

COMMENTARY - 2 CORINTHIANS - Shillington

V. George Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998),

Letter of Recommendation

The commending letter was a functional form of the day in the Mediterranean world of the Roman empire, much like a letter of reference today. Persons could move through the Roman world and find access into social settings by means of the letter of recommendation. Christians also used the letter of recommendation to vouch for their good standing. In the hands of missionaries who came to Corinth, these commending letters functioned as credentials for ministry among the believing community that Paul founded.¹

Such letters were customary at the time of Paul. The idea of these letters triggers a string of metaphors in Paul's mind. First he cites the Christian lives of the Corinthians as his letter. Their standing in Christ is Paul's primary proof for the genuineness of his ministry. Verse 2 reads, "You yourselves are our letter, written on **our** hearts. This means, "Your own hearts of faith in Christ constitute our letter of recommendation. " "Written on our **own** hearts" (3:2) means that Paul carries the Corinthians with him wherever he goes. They are his letter of recommendation, known and read by all. The difficulty with this image is that *all* cannot know and read what is written in Paul's heart (3:2), unless Paul speaks what is in his heart. No doubt Paul talks about his Corinthian community wherever he preaches, praising their enthusiastic acceptance of the message of the gospel.²

The idea is further qualified in verse 3.

¹ V. George Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 CORINTHIANS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 268.

² V. George Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 CORINTHIANS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 68.

The Corinthians are *a letter of Christ, prepared by us* (NRSV). The RSV has *delivered by us* and Jerusalem Bible *drawn up by us*. In this context, the verb signifies intermediate agency. Paul administers the word of Christ to them. That kind of *letter*, he argues, is greater than any letter of recommendation written in ink. That kind is written *with the Spirit of the living God* (3:3) ³

Paul's critics infer that he ministers without proper approval. He answered that his confidence is *through Christ toward God* (3:4). His competence and call go hand in hand. If he is not competent for the ministry, then he is not called to the ministry. But he knows he is called, therefore, he is competent. However, his competence is not simply innate; it is a gift from God (3:5). God *made* Paul competent by a divine authority that outranks human convention. ⁴

2 Corinthians 8:1-24 Collection

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia;²for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.³For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means,⁴begging us earnestly for the privilege* of sharing in this ministry to the saints—⁵and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us,⁶so that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking* among you.⁷Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you—so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking. ⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means.¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what*

³ V. George Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 CORINTHIANS (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 68.

⁴ V. George Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 CORINTHIANS (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 69.

one does not have.¹³ I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between¹⁴ your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.¹⁵ As it is written, 'The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.'

Rom. 15: 25-28

²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints.²⁶for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.²⁷They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things.²⁸So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, * I will set out by way of you to Spain;

Gal. 2:10

"They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was * eager to do."

1 Cor. 16:1-4

Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia.²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come.³And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem.⁴If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.

The collection of money from the Gentile congregations for the "saints at Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:26) is not an incidental matter in the ministry of Paul. The subject surfaces variously in his four principal letters (Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 15: 25-28), and nowhere more poignantly than in the present passage (2 Cor. 8:1-24). However, practical the funds will be in helping *the poor* in Jerusalem. Paul no doubt has mapped the purpose for the collection on a larger canvas. The collection constitutes a symbolic forging of unity between Paul's uncircumcised Gentile congregations and the parent Jewish-Christian enclave in the Holy City. In Paul's view, both groups participate equally in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Their solidarity in the grace of Christ signals the

approaching end of the age for Paul. "His pilgrimage to Jerusalem, bearing gifts from the [Gentiles], reflects the prophetic picture of the last days (Is. 2:2-5; 60:5-22; Micah 4), as the rabbis believed. Moreover, the monetary gift from Corinth will speak loudly on four counts: (1) about the spirit of the Corinthians, (2) about Paul's commitment to the history of salvation epitomized in Jewish Jerusalem, (3) about the full participation of Gentiles in the community of Christ, and (4) about the eschatological gathering of the Gentiles to Zion. Each of these factors is documented and developed in the essay [The Collection, p. 264]. Using the paradoxical example of the impoverished Macedonians giving joyfully out of their limited means, Paul implicitly shames the Corinthians into completing their appointed task out of their material abundance. They are to do so voluntarily. ⁵

