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## 1

AN APOLOGY FOR THE UNITY OF  
2 CORINTHIANS

## Introduction and overview

Ever since Johann S. Semler's commentary on 2 Corinthians in 1776, scholars have debated its compositional unity. After Semler, a *flood* of partition theories followed (see the surveys of Hyldahl, 1973, Betz, 1985, and Bieringer, 1994b).

Interpreters typically assume that 2 Corinthians is a composite letter of two or more letters or letter fragments. The number of individual letters and their respective order (also in relation to 1 Corinthians) vary greatly. Scholars have held to as few as two distinct letters: chaps. 1–9 and chaps. 10–13 (e.g., Bruce, 1971). Others have argued that 2 Corinthians contains five distinct letters or fragments: 1.1–2.13 with 7.5–16; 2.14–7.4 (excluding 6.14–7.1); chap. 8; chap. 9; chaps. 10–13 (e.g., Betz, 1985; cf. Bornkamm, 1965) or more (e.g., Schmithals, 1973). Furthermore, 2 Corinthians 6.14–7.1 is considered non-Pauline material. It is standard in current scholarship to ask where to find these smaller letters and how best to understand them according to epistolary and rhetorical conventions.

Considerable confusion results when interpreting 2 Corinthians and reconstructing Paul's theology. Presently, interpreters are left to determine the meaning of parts of 2 Corinthians on the basis of hypothetically reconstructed letters placed in a reconstructed chronological sequence in order to understand the reconstructed situation and Paul's theological response(s). Moreover, if 2 Corinthians is not understood as a unity, an ambiguity arises concerning how the church can adequately appropriate this composite letter in its final form (see Kurz, 1996, who attempts to overcome this dilemma through a canonical–critical approach).

So, the questions of this study are: Was 2 Corinthians as we have it today written and received as a complete letter? If so, how was it crafted so as to achieve its desired ends? My thesis is that Paul composed 2 Corinthians as a rhetorically unified apology drawing on the well-known Greco-Roman forensic tradition. This rhetorical unity is seen on at least two levels. First,

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the letter evidences substantial parallels in Greco-Roman forensic oratory in terms of speech arrangement (*exordium, narratio, divisio, partitio, probatio, refutatio*, self-adulation, and *peroratio*), forensic *topoi* associated with the qualitative *stasis* (e.g., intentions, authority, magnification of suffering), and forensic idioms (e.g., one's conscience as a witness, speaking the truth, admission of guilt, statements of hope).

Second, the letter displays a coherent core of related rhetorical aims. Paul's theological pen had been pushed by the hand of necessity – some of the Corinthians and Paul's missionary opponents, the so-called *false apostles*, were questioning his ministry conduct and official authoritative status. He failed to visit them when he said he would (cf. 1 Cor. 16.5–7 and 2 Cor. 1.15–17). Furthermore, he had used persuasive rhetoric in his letters when, in fact, he previously disavowed using it (1 Cor. 1.17; 2.1; cf. 2 Cor. 5.11). Finally, he was adjudged unapproved in his financial conduct (2 Cor. 7.2; 11.7–10; 12.14–18) – so much so that his role in delivering the Corinthians' portion of the collection (Paul's special project for assisting the poor in Judea) was in jeopardy (2 Cor. 3.1; 8.20–21; 12.14–18; 13.6–8). Paul became liable to the same criticisms he made of some of the Corinthians: He is worldly (1 Cor. 3.1, 3; see also 2 Cor. 1.17b; 10.2) and unapproved (1 Cor. 11.19, 28; see also 2 Cor. 13.3–7).

