

# Finding the central ministry purpose of a book of the Bible

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## 2 Corinthians and Habakkuk

### 2 Corinthians

There are two preliminary questions that need to be answered when tackling 2 Corinthians.

- a. Are 1 and 2 Corinthians one unit of meaning, and so mutually explanatory?

Traditionally these two letters have been regarded as one unit, in that it has been assumed that they both tackle the same issues, that they refer to each other, and that 2 Corinthians flows on naturally from 1 Corinthians.

Modern preachers are less attracted to this idea, because the references to Paul's former letter in 2 Corinthians do not obviously refer to 1 Corinthians, and because the notorious sinner of 1 Corinthians does not seem to be the same person as the sinner of 2 Corinthians. There is also a contrast between the issues tackled in the two books. While there are some common themes, it seems obvious that they are separate documents, and that there must have been another letter, 'the severe letter,' which was written and received in the time between our two books. [There is no problem in thinking of letters written by Paul, but not included in the Bible. His letter to the Laodiceans, referred to in Colossians. 4:16, is an example of such a letter.]

- b. Is 2 Corinthians made up of two separate letters, namely chapters 1-9, and chapters 10-13?

It is possible that chapters 10-13 are part of the 'severe letter.' This would mean that chapter 10-13 were a separate letter that Paul wrote before chapters 1-9. It would also mean that it not be worthwhile to look for one central ministry purpose that covered both chapters 1-9 and chapters 10-13.<sup>1</sup> This is not an impossible idea, and would not reduce the significance of both parts of the book. It is assumed by Colin Kruse in his Tyndale Commentary.<sup>2</sup> It matters to our quest, because if it is true, then it would be foolish to try to find one central ministry purpose for both 1-9 and 10-13.<sup>3</sup>

My current assumption is that 2 Corinthians is in fact one letter. I think it is likely that it was written gradually, and that Paul may well have received more information during the period when the letter was written. This would explain

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<sup>1</sup> I will not deal with the idea that 2 Corinthians is made up of up to 5 separate letters from Paul.

<sup>2</sup> Kruse, Colin, *2 Corinthians*, TNTC, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> I would not be troubled if it were discovered that our 2 Corinthians comprised two separate letters of Paul. We are used to composite books of the Bible, such as Psalms and Proverbs.

the changes of tone throughout the letter, including the more severe tone of chs.10-13. However it is also true that Romans has different moods and styles, for example the change from the end of ch. 8 to the beginning of ch. 9, and the sudden use of extensive Old Testament quotations in chs 9-11.<sup>4</sup> My conclusion was that I should treat 2 Corinthians as one document, and try to find one central ministry purpose for the whole letter.

**i. What is the *pastoral, edificatory or evangelistic* purpose of the book?**

It was not easy to find the answer to this question. The main concern of the book seems to be that Paul wants the church at Corinth to accept his ministry, and trust his integrity as an apostle, to reject false teachers, and to offer support in the collection he is making, most likely for the church in Jerusalem [assuming it is the same collection that is referred to in 1 Corinthians 16:1-3 and Romans 15:31].

Here are some options:

- ▶ ‘Be reconciled to God...do not accept the grace of God in vain.’ [5:20,6:1]
- ▶ ‘Open wide your hearts...Make room in your hearts for us.’ [6:13, 7:2]
- ▶ ‘Examine yourselves to see if you are living in the faith.’ [13:5]

Of these the first looks more promising, but it none of them includes a reference to Christ, a major theme of the book.

That left me with 13:1-10, a complicated section, but which seemed to summarise the pastoral purpose of the book.

[Christ] is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. ...For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect. So I write these things while I am away from you, so that when I come, I may not have to be severe in using the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down. [from 13:1-10].

We could use the first underlined section. It does cover the themes of Paul’s apostleship, the centrality of Christ, and the themes of weakness and strength.

