

Understanding 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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Introduction

The goal of this paper will be to show how the “then and there”¹ message within the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 can be understood and applied in the “here and now”². This will be accomplished through the act of exegesis within the first and second sections and hermeneutics within the third, ending with a conclusion. The first section covers the matters of general context of the said passage and will attempt to answer the following questions so as to aid in understanding the passage: 1) “What is the purpose of the writer in this book?”³, 2) “What basic problem was Paul addressing?”⁴, 3) “What was it like for people in that day?”⁵ and 4) “What were their attitudes and practices?”⁶. The proceeding section will attempt to address the main idea(s) presented by 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 and answer the question of “What was the Bible saying through God’s human servant to the first hearers or readers of that message?”⁷. The third section will examine the possible life application of said passage and address the question “How should we understand and apply the passage (if it should be applied) to the people of today?”⁸. This will then be followed by a conclusion.

General Context

To begin to understand the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 one must first identify the author, recipients and date written. This being said, the primary author of 2 Corinthians is the

1. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 27.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Berkeley A. Mickelson, and Alvera M. Mickelson, *Understanding Scripture: How to Read and Study the Bible*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992), 20.

4. *Ibid.*, 21.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 14.

8. *Ibid.*, 15.

Apostle Paul; however, Timothy is also mentioned as being alongside Paul thus showing he could have also take an authorship role (2 Cor. 1:1 NASB/NIV).⁹ The epistle's (letter's) recipients are those of the church of God at Corinth as well as all the saints throughout Achaia (2 Cor. 1:1; 9:2 NIV) with the most likely date for writing being late A.D. 55 or early A.D. 56 from Philippi.¹⁰ However, with regard to the church of God at Corinth, the only narrative (and only extra-Pauline) source is a limited passage in Acts (18:1–18 NIV) in which it notes that the Corinthian church was attempted to have been originated in a synagogue (Acts 18:5-8 NIV).¹¹

Setting and Background

In proceeding to determine the setting of 2 Corinthians it can be identified that “the “occasional” nature of Paul’s letter invites some interpretive observations” as “ancient writers, like modern ones, typically assumed a measure of cultural and situational knowledge on the part of their audience”¹². The public life in Corinth during Paul’s time was Roman although “many of the elite in Rome sought to imitate Greek ways, most of the elite in Corinth would seek to solidify their city’s identification with Rome. In view of this evidence, it is not surmising that a higher than usual percentage of the names in Paul’s circle in Corinth are Latin”¹³. With this being said though, the writing of Paul to Corinth was in Greek as 1) “even in Rome, educated Romans studied Greek language and culture; still less could mercantile Corinth ignore its environment”, 2) “despite its traditional base of Roman colonists, the city drew many immigrants

9. Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians: A Literary and Theological Commentary*, (Macon, Ga: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2002, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost), 164.

10. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2005), 1612-1613.

11. Craig S. Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost), 8.

12. *Ibid*, 6.

13. *Ibid*, 7.

from Greece and elsewhere in the eastern Mediterranean” and 3) “the congregation’s likely Jewish and God-fearing Gentile founding center (cf. Acts 18:4) probably spoke Greek, as most Jews in Rome did”¹⁴. Thus, the need of both Greek and Roman elements of the time as this knowledge aids understanding Paul’s correspondence with Corinth.¹⁵ In addition, to understand the Greek and Roman elements present in Corinth one must also recognize the economic elements in Corinth which consisted of wealth and antiquity as its’ location has long involved trade; however, most Christians in Corinth were not well-to-do (1 Cor. 1:26 NIV).

Purpose for Writing

In examining the reason for writing 2 Corinthians at surface level it appears that the purpose lies in Paul’s desire to re-establish his convert’s trust in him and their intimate friendship as noted by the *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*¹⁶; however, upon further examination one can see there is more depth to the reason of writing as he also writes to defend and substantiate the ministry and authority he has been given. *The Oxford Bible Commentary* expands upon the matter in showing that the reason and situation for writing 1 Corinthians – Paul’s response to “problems involving community division and behavior, problems he felt were incompatible with membership in Christ’s body” was the precursor to the community issues of 2 Corinthians which “extended to include the nature of the apostle’s relationship with the Corinthians”¹⁷. “Convinced that the relationship was severely threatened, and of the need for reconciliation, Paul set out to defend his apostolic authority”¹⁸. Thus, the nature of Paul’s

14. Keener, 1-2 Corinthians, 7.

15. Ibid.

16. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, (2nd Ed., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost), 499.

