁴ Barnett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 476-77, notes that the Corinthians “primary criticisms were directed at his unimpressive attempts to discipline the morally wayward
It was also during this visit that Titus initiated the collection for the believers in Jerusalem who were suffering a food shortage due to a famine (2 Cor 8:6, 10). This became another issue of contention between Paul and the Corinthians. It seems that although Paul refused to receive financial support from the Corinthians (2 Cor 11:7-15), nevertheless the Corinthians accused Paul himself of impropriety with money saying that the collection initiated by Titus during this visit (2 Cor 8:6, 10) was actually for Paul’s own pocket. This Paul flatly denies in 2 Cor 12:17-18:

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

Part IV: AD 56

10. Paul Travels from Ephesus to Troas
(2 Corinthians 2:12-13)

Meanwhile, Paul was soon faced with another crisis. The situation in Ephesus had now become terrifyingly dangerous, and Paul had to make a hasty exit in the wake of city-wide riot (Acts 19:23-20:1). No doubt greatly shaken and with heavy heart he travelled north to Troas where he had planned to meet up with Titus and hear how the Corinthians had received his letter, written in during the recent visit (cf. 13:2; 12:21; 10:1-2), and the dispatch, instead, of a letter when they were expecting a return visit (1:15-2:34).”

See Murray J. Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 38-40 who links 2 Cor 12:17-18 with 2 Cor 8:6,10 and the earlier visit of Titus to Corinth to deliver the “severe letter” and to initiate the collection (2 Cor 8:6a), and 2 Cor 8:14-24 with Titus’s up-and-coming visit to deliver 2 Corinthians and to complete the collection.

Garland, 2 Corinthians, 371, suggests that “[c]harges of some kind of fraud may also be lurking in the background. Paul’s refusal to accept support from the Corinthians may have fed vicious rumors that he schemed to siphon off some of the money from the fund. He would then receive support from them surreptitiously while avoiding any obligation to them as their client.” This explains why in 2 Cor 8:21-22 Paul goes to some length to deny any impropriety regarding the collection.

See Harris, The Second Epistle to the Corinthians, 889.
tears. But Titus had been delayed somewhere (2:12-13). During that time Paul faced yet another crisis as he tells the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:8-10):

> For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.

It is very possible that this affliction was a severe, painful, life-threatening illness. While we cannot be sure, this affliction proved “so devastating and overwhelming that Paul was forced to renounce all hope of survival.” Leaving Ephesus Paul made his way to Troas in order to meet up with Titus who would be making his way back from Corinth (2 Cor 2:12-13). When Paul arrived in Troas, he found many encouraging opportunities for evangelism, but his mind was so unsettled by the Corinthian situation that he couldn’t take advantage of them (2 Cor 2:12-13):

> When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

Paul once again gives us some insight into his state of mind as he travelled through Macedonia looking for Titus anxious to hear how his severe letter had been received in Corinth. As Polhill observes:

> Paul was exceedingly distraught about the Corinthian situation. He was not at all sure of his own welcome in the church. He dared not return to Corinth until he had received a report from Titus as to how the letter was received. Paul evidently issued an ultimatum that put everything on the line.50

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48 For a defence of this view see Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 170-72. For a summary of the options see pp. 166-70.

49 Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 165.

Paul himself tells us (2 Cor 7:5):

> For even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within.

It is thus no exaggeration when Paul says a little later on (2 Cor 11:28):

> And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Yet despite his anxiety over the Corinthian church, Paul travelled through Macedonia encouraging the churches there (Acts 20:2) and organising of the collection for the believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:1-4; 9:2). When Paul finally met up with Titus somewhere in Macedonia his anxiety changed to relief (2 Cor 7:6-7):

> But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted by you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, so that I rejoiced still more.

But while there was good news to celebrate, it was still very much a mixed report that he received from Titus. There were still some unresolved issues in Corinth as well as a very troubling new development—a group of Jewish teachers who called themselves “apostles” had descended upon the church.

11. Paul Writes “Corinthians D” (2 Corinthians) and Sends It Back with Titus.

In response, Paul wrote yet another letter, his fourth, 2 Corinthians, from Macedonia, which we will designate as “Corinthians D” (probably in the fall of AD 56). There are at least three major reasons for writing 2 Corinthians:
1. Paul wanted to resolve these matters before his third and final visit to Corinth (2 Cor 1-7).

2. He wanted to see the church restored to a right relationship with God and from that basis finalise the collection for the suffering believers in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8-9).

3. And perhaps even more importantly he had to deal with the issue of a group of newly arrived rival ministers who were calling people back under the Law of Moses (2 Cor 3) and who were usurping Paul’s authority in the church (2 Cor 10-13).

At this time Paul was heavily occupied with the collection for the believers in Jerusalem and so he sent Titus ahead of him to Corinth with the letter while he remained behind to complete the collection in Macedonia.

12. Paul Visits Corinth (3 Months) and Writes Romans.
   (Acts 20:2-3a; Romans 16:23)

A little later, probably in the fall of AD 56, Paul travelled south to Corinth for his third and final visit there. Returning to his original travel plans of 1 Cor 16:6, Paul spent the three winter months there (see Acts 20:2-3a and Rom 16:23). Paul was very active during his time there: reconciling with the Corinthians after many troubled months, finalising the collection for the believers in Jerusalem, and of course, writing the magnum opus of his apostolic career, The Letter to the Romans (Rom 16:23). Near the end of that great epistle Paul spoke of Gaius’s warm hospitality to him while he stayed in Corinth (16:23): “Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you.”