Examples of God's grace in Macedonian Churches 8:1-6

Paul opens his appeal by setting forth the example of Macedonian churches. He does not set up the Macedonian Christians as superior to the Corinthians by reason of location, prosperity, or birth. They have *overflowed in a wealth of generosity* (2 Cor. 8:2b) solely through *charis*-grace of God bestowed upon them. By their generous gift of money for *the saints* (8:4), the Macedonians have demonstrated their relationship with God, whose gift of life they enjoy. By Comparison, the Corinthians, who delight in *charismata* (spiritual gifts; cf. 8:7; I Cor. 12-14; 1:7), have failed this far to demonstrate the central gift of God by their financial gift to Jerusalem. ⁶

Paul cites the *severe ordeal of affliction* and the *extreme poverty* out of which the Macedonians have given their share (and more) of the collection (2 Cor. 8:2). The paradox of *abundant joy* in *extreme poverty* is not unlike power in-weakness paradox that crops up at various points in 2 Corinthians. We

⁵ V. George Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 *CORINTHIANS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 172.

⁶ V. George Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 *CORINTHIANS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 173.

assume that Corinthians are comparatively wealthy, as the available evidence seems to prove. So example of the impoverished Macedonians, who have given voluntarily *even beyond their means* (8:3b), and that with eager joy (8:2,4), carries a powerful punch. One wonders whether Paul, in citing this example of generosity from the poor Macedonians to the Christians of “wealthy Corinth,” implies that a surplus of goods blocks the overflow of the gift of God. Perhaps he hints that it is harder for rich Christians to give out of their wealth than for poor Christians to give out of their poverty, or that poor Christians demonstrate a greater measure of the grace of God (cf. Mark 12:41-44). Several terms of reference in the example passage (2 Cor. 8:1-5) call for comment. First, the Macedonians are said to have given *voluntarily* (8:3). With this example of willing heart before them, the Corinthians are being pushed to ask themselves about the state of their own hearts. Second, the collection for Jerusalem is said to be a *ministry* (8:4). The word connotes service, “often of a humble or menial nature.” In this context it can imply that the Gentile church is rendering a service to the Jewish church in the sacred center of historic salvation. This ministry of gathering money to send to others simply demonstrates the grace of God in Jesus Christ, as 2 Corinthians 8:9 is intended to prove. A ministry that fails to bring life and well-being to others is unworthy of Christian confession.⁷ Third, the ministry is for the *saints* (8:4b). Who are these people so designated? Used in this context, as also in the context of Romans 15: 25, the *saints* implies something more than “Christians” in the general sense. The Greek word *saints* can refer to people in a community of faith in Christ; Paul does employ the term in this way (e.g., 2Cor. 1:1). But when he designates a group as *the saints* within a situation-specific argument, he seems to attach a certain cultic notion to the corporate membership of the group, not unlike the cult of the people of Israel. Such a communion of *the saints* implies a cultic separateness from the profane in their sacrifice of praise of God. Yet “the focus is not upon a particular state of

⁷ V. George Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 CORINTHIANS* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 174.

holiness, but upon a special relationship with God." ⁸ So here in the context of 2 Corinthians 8:4, the saints are assumed to belong to a special class for whom the collection is intended. The Corinthians know who the saints are. Earlier Paul has informed them of their identity (cf. 1 Cor. 16:3). *The saints* in this context are to be identified with those of Romans (15:26); they live "at Jerusalem" and they are "the poor" (cf. Gal. 2:10). Living in Jerusalem, *the saints* probably speak Aramaic and have kept close ties to the temple and to the teaching of the elders of the people. But at the same time they were also believers in the messiahship of the resurrected Jesus. As such, they are allied to Paul (at least from Paul's perspective). But Paul also refers to them elsewhere as "the poor" (Rom. 15:26; Gal. 2:10). As such, they appear to be impoverished, either by circumstances in Judea brought on by the preaching of the Jesus as Messiah, or by famine of some sort. More likely, though, "the poor" is an honorific religious title given to those who surrendered their personal property and creature comforts for the sake of the community of faith. Collected for *the saints* at Jerusalem, the gift to them becomes a kind of votive offering to God, and a sign of solidarity with the faithful remnant of Israel. ⁹ Fourth, the Macedonians receive praise as a model in giving themselves *first to the Lord*, and simultaneously gave themselves to Paul. ¹⁰