17. John Muddiman and John Barton, *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2007, eBook Academic Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost), 1134.

18. Ibid.

authority is a theme throughout 2 Corinthians where some of the specific issues under investigation include Paul's apostolic credentials and talents, his involvement in the collection for the Jerusalem church and his attitude towards receiving material support from the congregation.¹⁹ It can now be observed that Paul is aware of rival teachers who are presenting their credentials to the Corinthians and attempting to gain/earn their loyalty (2 Cor. 2:17 NASB/NIV) as "Paul's competitors likely boast letters of recommendation (3:1) and engage in self-commendation (5:12)"²⁰. However, "if some Corinthians fail to recognize that they cannot be on good terms with both Paul and his rivals (a situation unlike that in 1 Cor. 1:12), Paul makes this demand clear in no uncertain terms...that they be reconciled with God, Christ, and with Paul the divine agent (2 Cor. 5:20–6:2; 6:11–13), while breaking with "unbelievers" compromising with paganism (6:14–16)"²¹.

Literary Structure

With this being said, the literary structure of the letter must be examined. While no one disputes that 2 Corinthians is a letter, there is an issue of the book's unity, specifically in reference to the change of tone from chapters 1-9 and 10-13 as is evident in both the NIV and NASB translations. The *Oxford Bible Commentary* states "it is a generally held view today that 2 Corinthians is made up of more than one of Paul's letters. Although there is no MS evidence to support this theory, there are several problems in the text as we have it which raise the question of its unity. Among the more serious difficulties is the sharp break between the conciliatory tone of chs. 1-9 and the harsh, sarcastic tone of chs. 10-13"²². To which *The IVP Bible Background*

19. Muddiman and Barton, 1134.

20. Keener, 1-2 Corinthians, 144.

21. Ibid.

22. Muddiman and Barton, 1134.

Commentary believes “dividing 2 Corinthians into two letters is a possible way to read the evidence, but the burden of proof should remain on those who wish to divide it rather than on those who argue for its unity”²³. However, an alternate position to which I agree with claims “the best interpretation views 2 Corinthians as a unified letter, with chapters 1-9 addressed to the repentant majority (cf. 2:6) and chapters 10-13 to the minority still influenced by the false teachers”²⁴ with support for this view being: 1) there is no historical evidence that chapters 10-13 circulated as a separate letter, 2) the differences in tone between chapters 1-9 and 10-13 have been exaggerated (11:11; 12:14 with 6:11; 7:2 NASB) and 3) chapters 10-13 form a logical conclusion to chapters 1-9 as Paul was preparing the Corinthians for his promised visit (1:15, 16; 2:1-3 NASB).²⁵

Main Idea(s) of the Passage

From the above, one may come to the conclusion of a dominate theme of 2 Corinthians which indicates that of Paul’s ministry as his main concerns in writing were 1) to defended his ministry and authority (chs. 1-7), 2) exhort the Corinthians to reassure their preparation for the collection (chs. 8-9) and 3) confront the false teachers head-on (chs. 10-13).²⁶ It is within this overarching theme that one will proceed to identify the main ideas/themes located in the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.

Regeneration as it Relates to Judgement

To begin to understand the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-19, one must not only look to said passage, but also to the surrounding verses for context. This being said, verses 11-16 speak

23. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, 498.

24. MacArthur, 1642.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 1613.

on the warnings against the reliance on external appearances, which relates verse 17 as “Paul’s ministry to a reversal of earthly standards and the dawning of a new creation”²⁷ with his motives being rooted in the Christ event (2 Corinthians 5:13-17 NIV). Paul’s motives consist of first being controlled by Christ’s love (v. 13-14 NIV), second being defined by Christ’s death as “the love of Christ is defined in terms of his death for us, that death being looked at in terms of its necessity” (v. 14 NASB, “therefore all died” and its objective v. 15 NASB, “that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him”) and how the “love of Christ is defined by the fact that when a universal need existed, Christ died to meet it”²⁸ and third the two-fold consequences of living for Christ.²⁹ Proceeding to verse 17, if the consequences of living for Christ constitute the formation of a “new creature” (NASB) or “new creation” (NIV) [each translation constituting the same idea from the Greek word “*ktisis*” –“the act of creating” or “the creative act in process”³⁰ as it relates to the consequences of the creative act and refers to regeneration or new birth at a qualitatively new level of excellence.³¹], the implications would then be “that this radical change demands that all Christians, like Paul, judge by criteria that takes motive into account. If the Corinthians understood the apostle’s motives, they would be able to answer those who judge merely on the basis of surface data”³². Paul extends his line of thought by emphasizing newness as he rejects appearance and favors the heart, thus showing “he was not interested in a fleshly perspective on Christ or Christians”³³ (i.e. human perspective -

27. Muddiman and Barton, 1140.

28. Talbert, 198.

29. Ibid, 199.

30. James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2010) 146.

31. MacArthur, 1630.

32. Talbert, 199.

33. Keener, 1-2 Corinthians, 185.

“worldly point of view” (v. 16 NIV) and/or “according to the flesh” (v. 16 NASB)), “but in the hidden, eschatological reality of resurrection life that had begun in Christ’s resurrection.