Because of these charges of inconsistency and his diminishing credibility, Paul in 2 Corinthians defended his past actions of writing rather than visiting (2.1–11; cf. 7.2–16), explained his intentions and involvements in the collection efforts (chaps. 8–9), and argued that God is active in and through his *persuasive* preaching of the gospel to call the Corinthians to the greater glory of the new covenant (chaps. 3–6; see esp. 5.11). However, this latter deliberative emphasis relates to Paul's disclosure of the dual function of the letter in 12.19. Although Paul affirmed that the Corinthians have *perceived* (δοκέω) that he had been *defending himself* (ἀπολογέομαι) *all along* (πάντα) through whole discourse, he also *speaks in the sight of God for their upbuilding* (οἰκοδομή). This *upbuilding* was for the purpose of Paul's imminent arrival at Corinth (12.14, 21; 13.1, 10). The letter prepares for his arrival in at least four ways: (1) by defending his previous decision not to visit when planned, but writing a letter instead (1.12–2.11); (2) by exhorting them to a lifestyle befitting the salvation offered in the gospel (5.20–7.3; 12.19–13.1); (3) by securing their complete confidence and cooperation in the collection for Jerusalem (chaps. 8–9; 12.14–18) as a sign for restored relationships with himself; and (4) by creating relational space for himself with the Corinthians by refuting his opponents (10.1–12.13).

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In the end, Paul argues that the Corinthians should have commended him (12.11; cf. 3.1; 5.12). Instead, Paul must *commend himself* to them (3.1; 4.2; 6.4; 12.12) just as his antagonists had (5.12; 10.12). Paul must refute both (some of) the Corinthians and his missionary rivals (10.1–11.15) while undermining their basis of boasting by showing that he is boast-worthy (1.14; 5.12; 11.23–30; 12.12) in that he exemplifies *through his weakness(es)* the true object of boasting, the power of God in Christ (11.16–12.10).

## Problems and solutions to the unity of 2 Corinthians

A starting point to affirm the rhetorical unity of 2 Corinthians involves a consideration of why 2 Corinthians is under *trial* in the first place.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, 2 Corinthians is mysteriously not explicitly cited in the extant writings of the earliest church fathers – the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp, and 1 Clement – but is first mentioned in the mid second century in Marcion's canon – nearly a century after its composition (Furnish, 1984, pp. 29–30). This opens the door for speculation about what form 2 Corinthians originally had. On the other hand, there is absolutely no evidence in the textual tradition that 2 Corinthians is a composite letter. The church fathers nevertheless assumed the unity of the letter. These external arguments, however, have not been judged heavier than the well-documented and much-discussed literary and logistical/chronological problems, which are summarized below.

First, there are disjunctions in thought between 2.13 and 2.14 and then between 7.4 and 7.5. Furthermore, when one reads continuously from 2.13 skipping directly to 7.5, no disjunction is arguably present, suggesting that two letter fragments were spliced together and that 2.13/14 and 7.4/5 are observable seams (see Welborn, 1996). Second, the section 6.14–7.1 contains dissimilar language and theology to Paul's own, thus raising suspicions not only about its position in the letter, but also about its being from the hand of Paul at all. One also can easily read from 6.13 to 7.2, suggesting more seams (see Duff, 1993). Third, the material in chapter 8 is oddly repeated more or less in chapter 9. Such repetitiousness may be better accounted for if each chapter is taken as a separate letter (see Betz, 1985). Finally, there are drastic changes in tone within 2 Corinthians

<sup>1</sup> Advocates of the unity of 2 Corinthians have used judicial terminology to describe their efforts (see Stephenson, 1965; Bieringer, 1994a). Consider especially the statement made at the end of Bates' defense of the letter's unity (1965–66, p. 68): "Here then the case for the defence rests."

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as a whole, most notably at 10.1. Interpreters rightly ask, how can 2 Corinthians 10–13, which are rather harsh in tone and ironic, be found within the same letter as the reconciliatory tone perceived in 7.4–16?

Logistically, any interpreter of 2 Corinthians is challenged to account for Paul's previous Corinthian correspondence (1 Cor. 5.9) and *the letter of tears* (2 Cor. 2.3–11; 7.8–12), the time of Titus' traveling with the brother(s) (2 Cor. 8.6, 17–18, 22; 12.17–18), Paul's various travel plans (1 Cor. 16.5–6; 2 Cor. 1.15–16), and whether there was an *intermediate visit* as might be suggested by 2 Corinthians in the adverbial statements "come *again*" (2.1; 12.21; 13.2) and "coming a *third time*" (12.14; 13.1; cf. 13.2).