At 8:7-8 Paul said, *8 I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others.* Paul's aim is to make the gift of the collection equal to the other gifts, and to move Corinthians to make up their deficiency in giving. Love ties in tightly with the act of giving of one's self, including possessions, for the sake of the other. The phrase implies that Corinthians possess the quality of love that they witnessed in Paul when he

⁸ V. George Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 175.

⁹ Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 175.

¹⁰ Shillington. *Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, 176.

administered at Corinth. He gave himself to them unreservedly. Now he credits them with the same love.¹¹

The gifts behind all gifts 8:9 [is Jesus Christ] - ⁹*For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich:* The example of the Macedonians gives way to the experience of *the generous act* (charis, grace) of our Lord Jesus Christ. Shillington claims that the core thought here is the same as that of words in Phil. 2:6-8; *who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form,⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.*

The divine figure becomes the emptied, earthly figure of Jesus, who gave himself up in death on a cross, a figure of affliction, poverty, humiliation. This is the supreme act of generosity that makes the Corinthians truly rich: *though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.* Given the reality of this Christ in their experience, how can the Corinthians fail to reflect the same generosity in their collection for *the saints*? The implication is inescapable. Either the Corinthians collect a generous offering for the saints or their claim to the gifts from *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ* is called into question.¹²

V. 8:10-15: Acceptable balance and solidarity

¹²*For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have.* ¹³*I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between* ¹⁴*your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.* ¹⁵*As it is written, ‘The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little.’*

¹¹ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 177.

¹² Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 179.

Acceptability and unacceptability of sacrificial gifts in 8:10-12 extends to interdependent community life in 8:13-15. The principle advocated is a *fair balance* or equity, a principle well-known in the Greco-Roman world of oratory. “Justice is equity, giving to each thing what it is entitled to in proportion to its worth” (Cicero: 3:2.3). In 8:14 Paul is aware of a material inequity between the two communities. The Corinthians have an *abundance* at the moment, while *the saints* are in need. If Paul left his appeal for equity at this point, his audience (then and now) would surely understand his point. But how would his audience understand his corollary point in 8:14b: *so that their abundance may be your need?* Do the Jerusalem Jewish believers have a spiritual *abundance* to offer the spiritually impoverished Corinthian Gentile believers? Perhaps the theological priority of “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” applies here (Rom. 1:16). The Jewish people inherited an *abundance* of God’s salvation centered in Jerusalem, city of the crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. That abundance of salvation flowed out to the Gentiles through no less a Jewish-Christian apostle than Paul himself.¹³ Because of their indebtedness to those believers in Jerusalem, the Gentiles are encouraged to give their means to equalize the living resources of the two communities, *that there may be a fair balance* (8:14b). The appeal is capped with a quotation from the record of that history of salvation heavenly manna to the desert-dwelling Israelites. Each tribe had to gather enough for its number for the day, without accumulating surplus. Some gathered little because their number was small; some gathered much because their number was large. But at the end of the day, there was not *too much or too little*.¹⁴

¹³ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *2 Corinthians*, 180.

¹⁴ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on *2 Corinthians*, 181.