In further examination of verse 17, the words “in Christ” (NASB/NIV) comprise a brief yet profound statement of the significance of the believer’s redemption, which includes the following: 1) the believer’s security in Christ, 2) the believer’s acceptance in Him, 3) the believer’s future assurance in Him, and 4) the believer’s participation with Him in the divine nature of Christ.³⁴

Ministry of Reconciliation

In verses 18-21 Paul speaks of how the ‘newness’ one experiences in Christ originates from God through the process of reconciliation - where the world is the object of God’s reconciliation (v. 19 NASB/NIV) and God is the reconciler of the world (Rom. 5:10 NASB/NIV) with the means of this reconciliation being described as being “through Christ” (v. 18 NASB/NIV)) and “in Christ” (v. 17 and 19 NASB/NIV). In comparing and contrasting the New International Bible translation (NIV) and the New American Standard Bible (NASB) translation a discrepancy in verse 18 becomes noticeable as it relates to what is ‘from God’. The NIV translation states “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself...” whereas the NASB translation utilizes the inclusion of the word *these* – “Now all *these* things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself...” which I conclude aids in clarity in both the present verse and prior verses. John MacArthur substantiates this in noting how “many modern translations add the article “these” before “things, which connects the word “things” to all that Paul has just asserted in verses 14-17”³⁵. Through continuing to examine verse 18, it can also be noted that Paul

34. MacArthur, 1630.

35. Ibid.

transitions his appeal to the Corinthians to which he notes “all this” (v. 19 NIV) with regard to new creation (5:17 NIV) comes from God as the result of reconciliation with God by Christ’s death (2 Cor. 5:14-15; Rom. 5:10, NIV/NASB) to which it is actualized by embracing the apostolic proclamation.³⁶ It can then be observed that “the “ministry” of reconciliation is the life-giving “ministry” of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:6–9; 6:3 NASB/NIV)”³⁷. Thus, “by means of the doctrine of ‘reconciliation’ in v. 18-19 Paul presents God’s initiative, Christ’s role, and his own mission”³⁸ - that of being a ministry of reconciliation an ambassador of Christ (v. 20 NASB/NIV) to which “in order to justify his mission and break with worldly standards, Paul ultimately relies on support for his conviction that God has transformed the world radically through Christ”³⁹. And as an “ambassador who entreats the assembly (5:20) ...Paul presents God as his ultimate judge, but this passage functions as an indirect acknowledgment of the fact that the Corinthians have put Paul on trial, and of how important it is to Paul that the Corinthians recognize his authority”⁴⁰. As noted by Craig S. Keener “the world has not yet become completely a new creation (5:17) as the principle of apostolic ministry of reconciliation is only available to those who accept the message of Christ as it is offered by His agents”⁴¹. In the concluding verse (v.21) of the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 which one has been examining, Paul resolves the “mystery and paradox of verses 18-20”⁴² through explaining how sinners can be/are reconciled to God through His Son Jesus Christ. Therefore, within these fifteen words

36. Keener, 1-2 Corinthians, 185.

37. Ibid.

38. Muddiman and Barton, 1141.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid, 1140.

41. Keener, 1-2 Corinthians, 186.

42. MacArthur, 1631.

Paul expresses “the doctrines of imputation and substitution like no other single verse”⁴³ in which Paul’s ministry is summarized in addition to the Gospel.

Life Application

In the above sections, one examined the context of the main ideas within the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 as they related to that of Paul’s ministry and the original readers of the biblical period - “then and there”⁴⁴. The the following sub-sections will seek to determine 1) how one should understand the passage, 2) what the passage means in the “here and now”⁴⁵ and 3) if and/or what can be applied within an individual’s life.