Although the literary problems are weightier, any proponent of the unity of 2 Corinthians must explain both literary and logistical difficulties. However, one can stress the difficulties and perceived inconsistencies or attempt to reconcile them. In the current debate, the partition theorists claim the high ground, despite the many excellent arguments resolving these literary problems in favor of the unity of large portions (chaps. 1–7 or chaps. 1–9) or all of 2 Corinthians (see the discussion in Long, 1999, pp. 1–42). The conclusion one draws from this scholarly exchange is that, if unified, *2 Corinthians addresses a complex rhetorical situation*. If this is the case, then Paul may have drawn upon ancient rhetoric to meet this dynamic exigency. Therefore, *ancient rhetoric* may very well be the means by which to understand the letter's unity.

Advocates of the unity of 2 Corinthians (or large sections of it) have contributed to understanding the unity of Paul's argumentative rhetoric. However, they have failed to convince the scholarly community, apparently for lack of conclusive evidence. What evidence would be conclusive? Those advocating various partition theories have helped to determine parameters for making a successful argument for the letter's unity in at least two ways: by presenting clearly defined problems that need resolution (as summarized above) and by delimiting the type of form-critical methodology that can conclusively argue in favor of the letter's unity. The question that Hans Dieter Betz raises in his commentary on 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 (1985) – how one can argue conclusively for or against the unity of the letter – is entirely appropriate. He rightly argues it is from formal and literary considerations.

Such evidence does exist, and it comes in the form of Greco-Roman rhetorical theory and practice. I agree completely with the apt methodological observation of Frank W. Hughes (1991, pp. 246–47) (but not with his partition theory):

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The major difficulty that partition theories pose for those who accept them is that such theories often seem to be quite arbitrary. How does one show that the existence, long ago, of one theoretically reconstructed letter fragment is more plausible than some other theoretical fragment, or, for that matter, than the canonical form of 2 Corinthians? An assumption of this study is that rhetorical criticism could help to confirm or refute the results of theories of partition or interpolation.

In this respect Margaret Mitchell's *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* (1991) is commendable. Mitchell performs the rhetorical form-critical work called for by Betz with respect to 1 Corinthians. She argues convincingly that 1 Corinthians is a unified letter exemplifying deliberative rhetoric. Consequently, her work has ended the basis to generate partition theories for 1 Corinthians (some of which involved 2 Corinthians). What Mitchell has accomplished for 1 Corinthians, I hope to do for 2 Corinthians.

## Proponents of the rhetorical unity of 2 Corinthians

The proponents of the unity of 2 Corinthians have a negative and positive task: to dismantle the problematic assumptions and conclusions of partition theories and to construct persuasive proposals for the letter's unity (Hester, 2002, pp. 276–77). Today there is a growing minority of scholars who argue for the unity of 2 Corinthians on rhetorical grounds, and each has contributed to this dual task.

Niels Hyldahl (1973) has written an excellent review and critique of partition theories in the course of setting forth a very plausible understanding of the exigency facing Paul in 2 Corinthians. He pursues the simplest solutions to these complex logistical and chronological issues. Among his laudable conclusions are that *the letter of tears* is 1 Corinthians and that Paul made no intermediate visit. Betz's (1985, pp. 32–35) claim that Hyldahl does not provide enough substantial evidence and argumentation is simply unfounded. It is unfortunate that Hyldahl's careful work has not been more thoroughly engaged. However, Hyldahl's treatment of the *rhetoric* of the text is weak (only 1.1–11 is identified as the *prooemium*).

The studies of Frances M. Young and David F. Ford (1987), Frederick W. Danker (1991; although cf. 1989, p. 19), and Paul W. Barnett (1997) represent important steps towards a more complete rhetorical analysis of 2 Corinthians. Their efforts have been primarily to give an account of chapters 10–13, which they typically understand as the *peroratio*

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(cf. Witherington, 1995, pp. 350–51). However, this conclusion is not supported by comparison with extant speeches. Additionally, the rhetorical disposition of the remainder of the letter is left unexplained (Young and Ford, pp. 27, 37–40) or is not accounted for in their thematic outlines of the letter (Danker, pp. 27–28; Barnett, pp. 17–19).