The collected money was specifically for poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem, and it was coming from Gentile believers in the Greek-Roman provinces of Achaia, Macedonia (cf. 2 Cor. 8: 1-4; 9:1-4; Rom. 15:25-26) and probably Asia Minor (Acts 20:1-4). By means of collected money, Paul was able to tie his Gentile world mission to Israel's symbolic center [Jerusalem] of historic salvation, and he viewed the event [collection] as God's way of fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah (66:18; cf. 2:2) and Haggai (2:6-9). The Lord would shake the nations and gather the Gentiles to meet in Zion to witness his glory and rejoice in his deliverance. The collected money was not merely pragmatic relief for the impoverished of Jerusalem. It was as well an offering representing the Gentiles who believed the word of the gospel of Jesus Christ, God's agent of salvation whom Paul preached. Paul declares his ministry to the Gentiles to be a priestly service of the gospel of God. He sees the collection from the Gentile churches an acceptable offering "sanctified by the Holy Spirit," and a "ministry to Jerusalem" (Rom. 15:15-16, 25-26, 31).¹⁵

2 Cor. 9: 6-10

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written, 'He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.' ¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.*

Ancient farmers took a risk in sowing grain. They believe that the more seed down, the greater the harvest of grain. But if the rains failed to come, the farmers lost the grain they sowed. Those who risked little would at least have some grain left if the harvest failed. Paul's use of the metaphor to develop his new word for the gift (*eulogia*), places responsibility for bountiful harvest in the

¹⁵ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 261-262.

benevolent God (9:7-8), whom the Corinthians know to be abundantly gracious. God, abounding in grace *loves a cheerful giver* (9:7b; Prov. 22:8a). In Proverb God “blesses” (*eulogei*); in 2 Corinthians 9:7, God *loves* (*agapa*). Paul replaces the word “bless” with *loves*. God loves humankind unconditionally in Christ and responds in love to those who, like him, give *cheerfully* rather than *reluctantly* or *under compulsion*. Giving is above all a matter of attitude: On what basis does a Christian *decide* to give (9:7a)?¹⁶

Taking Paul’s lead metaphor about sowing and reaping (9:6) at face value, one may infer a selfish motive in giving: the more one gives, the more one gets back for oneself. But Paul expounds his metaphor in quite another direction. God will grant a bountiful blessing to cheerful *givers so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work* (9:8). Thus, any hint of a self-centered motive is excluded. As proof that the sharing motive is right for God’s people, Paul in 9:9 cites verbatim a line from the Greek version of a wisdom Psalm (111:9, LXX; cf. 112:9, NRSV). In Psalm, the actor is one who fears the Lord (111:1); [Ps. 112:9 reads: *They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever*]. In Paul’s application, the actor is God: *He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor*. Point is that since it is God’s nature to supply seed for sowing and bred for food, he will multiply the metaphorical seed of the gift of money for *the saints*. God will increase the metaphorical harvest of *justice* (*righteousness or benevolence*) by distributing the surplus of the grace of God. The *righteousness* in this text bears some resemblance to the Jewish practice of almsgiving. Paul conclude with many thanksgiving to a super-generous God (9:11-15). In assessing the overall effect of a generous collection from Corinth, Paul identifies four interrelated facets. He closes the entire argument with an exuberant paean of praise to God (9:15). 1. A generous gift out of Corinthian wealth will provide for *the needs of the saints* (9:11a, 12a). 2. A generous gift from Corinth to Jerusalem will result

¹⁶ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 Corinthians, 194.

in *many thanksgiving to God* (9:11b, 12b); celebration of the grace of God. Both the saints in Jerusalem and the Corinthian believers participate jointly and freely a public service; Corinthians do this by their generous gift of blessing, and the *saints* of Jerusalem by their many *thanksgivings*. 3. The generous gift will act as proof of the Corinthians' *obedience to the confession* they make (9:13). The *obedience* or *submission* consists in the act of giving generously, an act that signifies the grace of God in *the gospel of Christ*. Sufficient for Paul is ***mutual benefit*** of the two communities to each other, by which their union is validated. 4. The generous gift creates a *communal spirit of mutual benefit* (2 Cor. 9:13b-14). Paul encourages unity within and between the churches. Bringing the collection to Jerusalem will signal the *participation* of the Gentile communities with the believing remnant in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem group in turn will intercede on behalf of the Corinthians in view of the *superabundant (surpassing, 9:14) grace (or gift)* of God to them, and through them to the *saints* (9:12).¹⁷

¹⁷ Shillington. Believers Church Bible Commentary on 2 *Corinthians*, 195-197.