Regeneration: A New Creation

Verse 17 it states “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (NIV) It is through this regeneration – this new life-giving relationship with Christ through reconciliation that one can truly ‘find life’. But in examining the above verses, what characterizes the “old” and the “new” life? Once one is able to identify these aspects, one can begin to more so fully embrace their new life as it can 1) give characteristics to strive towards acting upon and cultivating and 2) provide the individual an alternate perspective as the characteristics/attributes began to further shape the individual and the individual’s spiritual development which will/should result in a desire to please God with one’s life rather than others or one’s self (2 Cor. 5:14-15 NASB/NIV). This is seen as 1) “our ambition must be different from that of others; instead of pursuing position, power, prestige, or wealth, we should seek the approval of our God (2 Cor. 5:9)”⁴⁶ and 2) “our presuppositions shape our perspective, our

43. Ibid.

44. Fee and Stuart, 27.

45. Ibid.

46. Kenneth Boa, *Conformed to His Image*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 69.

perspective shapes our priorities, and our priorities shape our practice”⁴⁷. It is during this process of becoming a ‘new creation’ (regeneration) that one should begin to assume a servant’s heart towards God and others. An example of this is modeled by Paul after his conversion as his priorities were altered so as to where his priority became “to meet people’s spiritual needs”⁴⁸ (Acts 17:16; Rom. 1:13-16; 9:1-3; 10:1, NASB/NIV). This heart and/or priority shift has the possibility to reveal an entirely new concept to some individuals as previously serving could be equated to serving oneself rather than serving out of genuine love for God and others (John 13:35; Rom. 13:9; Gal. 5:22-23; 1 Tim. 1:5; 1 Cor. 12:1-3; 13, NASB/NIV).

Furthermore, it can be seen that “when Christ’s death and resurrection for all is actualized by faith there is a new way of living and this new way of living is characterized by a new way of knowing”⁴⁹. This new way of knowing can be equated with the veil (a representation of man being separated from God by sin) being torn within the temple upon Christ’s crucifixion and the giving-up of His spirit (Matt. 27:50-51 NASB) with the experiences of one’s eyes being opened for the first time through the process of reconciliation and regeneration. In other words, living in the world prior to conversion is similar to our eyes being opened and one is able to see for the first time what was and has always been there – God on the other side of the veil as when the veil tore, light broke into darkness and the grace, mercy, love and peace of God came flooding through.

However, this new way living and of knowing must be actively pursued as “to genuinely believe and embrace the reality of who we have become [new] as a result of our faith in Christ

47. Ibid.

48. MacArthur, 1630.

49. Hulitt Gloer, "Ambassadors of reconciliation: Paul's genius in applying the gospel in a multi-cultural world: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21." (Review & Expositor 104, no. 3 (2007 2007): 589-601. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost), 591.

[reconciliation] requires consistent discipline and exposure to the Word of God”⁵⁰. It is then through this ‘exposure to the Word of God’ one comes to further define their new identity in Christ as “Jesus derived his identity from his relationship with his Father”⁵¹. Thus, if one’s Lord and Savior seeks the Father’s Will (continuously) should one not also follow His example/model?

It is one’s identification with Christ which leads to and is the basis for one’s imitation of Christ (Phil. 2:3-4 NIV).⁵² Therefore, by developing a biblical perspective (the model set forth by God and exhibited in Christ) one’s heart is trained for discerning God’s Will in addition to learning to recognize the truth behind motivations and the danger in functioning outside of God’s Will as they cannot be known and/or realized without the act of seeking the truth from God’s Word.

God’s Reconciliation and the Given Ministry to Believers

In examining the nature of Paul’s ministry – “that of being an ambassador of Christ through whom God makes his appeals”⁵³ (1 Cor 1:17; 2 Cor 5:20, NASB/NIV), with regard to the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 one must ask if this role of ambassador strictly applied to Paul then or does it also have an application to people now? If one looks to the meaning of the word ‘ambassador’ – Greek: “*presbeuo*”⁵⁴ one can see it describes 1) to “act as a representative (fig. preacher)”⁵⁵, and 2) ”an older more experienced man who served as a representative of a king from one country to another”⁵⁶. With this definition in mind it can then be concluded in

50. Boa, 35.
51. Boa, 44.
52. Ibid, 45.
53. Talbert, 200.
54. Strong, 209.
55. Ibid.
56. MacArthur, 1631.

light of 2 Corinthians 5:18 and 20 that when Paul described his role, he was also in a manner describing the role of all believers – that of being “a messenger representing the king of heaven with the gospel, who pleads with the people of the world to be reconciled to God”⁵⁷. Hulit Gloer recognizes this as “while in one sense God has accomplished the reconciliation of the world to himself, in another sense this reconciliation remains incomplete until it is appropriated by faith in the lives of persons”⁵⁸. And he continues to state, “God has given to us the ministry of reconciliation (vv. 18b, 19c, 20)...and now entrusts the announcement of this reconciliation to those who have come to know it in their lives”⁵⁹. To the people of today, this ‘announcement’ and/or role of being an ambassador is the sharing of the gospel with family, friends, strangers – everyone, thus embracing and fulfilling the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15, NASB/NIV). And this role of being an ambassador and “the reality of the gospel for reconciliation must be realized in the concrete realities of daily life”⁶⁰ as the enemy (Satan) an opponent such as Paul had, would love for believers to keep their faith secret.