The second underlined section uses the language of ‘writing’, and does include ‘building up’ which is also found in 10:8 and 12:19. However this is not a common theme in the letter, and major themes are missing.

I decided to press on with the other approaches to see if they would provide more help.

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<sup>4</sup> And Romans was written at this time, from Corinth.

**ii. What are the main sections of the book?**

The three main sections of the book are:

Chs. 1-7, where Paul defends his actions, his ministry, and his gospel.

Chs. 8,9, where Paul explains the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, and asks the Corinthians to contribute to it.

Chs. 10-13, where Paul defends himself and his style of ministry.

A more detailed analysis would be:

1:1-2:11, where Paul explains why he did not visit Corinth when he said he would do so, and defends his actions, his ministry and his gospel.

2:12-7:16, where Paul tells of his joy in receiving good news from Corinth, and continues to defend his actions, his ministry and his gospel.

Chs. 8,9 where Paul explains the collection for the poor in Jerusalem, and asks the Corinthians to contribute to it.

Chs. 10-13, where Paul defends himself and his style of ministry.

The main sections of the book are easy to discover, and are so clear that many assume that they are in fact different letters. This exercise showed me that I needed to find on that would fit the whole book.

**iii. What are the key words or phrases or themes of the book?**

This was a quite complicated and demanding task, not least because there are different collections of key words or phrases, and they cluster in different sections of the book. It took a long time to work through, however in the long term it proved to be most constructive.

Here is a summary of the key words or phrases, listed in the main sections of the book:

Sections of the book	'pressure' or 'tribulation'	'suffering' 'grief'	'weak-ness'	'power' 'glory' 'glorify'	'death' 'dying'	'life' 'to live'	'consolation' or 'encouragement', used other than just 'I urge you to...'
<b>Ch. 1:1-2:11</b>	1:4,8, 2:4	1:5,6,7		1:4,8,20	1:9	1:8	1:3,4,5,6,7
		2:1,2,3, 4,5,7					2:7
<b>Ch. 2:12-7:16</b>					2:16	2:16	
				3:7,8,9, 10,11,18	3:7	3:6	
				4:4,6,15, 17	4:10,11, 12	4:10,12	
						5:4	5:20
	6:4	6:10		6:7,8	6:9		6:1
	7:4	7:8,9,10, 11			7:10		7:4,7,13
<b>Chs. 8,9</b>	8:2,13			8:3,19,23			
		9:7		9:8,13			
<b>Chs. 10-13</b>			10:10	10:4			10:1
			11:21, 29,30		11:23		
			12:5, 9,10	12:9,10, 12			
			13:3,4,9	13:3,4,9, 13		13:4	

This was a bit discouraging. There were blocks of common words, such as consolation/ pressure and suffering in chapters 1, 2, and 7, and weakness/power in chs. 10-13. However words seem to clump together in different sections of the letter. This seems to confirm the idea that there are two separate letters. However the helpful clue was found in discovering a common pattern of binary contrasts, such as: suffering/ consolation, weakness/power, death/life.

Another clue that I noticed was that of Christ as the example and source of consolation/suffering, weakness/power, and death/life, and also that these same binary contrasts were also evident the authentic ministry of Paul as Christ's apostle. Here was an indication of a common general themes to both 1-9 and 10-13. That helped me to start looking for more binary contrasts.

So I made the following chart.

Christ as example and source of affliction, and comfort, weakness and power, and these characteristics in Paul and his ministry or expected of believers:

Chapters	Christ	Paul
1:5, [10]	Suffering, comfort, deliverance	Suffering, comfort, deliverance
2:15,16	Death and life	Death and life
4:10,11	Death and life	Death and life
5:7-15	Death and life	Death and life
7:1-16		Affliction and comfort
11		Weakness
12:9	Weakness and power	Weakness
13:3.4	Weakness and power	Weakness and power

Next I made the following chart, which indicated the prevalence of a common theme, though expressed with a greater variety of opposites. This also alerted me to the poverty/riches theme in 8. This was an encouragement, as chapter 8 and 9 had been significantly empty until now:

Common theme of binary contrasts, such as suffering/consolation, death/life, and weakness/power.

