

A PLEA FOR HOLY FELLOWSHIP
2 CORINTHIANS 6:14-7:1
by Victoria A. Wheeler*

Corinth, in Paul's day, was the heart of Greece, surpassing Athens both as the economic center of trade and as the political capital. Situated on a narrow isthmus between two major trade harbors, one leading west to Italy and the other south east to Asia, this Greco-Roman city became a wealthy hub in the merchandise trade along the northern Mediterranean. The Isthmian Games also drew in considerable revenue, as did the prostitution cult surrounding the Temple of Aphrodite, which at one time included a thousand male and female temple slaves.¹

Paul arrived in Corinth during his second missionary journey (c. AD 50-51). His itinerary took him first to the local synagogue, which in Corinth was located along the Lechaion Road, below the Acrocorinth. He met up with two Jewish converts to Christianity from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla, with whom he lived and worked as a tent maker during his extended eighteen month stint there. Beginning with Jews, and then turning to Gentiles, Paul saw several prominent people come to Christ: Crispus, the synagogue leader; Gaius, host to the Corinthian house church and to Paul on his second visit there; and Erastus, the city treasurer, who later accompanied Timothy to Ephesus.

While living with the people in Corinth, Paul established roots which grew into a deep concern for their steadfastness in the Lord. This regard prompted his letters to them which he wrote during his third missionary journey, the first written probably in Ephesus (c. AD 54-55), and the second from Macedonia (c. AD 55-56), just weeks before his second visit there. The Corinthian correspondence portrays both a cosmopolitan, urban church caught in the tension between holy living in a world of immorality and political and economic snares, and also Paul, who opens himself up to expose the nature of a true apostle (i.e. father, teacher, model), establishing his right to be involved in, and offer practical and theological guidance to, this community of believers.

Just how many letters are encompassed within this literary corpus to the church at Corinth is debatable. 1 Cor 5:9 suggests a previous letter was written, which now is lost. 2 Cor 2:4 speaks of a letter written with "many tears," the existence of which cannot be determined. The uneven nature of 2 Corinthians might intimate that it is actually a compilation of several letters, perhaps made up of a) 6:14-7:1, now only a fragment; b) chapters 1-9, excluding the previous verses; and c) chapters 10-13.² Regardless of their quantity, the quality of the letters speaks to a deeply personal and lively

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association between the community and Paul, who, even in his absence, remained connected to those whom he considered his spiritual children.

That 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 could be an extant fragment of another letter cannot be proved. Yet some scholars believe it can stand alone, either as a rhetorical digression or as an independent text (either from Paul or another source), imported into the epistle (perhaps by the author or a later redactor).

Fitzmyer makes an interesting argument for the passage originating with the Qumran Essene sect.³ He claims the unit, containing considerable *hapax legomena* vocabulary, does not fit in the context of Paul's plea for reconciliation, and is devoid of any clues that it relates to any problem within the Corinthian church, specifically. Most importantly, Fitzmyer claims several features of the passage have a significant Qumran background, and he believes it to be a Christian reworking of Essene expressions.

Witherington, citing Quintillian, convincingly argues the passage is a digression (*egressio*), a common rhetorical device.⁴ Marked by an increased zeal, a digression functions within the context of a personal defense against opponents, and appeals to religion, duty, or historical events to admonish the audience's future behavior. Witherington goes on to point out that the syntax of the immediate context would be somewhat redundant without the digression. He claims the style is Pauline, and the material can be sufficiently traced to parallel passages in the first six chapters of the letter. In addition, the allusion in 6:11 and 14ff to Deut 10:16 makes a clear connection between the passage and its context, by linking "open hearts" and "idols."

Whether Paul was inspired from Essene concepts is not the focus here. Rather, considering the passage to be original to him, the discussion now will look at the structure. Following Witherington's argument, the immediate context of the passage (i.e. 6:11-13 and 7:2-4) would appear to form a chiasm, creating a singular setting for the passage.