13. Paul Departs for Judea with the Collection and Delegates from the Churches (Acts 20:3b)

It seems that Paul can never settle anywhere for long before trouble brews around his ministry. Aware of a plot against him by some Jews in Corinth (Acts 30:3b), and with the collection completed in both Macedonia and Achaia,
Paul, along with delegates from the churches in these areas (v 4), began the long journey back to Jerusalem to deliver the collection to the believers there. And so the story of Paul’s seven year relationship with the Corinthian church ends. And you thought your relationship with your church was challenging!

2. Paul and the Corinthians: Why Did Paul Persevere?

So what was it that enabled Paul to persevere for seven years with such a difficult, divisive, discouraging, and basically immature bunch of Christians? In conclusion I would like to briefly list at least four things:

(1) The Restoration of the Church

The first thing that enabled Paul to persevere was his deep concern for the restoration of the church. Positively, Paul’s desire was to win back the Corinthians’ loyalty to himself personally as their father in the faith (1 Cor 4:15), and negatively to turn the Corinthians away from their fascination with these flashy new “super-apostles,” as he sarcastically calls them in 2 Cor 11:5. But it was not for his own sake or his own sense of self-worth that Paul sought to do this. They were not just injuring his personal reputation. By following after these self-styled apostles they were subtly subverting Christianity itself. Paul tells them in 2 Cor 3:6-7 that he is not writing to them merely to make them think well of him, rather, he says in v 10:

I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down.

Paul’s ultimate goal in writing is thus not to defend himself but to build the Corinthians up so that they might reach spiritual adulthood. This is the first thing that caused Paul to persevere: the spiritual restoration and edification of the church. This is the challenge: What are we trying to build? Are we trying to build up our own ministries or are we committed to building up the people of God.
(2) Paul’s Love for the Church

The second thing that enabled Paul to persevere with such a difficult church was Paul’s deep love for them. Paul’s most emotionally powerful way of referring to himself in this very personal and passionate letter is as their “father.” In Cor 4:14-15 he tells them:

_I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel._

Through Paul’s witness to them he had become their beloved father in Christ—and a father never stops loving his children, never gives up on them, never closes his heart to them (2 Cor 6:11-13):

_We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also._

**This is the challenge:** There are many good things we can learn from Paul’s pastoral principles, but this is one of the most important: Pastors must continue to love their people. As Barnett notes:

_The love that he [Paul] expressed and sought in return was and is the best possible basis for minister-congregation relationships. Churches will overlook many shortcomings in their minister if they know he loves them._

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51 Barnett, _Paul: A Pastor’s Heart in Second Corinthians_, 91.
(3) The Collection for Jerusalem

The third reason why Paul persevered with the church, as 2 Corinthians 8-9 demonstrate, was both to prepare the way for his visit that would quickly follow and to unite the church in truth and love and from that firm basis complete the collection for the needy believers in Jerusalem. As far as the Corinthians themselves were concerned there were two main reasons for this:

Firstly, Paul was not content to allow the immature and self-obsessed Corinthians to remain focused on themselves. They needed to understand that God was dealing with a worldwide people purchased from among the nations, and not merely with a single congregation. He sought, says Barnett, to foster “a growth of others-centeredness and of sacrificial generosity that would also look beyond its own membership to the needs and circumstances of believers elsewhere.”52 That is what chapters 8-9 are all about. They are not primarily about giving to our own local churches, though good principles can be found for doing that in these chapters, they are primarily about looking beyond our own local congregations to the worldwide people of God and fellowshipping with them in sharing and suffering.

Secondly, for Paul the Corinthians’ dampened enthusiasm about the collection was a serious problem, not simply because it jeopardized the success of an errand of mercy, but because it constituted evidence that God’s grace had not transformed the Corinthians’ hearts. The Corinthians’ renewal of interest in the collection forms proof of the genuineness of their commitment to the gospel because a heartfelt willingness to give is itself a gift of God’s grace. If they are willing to give cheerfully, therefore, this is evidence of God’s transforming work in their lives.

This is the challenge: As pastors and church leaders, are we just content with a nominal form of Christianity in our churches that simply goes through the right motions and has all of the right externals, or are we working for the transformation of our people from the inside out?

Finally, one of the key characteristics of Corinthian society was the self-glorying of individuals. As Timothy Savage writes: “personal glory became an ideal.”\textsuperscript{53} Self-display and self-glorification was an extremely important aspect of Corinthian culture. And these so-called apostles that infiltrated Paul’s church projected an image of spirituality that focused on the glorification of powerful personalities and ecstatic experiences. Paul, on the other hand, was content to project an image of weakness. And in doing so he was determined to depend not on the human dynamic of the superstar but the spiritual dynamic of the cross of Christ (2 Cor 13:4):

\begin{quote}
For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.
\end{quote}

Paul summarises here the paradox of the cross which was the key to his apostolic ministry. The strange blend of humility and glory that characterised the Lord Jesus, crucified in weakness but raised in power, was reflected in Paul’s life. This is why Paul can say near the end of 2 Corinthians (12:9-10):

\begin{quote}
Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
\end{quote}

It was in Paul’s weakness that the centrality of the cross and the grace of God were glorified and that is what mattered to Paul. This was the key to Paul’s perseverance: when by grace we embrace the way of the cross throughout ministry we discover the strength to endure the crosses of ministry, and in doing so we become showcases for the glory and grace of God.

\textsuperscript{53} Savage, \textit{Power through Weakness}, 23.