Chapters	Binary contrasts
1	Suffering, affliction/comfort
2	Affliction, grief, death/life
3	Death/life
4	Death/life,
5	Consolation/life
6	Tribulation, death/consolation, power, self denial/holiness
7	Consolation/tribulation, grief, death
8	Poverty/riches
9	Power
10	Weakness/comfort, power
11	Weakness, death
12	Glory, power/weakness
13	Weakness, power, death/life

It was encouraging to find that the binary opposites were sometimes used interchangeably, because this showed that they were interconnected in Paul's mind.

All this took a long time, and was very demanding and frustrating, but ultimately very productive, especially as it helped me with the next approach.

iv. What is **the statement of purpose** or **natural climax** of the book?

I then realised that I could piece together three summary verses from the three main sections of the book, 1-7, 8-9, and 10-13, which all expressed a common theme of Christ as example and source of contrasting qualities, which should also be found in the life and ministry of the apostle, and of God's people.

- a. 'As the sufferings of Christ overflow into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows' [1:5].
- b. 'Though he was rich, yet he became poor, that through his poverty we might become rich' [8:9].
- c. 'He was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power, so we are weak in him, yet by God's power we live to serve you' [13:4].

However the problem with these three sentences is that they do not tell the Corinthians what to **do**.

So I decided to use the 3<sup>rd</sup> sentence above, with some additions from the context:

Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God. Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. [13:3-5].

This is not easy to understand, but then it is a demanding letter!  
But perhaps it is still too long and complicated. So here is an abbreviated version:

**Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God... Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith [13:3-5].**

I like this, because it includes the motivations of the sympathy and sufferings of Christ, and also his divine power. Both good reasons to examine ourselves! And it has an appropriate emphasis on how we live, as our response to Christ. It also points to Christ not only as the reason for living in this manner, but also as the source of this dying and living, weakness and strength. The self-examination Paul is calling for will include their approach to suffering, their attitude to Paul's apostleship, their generosity, and their experience of God's power in their weakness.

The useful spin-off of this exercise is that I think I have found the one coherent theme throughout the letter, expressed in different words for different purposes, but expressive of the same vital Christocentric reality that is the key both to authentic apostolic ministry and also to Christian living.

We can express it in these terms:

Christ came in both weakness and power: the weakness of his death, and the power of his resurrection.

Authentic apostolic ministry is also marked by both weakness and power [not one or the other, but both]. It is weak, as it is marked by suffering, affliction, and persecution, and by humble service of the people of God. However it is powerful, because of its transformative effects in people's lives.

Authentic Christian living has the same theme, as we follow the example of Christ who though he was rich, yet became poor, that through his poverty we too might become rich. It is also found in our daily lives, as in this world we become weaker, as we wait for our renewed heavenly bodies at the return of Christ.

This essential unity of the book and of its message will mean that though it is in some ways a confusing book, the coherence of its message provides its fundamental unity.

Four books on 2 Corinthians use this central ministry purpose in their titles, even if the first two of them also assert that 2 Corinthians comprises more than one letter of Paul.<sup>5</sup> Commentaries which point to these themes include Hughes<sup>6</sup>, xxx-xxxvii; Martin<sup>7</sup>, lxi-lxiii; Barrett<sup>8</sup>, 42-50; Barnett<sup>9</sup>, 40-46; and Harris<sup>10</sup>, 114-125.

This truth will then inform my exposition of the whole, as the following list makes clear.