6:11a "Our mouth has spoken freely to you"

6:11b "Our heart is open wide"

6:12 Paul has not restrained the Corinthians

6:13 "Open wide to us also"

7:2a "Make room for us"

7:2b-3a Paul has not wronged, nor condemned them

7:3b "You are in our hearts"

7:4 "Great is my boasting on your behalf"

The tight structure and use of rhetorical coupling and parallelism makes this passage, at the heart of Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church, a strong plea to holy fellowship. True reconciliation with each other, the main theme of Paul's letter, is only possible if the parties involved are brought together into right relationship with Christ. For Christians, that means

exposing and putting off every form of partnering that threatens the covenant community with a holy God, and is discordant with a life wholly consecrated to Him.

6:14-16a The passage opens with a present imperative verb (*mēginesthe*), which may imply the Corinthians are already working together in some manner with unbelievers. The verb root is similar to that used in Phil 2:25 and 4:3 to describe Paul's fellow workers of the Gospel. The unbelievers, or unfaithful, are those who have been blinded by the god of this world, leaving them in darkness, and unable to see the light of the Gospel (2 Cor 4:4).

A series of rhetorical questions underscore the separation and thus the inherent impossibility of any form of mutuality between the believer (in Christ) and the unbeliever. Each coupling expresses concepts in opposition to each other: righteousness and lawlessness (also Rom 6:19), light and darkness, Christ and Beliar (Satan), believers and unbelievers, the temple of God and idols (false gods). The questions are structurally unified by the alliteration of the *tis - ē tis* combination, and culminate in the aurally similar, yet distinct, *hēmeis*, (further emphasized by the postpositive), which sets off the phrase, "but **we** are the living temple of God."

Righteousness and the Law are related in regard to sin. Sin is what separates and makes fellowship impossible, The Law makes one aware of sin, but does not render sin powerless. For Paul, the only way for partnering within right relationships was a righteousness beyond the Law, found solely through faith in Christ, Certainly then, those who are lawless do not even have the benefit of the knowledge of sin which would come with the Law, Thus, the righteous and the lawless stand separated by the unbridgeable chasm of the ignorance of sin.

The relation of light to darkness could be associated with creation.⁵ But, since both are created and declared good, this could lead to confusion here. Paul speaks metaphorically when he relates light and darkness with the glory of God and knowledge versus paganism (2 Cor 4:4-6), guidance for the blind, the strength of armor against the sinful deeds of weak flesh (Rom 2:19f; 13:12), and the disclosure of things hidden (1 Cor 4:5).

One of the numerous *hapax legomena* of this passage is *Beliar*, an OT word meaning death, or worthlessness (Ps 18:4). The MT vowel pointing renders a word meaning "without" (*b'li*) "profit" (*ya'al*). The Hebrew root *bala* means "swallow up" or "engulf," and would then produce the name *Sheol*, or Engulfed. The word became the personification of such (i.e. Satan, the devil) in the writings of the intertestamental period and the NT.⁶ Here, the one who devours is juxtaposed with the One who is life, Christ. Paul then contrasts the one who believes in Christ with the unbeliever.

The final comparison is between the temple of God and idols. God's dwelling place within the temple in Jerusalem was the Holy of Holies, the innermost part of the temple which contained no statue or replica of God. The presence of the Creator God is dynamic, rather than static; unlike the false gods, whose resemblance could be portrayed by something created, set in a shrine. For Paul, the body of believers, corporately as well as individually, comprised the dwelling place of God (1 Cor 3:16f; 6:19; Eph 2:20). Translators have used the adjective *zōntos* as a modifier for God (i.e. "living God"), but that seems redundant, not to mention grammatically unsound. The focus is on the vibrant fellowship believers share in common in Christ; thus "we are the living temple of God."