It is then through one’s call to be reconciled to Christ and to be ambassadors of Christ that one has “been given a response-ability, an ability to respond to or neglect these divine initiatives”⁶¹ in which from a human standpoint one’s relationship with God is determined by one’s willingness to reciprocate as without an ongoing response of our personality to God’s one’s relationship with Him would be surface level or that of non-existent.⁶² One must live a life of example, such as Paul exhorted Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 4:12. While Timothy was young, it did not stop him from living for Christ and modeling Christ within himself. By living a life of

57. Ibid.

58. Gloer, 597.

59. Ibid, 598.

60. Ibid.

61. Boa, 459.

62. Ibid.

example as an ambassador of Christ, His light is on display for all to see (Matt. 5:14-16 NIV). It is God's desire for believers to participate in His purposes by being a part of what His Spirit is accomplishing in the lives of people - He invites us to take an active role in furthering His kingdom and in the transforming of lives where outsiders become insiders to the family of God by individuals being an ambassador of reconciliation.⁶³ This is evangelism in action! All one does or does not say or does or does not do has the ability to affect individuals for eternity... How one chooses to live - for Christ or for self/others makes an impact in/on eternity. "Biblical evangelism is a lifestyle to be lived, not a lesson to be learned; it is a process...", a life-long and life giving process.⁶⁴ An example of how one is to live an evangelist lifestyle as an ambassador of Christ is located in Christ himself (as previously noted). To Jesus everything was world evangelism and His life was ordered by this/His objective.⁶⁵ "Everything he did and said was part of the whole pattern. It had significance because it contributed to the ultimate purpose of his life in redeeming the world for God. This was the motivating vision governing his behavior. His steps were ordered by it"⁶⁶. Should not also a believer's life encompass such as well? While Jesus was The Son of God, would we not be well to follow His example? Especially if in the process of being created and re-created (regenerated) through reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:17 NASB/NIV) if it was done in God's/Christ's image (Gen. 1:26-27 NASB/NIV)? Kenneth Boa summarizes the above principle and application well in stating:

Christ the visible expression of the invisible God, came to disclose the heart, the essence, and the being of the eternal God in the clearest way of all – personal revelation. And he has called the church to personally manifest his life to the world. We are letters of Christ, "known and read by all men" (2 Corinthians 3:2-3). We are to be communicators of a message the world desperately needs to hear, and this communication must take place not

63. Boa, 59.

64. Ibid, 396.

65. Robert E. Coleman, *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1993), 17.

66. Ibid, 18.

only with our lips but also with our lives. Our words must be authenticated by the quality of our character, by the genuineness of our love and service of people, and by the corporate love within the Christian community. Our friends without Jesus need to know that they are important to use for who they are and not because they are warm bodies we want to persuade. This will be reflected in our words, attitudes, and actions.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Within this paper one has examined the context of the passage of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 and the 2 main ideas of regeneration and reconciliations as presented to the original readers. In addition, one has also considered the possible application of said main ideas as they can be applied to current readers/believers. With the application points within the sections of “Regeneration: A New Creation” and “God’s Reconciliation and the Given Ministry of Believers” consisting of 1) cultivating the ‘new’ characteristics one is given as a new creation through the individual’s spiritual development as it relates to having a new perspective (servant’s heart)/order of priorities which is accomplished through consistent discipline and exposure to God’s Word which leads to the formation of a biblical perspective and imitation of Christ and 2) through the process of being reconciled to God, one being called to be an ambassador (representative) of this ministry in which one is to implore evangelism in/to one’s daily life by utilizing the manner of modeling one’s reconciliation/faith in their lifestyle with such example originating in and exhibited by Christ during His time on earth. Thus, it can be identified the “then and there”⁶⁸ message of 2 Corinthians 5:17-21 can be understood and applied in the “here and now”⁶⁹.

67. Boa, 409.

68. Fee and Stuart, 27.

69. Ibid.

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