More positively, these works have contributed to understanding the rhetorical situation and emphasizing the importance of the genre of 2 Corinthians. Danker has directed interpreters to see parallels with Demosthenes' *On the Crown* and to consider the importance of benefaction and finances in the letter. Young and Ford understand 1 Corinthians to be *the letter of tears*, and Paul has probably made an intermediate visit before writing 2 Corinthians, which is a letter of self-defense in the tradition of Demosthenes' *Second Letter* (pp. 27–59). Young and Ford argue that Paul was criticized in terms of his worldliness, spiritual credentials, financial matters and patronage, and eloquence (pp. 50–53). Thus, Paul offers an *apologia in absentia* (p. 27). Herein lies the key to affirming the letter's unity (p. 54). Both Danker and Young and Ford correctly focus our attention on the apologetic tradition. However, the task of correlating 2 Corinthians to the broader forensic theory and practice still remains to be completed.

The more recent rhetorical contributions of Ben Witherington III (1995), Jerry McCant (1999), and J. D. Hester (Amador) (2000; 2002) have also advanced the case for unity. Witherington has written a historical-rhetorical commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians. Although 1 Corinthians receives substantially more attention than 2 Corinthians (253 versus 150 pages), his discussion of the rhetorical situation and dispositional structure of 2 Corinthians is groundbreaking. Witherington argues that 2 Corinthians is a unified letter evidencing the disposition of a forensic speech (pp. 335–36). He admits, as others have noted, that deliberative argumentation is found within 2 Corinthians (esp. chaps. 8–9), but that this is not “characteristic of the letter as a whole” (p. 333 note 23; cf. pp. 43–44). Furthermore, the exigency that Paul met is one calling for reconciliation. The obstacles to reconciliation – the Corinthians' dabbling with idols, Paul's failed travel plans, patronage issues, matters of integrity – were exploited by certain opponents (pp. 339–43). As a result, “it appears that the Corinthians felt they had the right to judge Paul and his message and were evaluating him by the same criteria by which popular orators and teachers were judged. Paul disputed this right . . . and sought to make clear that he was answerable only to God” (p. 47). Because of this, 2 Corinthians takes the form of an apology of Paul's apostleship.

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While I affirm Witherington's historical-rhetorical approach and conclusion about the forensic nature and unity of 2 Corinthians, I understand the letter not as a *general defense* of Paul's apostleship, but as a specific defense of his manner of preaching, ministry practice, and itinerant intentions. At stake is an understanding of the nature of Paul's apology. It is not enough for Paul to argue that he is answerable only to God (*contra* Witherington); there is every indication that Paul offers a *real defense* to the Corinthians in order to secure their goodwill and future relations with them (see my discussion in Chapter 7).

Furthermore, Witherington does not equate 1 Corinthians with *the letter of tears* (which Witherington believes is simply lost); he also believes that Paul made an intermediate visit. These conclusions ultimately undermine the unity of the letter by complicating the logistical and chronological framework and by not acknowledging the central issue of Paul's defense – his failure to revisit Corinth (1.17; cf. 12.14, 21; 13.1, 10, and 1 Cor. 4.18). Finally, I believe that a better accounting of the letter's disposition is possible, particularly concerning the *partitio* and *peroratio* (see my discussion in Chapter 8).

Although a large step in the right direction, in the end Witherington's work does not provide a conclusive case for the rhetorical unity of the letter, because very little support from ancient sources – handbooks and speeches – is used to establish that 2 Corinthians conforms to ancient apologetic practice.<sup>2</sup> The question remains whether and to what extent 2 Corinthians actually displays features in adherence to forensic theory and practice.