The flow of the rhetorical questions also highlights some similarities. The binding together of believers is defined as a partnership, a fellowship, a harmonizing (or, mutual consent; as in 1 Cor 7:5), a sharing in common, and an agreement. In addition, that which binds them together is marked by righteousness, light, belief or faith, and being a living temple. At the center of the chiasm is Christ, the heart of their mutuality. The opposite is also presented, with Beliar (Satan) at the heart of that which Paul defines as lawlessness, darkness, unbelief, and idolatry. Thus, in contrast to the lifeless unbeliever, who is ignorant to sin, engulfed by darkness which renders sight impossible, and who wastes life for a carved piece of wood or metal, against that stand the believers with their minds and hearts opened to the glory of God, portrayed as a magnificent, living, breathing dwelling place for God. What companionship could there ever be between the two?

Paul does not leave the argument to rest on his words alone, but draws on the scriptural (i.e. OT) promises of God, from which he makes his case. If reconciliation is to be found, it must be grounded in having been formed together into a unified community by the Lord. This community is presented here as God with his chosen people, and also as a father with his children. These benign scenes of nurture and protection are possible only if both parties do their parts. The divine promises require human responsibility.

6:16b-18 The concept of God making his dwelling among humanity, a plan which has been unfolding throughout history, can be traced through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.⁷ God first establishes a covenant "to be God" to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:7), which expands to being the God of all Israel, thus enabling them to know *YHWH*, but not yet to be his people (Ex 6:7). To the exiles, God declares he will make his dwelling place among them, and he will be their God and they will be his people (Ez 37:27). With the coming of Christ, the first part of that promise becomes a reality (Jn 1:14). By faith it becomes actualized in one's heart (Eph 3:17). And with the new heaven and earth, the promise will become sight (Rev 21:3).

A holy God requires a holy people. God has made his home among his people, but there are demands he places upon humans in order to make them an acceptable dwelling place. They are physically to separate themselves from those pagans with whom they have lived, and not to touch any unclean thing or person (i.e. anything which has no relationship with God). The original message, spoken to the remnant in Babylonian exile (Is 52:11), is still appropriate to those believers living among their pagan neighbors in Corinth.

A final phrase from Isaiah is omitted here, explaining that they were not to touch what is unclean because they were responsible for carrying sacred items. This was clear to Paul when he stated he was called out and set apart for the sake of the Gospel (Rom 1:1). Here, the imperative form of the verb *aphoristhēte*,⁸ “be set apart,” is aorist passive, and could imply that God has done the appointing, the setting apart, perhaps even before birth (Gal 1:15), and one merely receives it. Then consecration would involve both a divine ordaining, as well as an acceptance of the calling. Still, to be accepted, welcomed, received by a holy God, it is imperative to make a lifestyle choice that would remove oneself from one’s former way of life, no longer handling those things which have no place in the life of one who is divinely appointed for service. The purification speaks both to activities (“come out from their midst”; “do not take hold of”), and mindset (“be set apart”).

The essence of the first promise is paralleled, but now with the more personal twist of God being a father and his audience being his children. The original was a sign of God’s faithfulness, a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant (2 Sam 7:14), and would have had, for a strong patriarchal society, a sense of authority and power, as well as nurture and protection. Perhaps Paul is alluding to an earlier declaration of having become himself a father to the Corinthians (1 Cor 4:15), thus making a plea for them to be as his children, that is, a plea for reconciliation.

Adding to this, Paul builds in a concept from Joel 2:28-32, that in the end times God will cross gender barriers, and pour out his Spirit on sons and daughters. Paul had already written elsewhere that in Christ all are one (Gal 3:28), and no separation should hinder their fellowship. Perhaps this is a special plea to women in the Corinthian church offended by Paul’s charge in his first letter that they keep silent in their meetings (1 Cor 14:34f).

Finally, the entire working of God’s promises from the OT passages is punctuated by a threefold reminder (vv. 16, 17, 18) that it is God who originally spoke and desires holy fellowship. For his part, Paul is only acting as his free-speaking mouthpiece (v.11).⁹ The three phrases function as an *inclusio* and also a focal point at the center of the quotations, and serve to underscore the authority Paul has to address them.

