

Editorial: Learning from Paul's Second Letter to Corinth

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Every year we devote one issue of *SBJT* to a study Lifeway's January Bible study book. For 2016, our focus is on Paul's second letter to the Corinthian church. In focusing our attention on this specific book of Scripture, I am reminded about the story told by Kent Hughes regarding one of the world's most renowned classics scholars, E.V. Rieu. Hughes recounts the story that Rieu, at the age of sixty, had just completed a new translation of Homer into modern English. Soon after his work was done, Rieu, who at this time was not a Christian, was approached by Penguin Books to translate the four Gospels. Interestingly, when Rieu's son heard that his father had accepted the publisher's request, it is reported that his son was overheard as saying: "It will be interesting to see what father will make of the four Gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels will make of father."

As the story goes, Rieu's son did not have to wait long to discover what the Gospels would do to his father. Soon after E. V. Rieu finished his translation, he committed his life to Christ. Rieu's story is not an anomaly. It reflects countless similar stories of how our triune God takes his Word and drives it home in people's life. This story is a wonderful testimony to the transforming

power of God's Word. When people devote time to reading and studying Scripture, often they personally experience what the Bible claims for itself, namely, that it is God's Word written, the product of his own divine agency through human authors, which Paul describes as God's own breathed-out Word (2 Tim 3:16; cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21). They also discover that Scripture powerfully changes our lives because it is through his Word and by the Spirit that God makes people alive, unites them to Christ, and transforms us. In the words of the author of Hebrews, in reading and studying Scripture, we discover anew that "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12, NIV).

In focusing our attention this year on Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, it is important to keep these truths in mind. Our study of Scripture is never merely to learn more information about ancient times, or what the church was like in the first century, or use the Bible as a mere source book for our theological reflections. Rather, our goal in reading and studying Scripture is to know our great and glorious triune God more, to be transformed by his Word, and conformed to the image of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we approach 2 Corinthians, we ought to do so with a sense of expectation that God will take his word and apply the truth of the gospel to our daily lives. Sadly, we often become so familiar with Scripture that we take it for granted, but we need to be reminded that it is not enough to confess doctrinally and theologically what Scripture is; we must also submit our lives to it, and pray that the Spirit of God will do his transforming work through our study of Scripture. Scripture repeatedly teaches that God never gave us his Word to have no effect on us. On the contrary, God intends for his Word to inform, change, and conform us to Christ Jesus our Lord, since the one who the Lord esteems is "he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa 66:2b, NIV).

A wonderful place to turn to see the power of God's Word at work is 2 Corinthians. Second Corinthians is the last of the extant letters Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. Anyone familiar with the Corinthian church knows of its serious problems and aberrations and how Paul patiently, yet forthrightly addressed these problems with pastoral care and the theological application of the gospel to their situation. In 2 Corinthians, we not only discover more about the serious condition of the Corinthian church, but also of Paul's deep

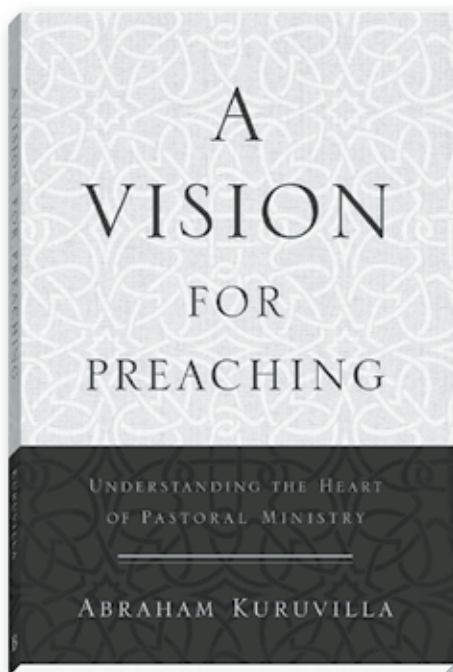
and abiding love for this church which had caused him no small amount of grief and sadness. In this letter we learn that the church was infected by false apostles and their teaching; how these “teachers” stood against Paul and his ministry, and more importantly, how Paul responded to these charges. In Paul’s response, we not only discover the heart of the apostle—a man captivated by Christ and all of his glory—we also learn valuable lessons about what true Christian ministry is and what true leadership entails in the church.

In addition, 2 Corinthians is valuable in its theological instruction. It offers us insights into our future state (2 Cor 5:1-10), it unpacks the incredible ministry of reconciliation that God gave the apostles and by extension to the church (2 Cor 5:11-21), and within that discussion we are reminded again about the glorious doctrine of justification, and that how in Christ, we are reconciled to the Father as we are clothed in Christ’s righteousness (2 Cor 5:21). Furthermore, 2 Corinthians 8-9 also provides the most detailed NT treatment of Christian giving, especially focusing on the motivation for why we give, rooted and grounded in Christ’s example: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9, NIV). In this profound letter, we also learn about the importance of church discipline, how to restore offenders, and how the church ought to function as ambassadors of Christ in the world.

However, probably the most distinctive contribution of the letter is Paul’s discussion of Christian leadership and specifically how pastors ought to execute their ministerial roles. In contrast to the false teachers who infected Corinth with their false teaching and example, Paul presents the Christian leader as one who knows his weaknesses, and it is precisely in those weaknesses, that the sovereign God brings about success in ministry. In our day, it seems as if the times have not changed, and the temptation for pastors to be like leaders in the world is a perennial temptation. For those in pastoral ministry, 2 Corinthians pays valuable dividends as we discover the hows and whys of faithful, godly pastoral ministry and ministerial effectiveness. In many ways, what Paul lays out for us is the glory of Christ, and what leadership in the church ought to be as a result of Christ’s glorious reconciling work.

It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will spur us on to greater faithfulness and service in our Christian ministry and lives for the glory of Christ.

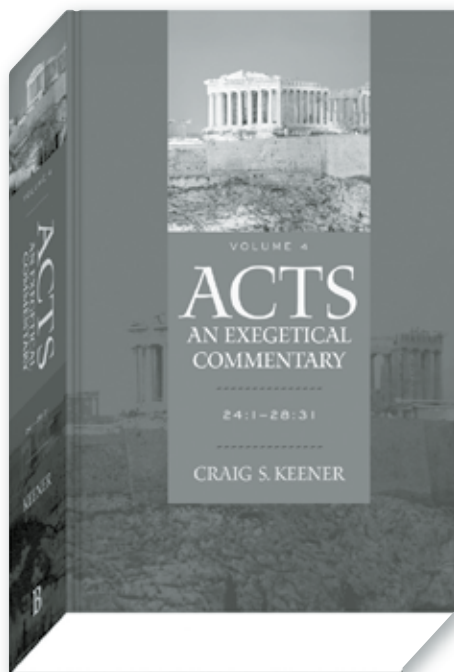
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