*Jesus Christ, weakness and power, death and resurrection life:*

- ▶ In apostolic ministry, sharing in the sufferings of Christ and also Christ comfort. [ch. 1]
- ▶ In apostolic ministry, the response of both unbelief and saving life. [ch. 2]
- ▶ In apostolic ministry, the gospel of righteousness and the transformative power of the Spirit [ch. 3]
- ▶ In apostolic ministry, great perseverance in the midst of great suffering. [ch. 4]
- ▶ In ministry and life, the weakness of our mortal bodies, and the certainly and strength of our future life with God. [chs. 4, 5]
- ▶ [For this is how we understand Christ - ch. 5]
- ▶ Integrity in ministry and life, whatever the personal cost. [ch. 6]
- ▶ Life-giving repentance. [ch.7]
- ▶ Imitating Christ in everyday life, by self-giving generosity. [chs. 8,9]
- ▶ God commends godly and faithful servants of the gospel of Christ, who trust in God's power. [ch. 10]
- ▶ Apostolic ministry does not need to boast. [ch. 11]
- ▶ Paul has learnt that Christ's strength is perfected in his weakness. [ch.12]
- ▶ Christ is strong in judgement on the arrogant, but merciful to the humble. [ch. 13].

This provided a good test of my theory.

Or more simply [but not following the order of the text]:

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<sup>5</sup> Pfitzner, V. C., *Strength in Weakness: A Commentary on 2 Corinthians*, Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1992. Wan Sze-kar, *Power in weakness: Conflict and rhetoric in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000. Clements, Roy, *The Strength of Weakness*, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1994. Savage T.B., *Power through Weakness: Principals of Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, Philip.E., *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962

<sup>7</sup> Martin, Ralph, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary 40, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Barrett, C. K., *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1973

<sup>9</sup> Barnett, Paul, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, NICNT, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997

<sup>10</sup> Harris, Murray, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/ Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005

*Jesus Christ, weakness and power, death and resurrection life:*

- ▶ In ministry [chs. 1-4, 10-12].
- ▶ In daily repentance [chs. 6, 7, 8-9, 13].
- ▶ In daily experience of our weakness and God's power [chs 4-5, 12].
- ▶ In generosity of heart and life, following Christ's example [chs. 8,9].

Or diagrammatically:

Jesus Christ,  
weakness and power,  
death and resurrection life,  
leads to  
apostolic ministry which follows the same pattern,  
which results in  
daily repentance, daily experience of weakness and power, and generosity of heart  
and life.<sup>11</sup>

2 Corinthians provides an attractive but challenging picture of the call to follow Christ in life and ministry, as we know both the sufferings and strength of our Saviour and Lord.

'Christ was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith.' [13:3-5].

This exercise took the equivalent of one week's work, and this consisted of reading 2 Corinthians, and using the four approaches outlined above. My tools were the text of 2 Corinthians, and a concordance. I used commentaries at the next stage of my preparation. I used all that work to prepare a series of 19 sermons on 2 Corinthians to preach College Chapel over this year. Time spent in preparing the whole book saves time in the preparation of each sermon in that series, and is also a good long-term investment in growing in understanding and teaching the whole Bible.

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<sup>11</sup> I then noticed that there is a link to some of the themes of 1 Corinthians, those focused on Christ crucified, and the weakness of apostolic ministry.

## Habakkuk

Main sections:

1:1 - 2:13. This is a dialogue between the prophet and the LORD

3:1-19. This is the prophets response to the revelation.

It comes in the form of a dialogue:

Habakkuk	The LORD
1:1-4 Why don't you judge Judah?	
	1:5-11 I will, by sending Babylon.
1:12-2:1 But they are so wicked— we will be destroyed.	
	2:2-20 The just will live by faith.
	Babylon itself will be destroyed (by the Persians, who will send my people back from Babylon to Jerusalem). 5 'woes'
	All this will serve my gospel purposes for the whole earth, vv. 14,20
3:1-19 I believe. In your wrath remember mercy. As you rescued your people from Egypt, so I believe you will rescue us from Babylon.	
I will rejoice in God my Saviour, even in the midst of your judgement.	