Paul makes one last appeal to the Corinthians using all his rhetorical tools: reason (*logos*), emotion (*pathos*), and goodwill (*ethos*).¹⁰ The logical conclusion to these promises is to do what God requires in order to appropriate them. Paul's use of *agapētoi* is an address of endearment. This is followed by the hortatory subjunctive in the first person plural; Paul is including himself with his audience in this call to purify themselves from anything that defiles body and soul. For Paul, the term *sarx* usually means the flesh nature, something to be put off because of its proclivity to sin. But here there is a sense of the whole person, one's essence and activities. This, juxtaposed with the participle "perfecting holiness," suggests that both the physical and spiritual are necessary components in working out one's salvation (with fear and trembling, Phil 2:12). There is a mutuality between the two, so that what happens bodily has consequences for the soul and what takes place in the spiritual realm effects the physical. The dual participles, "having the promises" and perfecting holiness," underscore this mutuality: God's work/promises, and our work/consecration to him.

That which deadens and divides is sin. Participation in anything that has no relationship with God threatens to corrupt the body as well as the soul. Paul provides guidelines, principles, and a way of thinking, rather than solutions or rules. The hearers and readers of his letters must work with his words to determine how they shall be interpreted and applied to daily life.

God's plan throughout history has been to reconcile humanity to himself, that both might share in holy fellowship. There is a harmonious unity that can be found in Christ. But partnering with him will cost everything that smacks of self-promotion, which always comes at the expense of others. This unity happens when each considers the need of others before his or her own. For it is not just my own defilement that is my concern, but that of my brothers and sisters. That living temple is only as strong as its weakest stone. We receive God's promises collectively, and we purify ourselves, perfecting holiness together as one body. When we see our relationship to God clearly, that is as siblings of a divine father, we cannot help but see ourselves (i.e. our attraction to the things of the world), and our interrelatedness (for better or worse) more clearly. Those grudges we might hold against each other or those secret sins, we think they might affect no one but ourselves. But if they are harmful to one, they are harmful for all and should be left behind, that in the light of truth and love we might edify each other, and serve our heavenly Father.

Endnotes

¹ John Moray, *Archaeology and the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 315.

² Larry Kreitzer, *2 Corinthians* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 35. The

author argues for these five letters.

³ Joseph Fitzmyer, "Qumran and the Interpolation Paragraph in 2 Cor 6:14-7:1," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (1961), 271-80. The author claims the following are particular literary devices stemming from the Qumran community: 1) triple dualism; 2) the opposition to idols; 3) the community as the Holy of Holies; 4) separation from all impurity; 5) the idea of the "lot" of God's chosen people; 6) the stringing together of OT texts around a theme to form a *testimonia* (e.g. Rom 3:10-18; 9:25-29; 10:15-21; 11:8-10; 15:9-12).

⁴ Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 402f.

⁵ Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VII, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967; reprint 1973), 442.

⁶ J.D. Douglas, ed., *New Bible Dictionary* 2d ed. (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1982; reprint 1996), s.v. Belial by D.F. Payne.

⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 231f.

⁸ In the (MT) Hebrew (from Isaiah 52) the same verb, *hibaru*, is a Ni'fal imperative and has a reflexive meaning, "purify yourselves." The OT concept of purification addresses both the condition of the heart, or intention, as well as the hands, or ethical acts. Both are necessary, with inner purity and outward purity being mutual expressions of each other. Johannes G. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 311. The mutual reciprocity of covenant may also be implied here (both words come from the same root, *bar*), with both parties responsible to and benefitting from the inward and outward purification of God's chosen people.

⁹ The third reference to divine authorship addresses God as Lord Almighty (*kurios pantokratōr*), a singular combination of titles (Hebrew would read *YHWH Shaddai*) which appears nowhere else in the Bible.

¹⁰ For further reading on rhetorical analysis see Rodney K. Duke, *The Persuasive Appeal of the Chronicler: A Rhetorical Analysis* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990); also Martin Warner, ed. *The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility* (London: Routledge, 1990).