McCant (1999) presents a very thoroughgoing and provocative case that 2 Corinthians is an apologetic forensic parody (p. 19) unified around several well-documented themes (see pp. 21–22). In 2 Corinthians 12.19, McCant argues that Paul “disclaims self-defense,” which functions as “a subversion of anticipation” and thus points to Paul's use of parody (p. 15). McCant's attention to style and intertextuality is notable, although parody is seen as Paul's primary literary mode. Parody is not restricted to the fool's speech in chaps. 11–12, but extends to the whole letter (McCant outlines chaps. 1–7 as “A Parodic Defense of Behavior”; chaps. 8–9 as

<sup>2</sup> Witherington is well aware of the provisional nature of his own proposal: “Study of the rhetorical form of Paul's letters is a discipline still being reborn, and any results that we come up with will necessarily be tentative and subject to further correction” (p. 39). I, too, cannot claim to account fully for the rhetoric of 2 Corinthians; my proposal will no doubt enjoy the revision of others. Furthermore, it was not within the scope of Witherington's commentary to perform an analysis such as M. Mitchell (1991) performed. Conversely, Mitchell must disclaim her own work as not being a commentary (p. vii), which is certainly the same caveat I must offer.



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“A Parody of Benefaction”; and chaps. 10–13 as “A Parodic Defense of Authority”) and even back into 1 Corinthians 4 and 9 (p. 26). Paul used parody to confront the Corinthians’ “relational tautness” and the “tension” created by “[a]n offending member of the church and Paul’s failure to keep a promise and visit the Corinthians . . .” (p. 26). This parody is most evident as Paul has become prosecutor (see pp. 163–64) and educator, who “wants to ‘build up’ the Corinthians by helping them understand the true nature of apostleship. Apostleship is a critical issue for Paul” (p. 17).

Critical for McCant is the view that we cannot discover the charges against Paul. He argues (p. 163):

The difficulty for the interpreter of 2 Corinthians is that, if they ever existed, we do not have the prosecutor’s charges. If the Corinthians made charges, we do not know what they were. What Paul tells us probably reflects the general situation at Corinth, but it is impossible to formulate the Corinthian “charges.” All we have is Paul’s parodic defense and surely he is capable of some distortion, misrepresentation and bias.

Moreover, McCant maintains that there are no missionary opponents; in fact, he calls for a moratorium on this area of research in 2 Corinthians and claims that it is based largely on mirror-reading (pp. 17–18, 26).

If McCant is correct to identify 2 Corinthians formally as a defense (p. 13), I would fundamentally disagree with his reading of 12.19 and his broader understanding of the rhetoric of the letter. First, McCant does not consider the relevance of ancient *stasis* theory, which would help delineate the charges and Paul’s response to them. Second, no accounting for the disposition of the letter is provided. Third, like Witherington, McCant ascribes to an intermediate visit and a lost letter of tears (pp. 26–27) and emphasizes that Paul’s apostleship more generally is the issue, *rather than specific charges*. Fourth, this latter view is related to the most problematic feature of McCant’s thesis, namely, *that all of 2 Corinthians is parodic*. I would grant that 2 Cor. 11.1–12.10 contains increasingly parodic features; but I would question its presence in chap. 10 and earlier altogether. What Paul is engaged in is a challenge–response scenario within a culture of honor and shame (Watson, 2002). It seems implausible that Paul would subject the Corinthians to such thoroughgoing parody (thirteen chapters!) in order to educate them. How irritating! And principally such a parody would be completely unfounded, since according to McCant’s reconstruction there is only “tension” and no specific charges, criticisms, or opponents of Paul (although McCant, p. 32 entertains “charges”



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concerning Paul's failed visit and sent letter based upon 2 Cor. 1.12–2.11). Indeed, if there were no charges, then what defense is there for Paul to parody?

Fifth, McCant is right to observe Paul's tactic of playing the prosecutor. However, this does not support his parodic view of 2 Corinthians, since counter-accusation is a common rhetorical *topos* befitting a defense. Particularly, in the case of 2 Corinthians this tactic seems completely justified since Paul critiques the Corinthians' poor moral conduct as the basis for his determination not to visit (2.1–5) as he had originally planned (1.15–16; cf. 1 Cor. 16.5), the failure of which is precisely the charge he is responding to (1.17).

Finally, in 2 Corinthians 12.19 there is no contrast of thought between the Corinthians' perception of Paul defending himself and his speaking before God in Christ. The later statement is a forensic *topos* in which a litigant reminds the jury that he speaks in the full awareness of God and thus indicates confidence in his own case (see Cic. *Inv.* 1.23, 101; Quint. *Inst.* 6.1.34; *Rhet. Her.* 1.7; see also my discussion of 12.19 in Chapter 8.9). Also in 12.19 Paul acknowledges that everything (τὰ πάντα), *even his perceived defense*, is for their upbuilding. Thus, 12.19 discloses the dual function of the letter, apology and moral formation, not its comprehensively parodic character. In the end, McCant's reading of 2 Corinthians does not offer a compelling case for the unity of 2 Corinthians, since it is not able to take at face value its judicial dimensions.

Hester has performed both the negative (2000) and the positive tasks (2002) while making a case for the unity of 2 Corinthians. He emphasizes *inventio* rather than historical reconstructions (2000, p. 94) and uses "a rhetorical theory of dynamic argumentation" (2002, p. 294) which is greatly dependent on Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca's theory of argumentation (1969) (p. 278). Although this may give Hester added interpretive resources by which to analyze and describe Paul's argumentation, it also requires readers to be conversant with modern discourse and rhetorical categories. He, too, holds to an intermediate visit (2000, p. 98).

In my estimation, Hester's main contributions are (1) confronting the assumptions of modern historical-criticism regarding decisions to partition 2 Corinthians because of its *perceived inconsistencies* and *illogic*, decisions which impose a particular modern linear rationality onto a dynamic argumentative text (2000, pp. 93–94); and (2) understanding the rhetoric of the text through attention to aspects of argumentative shifts in relation to the argumentation of the whole. For example, although not following an ancient disposition schema for outlining the text, Hester

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rightly observes that Paul has distributed his narrative material (2002, pp. 278–80). Also, Paul's repetitiveness and shift of argumentation at 9.1 is due to employing a *paralepsis* figure which “functions to downplay the rhetor's concerns just mentioned . . . by playing up the confidence he feels” (2002, p. 290). Hester (2000, p. 109) summarizes his arguments: “All the ‘seams,’ non-sequiturs and formalist deviations have been, in every case, easily explained by reference to common rhetorical practices and the strategic needs of Paul to address the argumentative situations arising from his relationship to the Corinthian community.”

Hester offers a much more sophisticated rhetorical understanding of the invention of the argumentation and themes of 2 Corinthians. However, he does not entertain a consideration of the genre of 2 Corinthians as a whole (he deems chaps. 10–13 an “apostolic *apologia*”; 2000, pp. 95–97). Thus, the results of his arguments will remain inconclusive for the unity of the letter on historical grounds. In other words, the inventive and argumentative features observed in the text by Hester must have some warrant in the historical-cultural milieu. To enter into Paul's milieu requires a consideration of literary genre, something which Hester does not fully address. The best way to argue *conclusively* for the letter's unity, I argue, must be within the discipline of ancient rhetorical criticism and involve a rigorous genre analysis of the letter.

This survey indicates that three fundamental issues face the proponents of the unity of 2 Corinthians. The first is determining the rhetorical exigence of the letter in terms of charges and opponents. Are there any charges against Paul? If so, what precisely are these charges? Who are bringing these charges? Are they some of the Corinthians and/or Paul's missionary rivals? The second issue concerns how Paul addressed this exigence. What manner or means did Paul employ? Is he thoroughly parodic? To what extent is he truly apologetic by drawing on the forensic tradition? The third issue is the method and manner by which 2 Corinthians can be shown to be a unity. Should we emphasize invention, argumentation, style and figures, genre, or disposition? My view is that actual charges were issued by real opponents from within and without and that the best method to demonstrate the unity of 2 Corinthians is historical rhetoric working with generic features of ancient apology.

The historical-rhetorical method of this study

The classicist Donald A. Clark (1957), after surveying ancient rhetoric, concluded with the following remarks: