

# Preaching the Heart of 2 Corinthians

— Murray Capill —

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A key principle of homiletics is to allow the biblical genre we are preaching from to shape the way we preach. Jeffrey Arthurs argues not only “that a sermon’s *content* should explain and apply the Word of God as it is found in a biblical text” but that “a sermon’s *form* should unleash the impact of that text.”<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the genre of the text should shape the form of the sermon. When that is the case, variety in preaching is guaranteed. God, in his wisdom, has revealed himself and what he is doing in this world in a wide variety of literary genres. He has revealed himself through law, narrative, poetry, parables, apocalyptic, and so on. Sermons from different genres should therefore be somewhat distinct in form and feel as we cherish the variety of expression and style that each genre brings to our understanding of God. Sermons should reflect the reality that the story matters in narrative, images and emotions matter in poetry, commands and principles matter in law, symbols and schemes matter in apocalyptic.

When we come to an epistle, then, our concern ought to be to preach it in terms of its literary content. At this point many preachers feel at home, finding the genre more familiar, comfortable and immediately connected to our own situation than some other genres. Epistles tend to have a sermonic feel to them, and so, we think, they preach quite easily.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Sidney Greidanus quotes William Barclay who believed “Paul’s letters are sermons far more than they are theological treatises... They are sermons even in the sense that they were spoken rather than written... They were poured out by someone striding up and down a room as they were dictated, seeing all the time in his mind’s eye the people to whom they were to be sent.” Barclay, “A comparison of Paul’s Missionary Preaching and Preaching to the Church,” 170, in Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 313.

But epistles vary<sup>3</sup> and are themselves composites of various sub-genres.<sup>4</sup> So the question we face as we seek to preach 2 Corinthians in terms of its literary composition is, what kind of literature is it? It is clearly not a purely didactic letter, nor is it a theological treatise, a church rule book, a pastoral ministry lecture, a set of tips for weary pastors, or a “how to deal with your church” handbook. It is less predictable than any of that, though it contributes to all those things.

On closer examination we discover that 2 Corinthians uniquely combines three distinct but highly integrated elements. First, there is an extensive, complex and intensely personal and pastoral narrative. Second, there is significant theological content that is provided to give perspective on the narrative. Third, arising out of the narrative and the theology, there is strong pastoral appeal rooted in sustained personal affirmation. These three elements are constantly interwoven and interdependent and, while sometimes one or another is to the fore, the three together form the fabric of the epistle.

To preach this letter in terms of its literary content, therefore, our sermons will need to reflect the pastoral narrative, pastoral theology and pastoral appeals of this letter. It will be helpful, therefore, to examine each of these elements and then consider how we might combine these in our sermons so as to form messages that are true to the letter’s unique literary composition.

## ***1. Narrative***

“Second Corinthians is deeply personal,” writes Paul Barnett, “at times passionately emotional. Each of Paul’s letters to his churches is ‘pastoral’ in the true sense of the word, but none more so than this second letter to the Corinthians.”<sup>5</sup> In this letter, more than any other, we hear the heart of Paul and are given profound insights into his experience as an apostle.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the brief discussions on whether Deissmann was correct in distinguishing between epistles and letters in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 56, and Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 312-13.

<sup>4</sup> Arthurs identifies proverbs, creeds/hymn, rhetorical questions, apostrophes, doxologies and apocalyptic visions as some of the sub-genres of epistles. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 158-59.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Barnett, *Paul: A Pastor’s Heart in Second Corinthians* (Sydney: Aquilla, 2012), viii.

As Martin Williams has demonstrated, 2 Corinthians has a complicated back story, consisting of Paul's planting of the church (Acts 18:1-7), some eighteen months of face-to-face pastoral ministry (Acts 18:11), a "painful" visit (1 Cor 4:21, 2 Cor 2:1-11; 13:2; 12:14), four letters (of which 2 Corinthians is the last), various delegations sent between him and the church, and great angst and tension in his relationship with them.<sup>6</sup> So although this is an *epistle* it is not primarily a didactic letter, but a pastoral letter arising out of a complex pastoral narrative. That is not so uncommon. James Cox observes that "a vibrant story lies just beneath the surface of many an epistle text."<sup>7</sup> In the case of 2 Corinthians, however, the story does not merely lie just beneath the surface; it is prominent throughout. The pastoral narrative shapes every portion of the letter, making this, in many ways, a narrative letter. James Thompson has noted that "Pauline texts do not fit easily with the postmodern fascination with story"<sup>8</sup>, yet in a very real way 2 Corinthians should be an exception. Preachers can potentially approach this letter as a narrative first and foremost.

The pastoral narrative of 2 Corinthians, of course, fits into a much wider narrative, namely the narrative of redemptive history. In *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul*, Thompson argues that Paul addresses in his letters a communal narrative that fits within the wider narrative of God's work.<sup>9</sup> God, beginning with Abraham, has called a people to himself, sent Christ to be their redeemer, and will come again for their full and final restoration. "Paul and his communities live between the middle and end of the story. The community of Gentiles has been adopted into Israel's story and now waits for the ultimate consummation of God's promises on the day of the Lord."<sup>10</sup> The Corinthian story is therefore a snap shot of a particular church that is part of God's story of people saved but not yet perfected, experiencing the already/not yet tension of redemption.

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<sup>6</sup> Reference to Martin's article.

<sup>7</sup> James W. Cox, *Preaching* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) in Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 335.

<sup>8</sup> James Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>9</sup> James Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry according to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 24-25.

<sup>10</sup> Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry*, 25.

Paul is deeply concerned that their salvation not be aborted. They are in danger of being led astray, of living by worldly standards, of rejecting Paul's authority as an apostle, and of buying into a false gospel. He longs that they will be brought to fullness, completion and maturity as a church. His vision is for their transformation as a community of faith, until it is blameless at the coming of Christ. He doesn't want them to be derailed, distracted, deceived or destroyed.

To achieve this end he must overcome various objections to and suspicions about his ministry so that he can be effective in pastoring them to maturity in Christ. According to Barnett, Paul has a twofold objective in writing the letter. "On the one hand he sought to win back the Corinthians' loyalty to himself personally as a minister of the new covenant, while on the other, he attempted to turn the Corinthians away from their fascination with the newly arrived false apostles."<sup>11</sup> To achieve these ends he must prove his authenticity as an apostle and a preacher. That is why he defends himself, but as he does so he is also anxious to stress his deep love for them and how much they mean to him. They are his joy and his crown and he desires their affection in return. He wants the renewal of a close and loving pastoral bond.

These are the dynamics that force him to explain himself. He recounts his experiences, his joys and sorrows, his fears and his hopes. While he addresses all these things theologically, as we will see shortly, he primarily addresses them personally. In 1:3-11, for example, he speaks of his sufferings in Asia and his own experience of God's comfort so he can now comfort them. In 1:12-2:13 he explains his change of plans so that they will know he has a real heart for them. In 2:14-7:4 he expounds his new covenant ministry so that they will receive it as genuine.<sup>12</sup> In 7:5ff he resumes the narrative of events in order to stress his relief over their response. In chapters 8 and 9 he tells the story of his collection for the poor in Jerusalem so as to engage them in that ministry of the churches. In chapters 10-12 he exposes his multiple weaknesses in ministry in order to draw them away from the false ministry of the so-called "super-apostles".

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<sup>11</sup> Barnett, *Paul*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> J. I. Packer refers to 5:6-6:2 as the climax of the first part of the letter "where Paul is baring his soul in order to reestablish trust, love, and responsive rapport between the Corinthians and himself, and to that end he is highlighting his motivation as a servant of God." He describes this section as "supremely thrilling, indeed overwhelmingly so." J. I. Packer, *Weakness is the Way: Life with Christ Our Strength* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2013), 28-29.

As with all biblical narrative, these personal references are not just wrapping paper, to be discarded as rapidly as possible in order to get to the gift inside. Rather, the story *is* the gift, or at least a substantial part of it. The narrative has as much to teach us as the accompanying theology. So what are its lessons?

In the first place, it teaches us vital truths about the earthy realities of Christian life and gospel ministry. The letter shows, somewhat plainly, that church life is not always happy, relationships are often complicated, our best attempts are easily misunderstood, the gospel and the church is constantly under attack, divisions easily occur, mistrust can develop, and even great pastors can come unstuck. These realities need to be proclaimed. In particular, we need the story of weakness that Paul tells. That is a key part of the theology to which we will turn shortly, but it comes to us, in large measure, in the flesh and blood experience of the apostle. In 4:8-12, 6:3-10, and 11:24-29 we encounter extended accounts of trial, persecution, struggle, failure and hurt. "His autobiographical sketch reaches a climax in 2 Corinthians 12:10, in the words 'When I am weak, then I am strong!'"<sup>13</sup> Such pastoral realism is a necessary corrective both to pastoral naivety and Christian triumphalism.

Secondly, the narrative is instructive in showing that preaching never takes place in a vacuum. Of course 2 Corinthians is not a sermon as such and it is not primarily intended to be taken as a model for preaching.<sup>14</sup> But it does make abundantly clear that a preaching ministry always takes place in the context of a pastor-church relationship and there are times when it is right and necessary to speak about the state of that relationship.

Preachers once advocated being largely invisible in the pulpit. They were not to speak much of themselves or their experiences but keep their focus on Christ alone. There are no few pulpits inscribed with the words of John 12:21,

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy B. Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

<sup>14</sup> James Thompson, however, argues persuasively that Paul's epistles "*present a very strong echo of his actual preaching ministry*" and therefore do act as a mode for preaching (his italics). See Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul*, 29 and the entirety of chap. 2, "Paul as a Model for Preaching", 21-36. Even so, the intent of 2 Corinthians is not primarily given to model preaching or pastoral ministry but to address an urgent pastoral crisis. The implications for preaching and ministry are secondary.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” It is a right emphasis and in today’s celebrity pastor church culture a needed reminder. But complete preacher invisibility can be artificial and unhelpful. 2 Corinthians shows that sometimes, for the good of a church, a pastor must address how things are going with the church and must therefore speak of the dangers he sees, along with his fears, worries, dreams and desires. He must also express love, seek response, acknowledge problems and articulate vision. In sermons, as well as in other leadership contexts, preachers need to address the real issues of church life. Paul certainly does in 2 Corinthians.

Thirdly, and most significantly, the narrative teaches us that Paul’s gospel matters. Preachers must recognize that their own narrative, whatever it is, is fundamentally different from Paul’s because he was an apostle and we are not. Paul in this letter is not an *anyone* but a *someone*. He is the apostle to the Gentiles, who has received exceedingly great revelations, and who here, in this letter, is writing New Testament Scripture under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As Peter Adam therefore says:

The right way to apply this material is not to apply it directly to all believers, or to apply it directly to Christian ministers today, but to use it as Paul used it. Paul wrote the letter to appeal to the church at Corinth to “be reconciled to God” by receiving his ministry and message, and not rejecting or despising it. There are many different ideas about the gospel and different models of ministry in our churches today. We should work to ensure that our churches accept Paul’s ongoing ministry to us through his letters.<sup>15</sup>

In a similar vein Scott Hafemann, notes that “neither our pastors nor our missionaries, nor even contemporary martyrs, occupy the intrinsically authoritative office held by Paul as an apostle.”<sup>16</sup> So while the letter helpfully informs our understanding of the realities of Christian life and ministry, and while it suggests we might sometimes need to be overt with our churches about our relationship with them and their spiritual well-being, the main

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Adam, “Finding the Central Ministry Purpose of a Book of the Bible, Part Two - 2 Corinthians,” *Essentials* (Winter, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians: the NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 69.

point of the extended pastoral narrative is that Paul and his gospel is the authentic gospel that Corinth, and every other church, needs to embrace. To reject Paul and his ministry is to reject the gospel. Every other “gospel” and every other model of ministry must be rejected as false.

What is at stake in this letter is not so much the ministry of a local pastor who has lost the affection of his people, but the credibility of Paul as an apostle of Christ because his ministry and his message had been undermined by other ways of “doing church”. But if he and his message is rejected (which for us means, if his writings and apostolic doctrine are not taken seriously) then the gospel is lost and the church will be destroyed. The narrative calls us to embrace Paul’s apostolic teaching and model of ministry, with all the implications that it has for Christian life and ministry. These implications are spelt out as Paul develops his main themes theologically, so we turn now to the second main element of the epistle.

## 2. Theology

At every point in the narrative Paul moves from what he has experienced or done, or what the Corinthians have experienced or done, to some point of theology that addresses those realities. His “defence of his ministry is decidedly theological” even though it is immensely personal.<sup>17</sup> The theology functions as a commentary on the narrative. He interprets life theologically, grounding all his actions, experiences and appeals in the gospel.<sup>18</sup>

That can be seen in almost every chapter. In chapter 1, for example, he moves from his suffering to a theology of comfort, and then from his change of plans to a theology of God’s consistency in his promises that are “yes” in Christ; in chapter 3 from the seeming ordinariness of his ministry to a theology of the glory of the new covenant; in chapters 4 and 5 from the difficulty of ministry to a theology of the hope of glory,<sup>19</sup> in chapter 6 from a call to embrace him

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul*, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Barnett notes that one of the “many striking elements” of the letter “is its theological depth. Paul could have set out his objectives relatively briefly: first, reinstate the collection, and second, reject the newcomers. Instead, he went to great lengths in articulating his pastoral objectives *theologically*.” Barnett, *Paul*, 108.

<sup>19</sup> According to Thompson it is in 5:12-21 that “he gives the most densely theological treatment of his own ministry in the entire book.” Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul*, 120.

as a true minister of Christ to a theology of separation from ungodliness; in chapters 8 and 9 from an appeal for the offering to be completed to a theology of gospel generosity; in chapter 10 from the attacks of “super-apostles” to a theology of spiritual warfare; and in chapters 11 and 12 from a ministry of trials and a personal thorn in the flesh to a theology of power in weakness.

The overarching theology that encompasses the entire letter is the theology of weakness. As Packer so pithily puts it, “Weakness is the Way.”<sup>20</sup> A theology of weakness basically explains everything.<sup>21</sup> It explains why God allows suffering in his life and theirs (chap 1), why his apostleship looks the way it does (chaps 2-7), why they should give generously to the poor in Jerusalem (chap 8-9), and why they should not fall for the claims of the super-apostles (chaps 10-12).

This theology of weakness is rooted in the life of Christ. Christ was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God (13:4) and his life sets the pattern for Christian life. Christ is the source and example of all Paul’s experiences. In union with Christ, he is drawn into living the paradoxical couplets of Christ’s life: consolation in suffering, life in death, riches in poverty, and power in weakness.<sup>22</sup>

This leads us to the main theological point of the letter, namely, the pattern in Christ’s life (of comfort in suffering, life in death, wealth in poverty, and power in weakness), is the intended pattern of all true apostolic ministry and therefore the pattern of life for all who believe the apostolic gospel. To reject this pattern is to reject Christ and the gospel. The Corinthians must therefore measure themselves, their teachers and their church against this pattern. The bottom line appeal is, “Examine yourselves, test yourselves” (13:5), to see whether you are in the faith, because this is the true faith.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Packer, *Weakness is the Way*.

<sup>21</sup> Some reference to the theme of power in weakness features in the title of many books and commentaries on 2 Corinthians, and is the particular focus of Savage, *Power Through Weakness*.

<sup>22</sup> Adam speaks of “binary contrasts” while Savage speaks repeatedly of Paul addressing a “fundamental paradox” that is expressed in various “antitheses”. See Adam, “Central Ministry Purpose – 2 Corinthians,” and Savage, *Power Through Weakness*.

<sup>23</sup> Adam identifies the chief ministry purpose of the letter to be found in 2 Corinthians 13:3-5 with its twin emphasis on Christ being crucified in weakness and yet living by the power

Alongside this central doctrinal emphasis, Paul highlights many other gospel truths that give perspective on the way he lives and acts. At almost every point in the narrative he injects theological commentary. So, if we paraphrase his emphases, we find him saying things like this:

My change of plans is not me saying “yes” and “no”, because God is not a God of “yes” and “no”, but always “yes” in Christ. The gospel demands constancy and consistency. My change of plans was an act of gospel love not an act of ungodly inconsistency.

Gospel ministry is new covenant ministry. The nature of the new covenant displays the glory of gospel ministry, and is the source of our encouragement in ministry. “Therefore we do not lose heart”.

As you can see, our ministry is a highly motivated one with much activity and a large amount of trouble. So how do we stay motivated? The love of Christ compels us!

Eschatological hope is our ultimate incentive. We will all appear before God and he will judge us, so the judgement of people matters little to me.

The very heart of the gospel is the message of reconciliation. That is why we are appealing to you to be reconciled to God and to us.

The reason we are not to be yoked with unbelievers is that the gospel has set us apart for God. We are sanctified so we must live sanctified lives.

Godly sorrow leads to repentance. There is right sorrow and wrong sorrow. I’m glad you showed real gospel sorrow.

The generosity of Christ demands generosity on our part. Christian giving is an outworking of the gospel.

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of God, and the Corinthians being called to see whether they live in the faith. Adam, “Central Ministry Purpose - 2 Corinthians.”

Paul clearly has only one way of defending himself: his life and ministry, as well as his message, conform to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is no pragmatist; all his actions and appeals are shaped by the gospel.

The main implication of 2 Corinthians' theology is that when we preach this letter we must chiefly preach Christ, not Paul. We must not mainly use this letter to provide ministry tips and lessons, but to proclaim Christ crucified and promote a way of life that is conformed to him.

As we do that, we can also make some useful observations about what Paul is doing; about his method. We can highlight the way he moves from the narrative to theology, teaching the importance of deriving from any issue to the gospel and finding in Christ the right way to handle every situation. Paul relentlessly models the importance of addressing tensions, problems, difficulties, church life and ministry theologically. To him, nothing is more practical than theology. His theology shaped his entire life, just as a distorted gospel shaped the lives and ministries of the false apostles. "Truth was important to Paul and so too it should be to us."<sup>24</sup> Preachers will do well to highlight from this letter that what we believe matters and that good theology is never theoretical but immensely practical.

Thompson in fact argues that "*The purpose of Paul's theological statement – and the purpose of theological preaching – is to create in the church the capability of speaking in theological terms to the issues that arise.*"<sup>25</sup> The Corinthians must not only be able to understand Paul's ministry but answer the opposition. It is, therefore, a preacher's duty to teach the church how to think and speak theologically about life.<sup>26</sup>

Paul's theological interpretation of his narrative leads to his appeal to his readers, and so we turn now to the third element key element of the epistle.

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<sup>24</sup> Barnett, *Paul*, 25.

<sup>25</sup> Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul*, 121. His italics.

<sup>26</sup> Barnett explains the reason for Paul's in-depth theology as being his desire "to teach the Corinthians to inhabit the same theological universe and to make their responses to the challenges of life out of what could be called a 'Christian mind' and to grow thereby to spiritual maturity." Barnett, *Paul*, 108.

### 3. Appeal

The entire letter is crafted with a view to making an appeal to the church. It is highly significant, however, that Paul's appeal is built on affirmation. He repeatedly affirms his love for them, his commitment to them and his confidence in them. He suffers for their comfort (1:6), he works for their joy (1:24), he has abundant love for them (2:4). He sees them as his letter of recommendation because they are a letter written by Christ written on his heart (3:2-3), and his heart is open wide to them (6:12). He has great pride in them (6:4), he has complete confidence in them (7:16), he boasts about them to other people (7:14) and other churches (9:1). Even in the later, more distressed section of the letter Paul still affirms his deep love for them: God knows he loves them (11:11); his greatest burden is his anxiety for the churches (11:28), he has loved them as a father loves his children (12:14), he has taken no advantage of them (12:17), his primary concern is to build them up (12:19), and his greatest fear is that things may not be good with them (12:20).

As Barnett notes, "Paul's most emotionally powerful way of referring to himself in Second Corinthians... is as their *father*."<sup>27</sup> He is an apostle and a minister (servant), but more significantly, and in notable difference to the attitude of the false teachers, he is their spiritual father. "We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also" (6:11-13, ESV).

It will do us no harm to learn from this level of emotional connection and relational openness. People, and indeed churches, need encouragement, affirmation, love, compassion and approval. The nineteenth century Scottish preacher, James Stalker, describes in a quaint way his own experience of loving his church:

When I first was settled in a church, I discovered a thing of which nobody had told me and which I had not anticipated, but which proved a tremendous aid in doing the work of the ministry. I fell in love with my congregation. I do not know how otherwise to express it. It was as genuine a blossom of the heart as any which I have ever experienced. It made it easy to do anything for my

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<sup>27</sup> Barnett, *Paul*, 86.

people; it made it a perfect joy to look them in the face on Sunday morning. I do not know if this is a universal experience; but I should think it is common. For my part, I like to meet a man who thinks his own congregation, however small it may be, the most important one in the Church and is rather inclined to bore you with its details. When a man thus falls in love with his people, the probability is that something of the same kind happens to them likewise. Just as a wife prefers her own husband to every other man, though surely she does not necessarily suppose him to be the most brilliant specimen in existence, so a congregation will generally be found to prefer their own minister, if he is a genuine man, to every other, although surely not always entertaining the hallucination that he is a paragon of ability. Thus to love and to be loved is the secret of a happy and successful ministry.<sup>28</sup>

Paul not only felt this love in his heart; he knew the importance of expressing it to his congregation.

On that basis, as their loving father, he appeals to them. He employs twenty-two imperatives in this letter, over a third of which are in the last chapter.<sup>29</sup> Five times he says to them, “I beg you”, “I appeal to you”, “I plead with you”, and “I implore you”, using *parakaleo* three times and *deomai* twice.<sup>30</sup>

When analysed, it emerges that there are three main levels of appeal. First, there is the appeal to accept Paul’s ministry. He appeals to them not to trade him for the super-apostles, nor to reject his authority or question his integrity. Instead, he desires that they will boast about him just as he boasts about them (1:14, 5:12).

It is tempting to apply this line of appeal to our own pastor-church relations, but then we would be putting ourselves in the apostle’s position, which we are not. It is better to apply these appeals to our need to accept the apostolic

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<sup>28</sup> James Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models: The Yale Lectures on Preaching, 1891* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1891), 213.

<sup>29</sup> Imperatives are employed in 5:20; 6:13, 14, 17; 7:2; 8:11; 10:7, 11, 17; 11:16; 12:13, 16; 13:5, 11 (where there are five) and 13:12.

<sup>30</sup> *Parakaleo* is used in 2:8; 6:1 and 10:1; *deomai* is found in 5:20 and 10:2. Harris notes that “nether verb denotes a dispassionate and detached request but rather an impassioned and urgent entreaty. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: a Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Milton Keynes, UK: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005), 447.

testimony given by Paul, just as the Corinthians needed to. We, like them, may well find more appealing “gospels” than the one he presents but our future well-being depends on biblical fidelity. We must accept the gospel given to Paul.

The second level of appeal is for the Corinthians to love Paul and open their hearts to him. He repeatedly appeals to them to reciprocate his love for them. “We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also” (6:11-13, ESV).

Again, we may be tempted to make application in terms of our pastor-church relationship. “Love me! I love you, why don’t you love me?”! But as we have already noted, Paul is not chiefly giving a model for our pastor-church relationships. He is seeking to re-gain their affections for his God-given authority and cruciform ministry. The issue is, will they have a heart for Paul and his gospel? And will we? Or will we run off to other ministry models that look more successful and where numbers, statistics, KPIs, facilities, structures, and leadership techniques capture our hearts?

These first two lines of appeal pave the way for the third and most significant appeal. That is the appeal to live the faith – faith in a weak Christ who works his power in weakness. As we have seen, the pastoral intent of the letter is distilled in 13:5-6. Christ was crucified in weakness but lives by power. Paul’s ministry reflects that and now his readers must examine (*peirazō*) and test (*dokimazō*) themselves to see if this is their faith.<sup>31</sup> The appeal calls them to reject the world’s love of success, fame and power and look for a different source of comfort, strength and enablement. Paul’s desire is that they are strong (13:9), but by strength he means strength in Christ, not in a worldly way.

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<sup>31</sup> Barnett argues that “the conditional ‘if’ does not necessarily imply that Paul doubted their genuineness as believers” and that the concluding “unless you fail the test” while “ironic and pointed” and seeming to raise doubts about them, is really “somewhat tongue-in-cheek.” Barnett propounds that their failing the test was unthinkable, but if that is the case then Paul has been a true minister of Christ to them and “their verdict on themselves is their verdict on him.” Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), 607-09.

This appeal is drilled down into many particulars in the various sections of the letter. They are to live the real faith in their handling of suffering, their view of people, their relationship to God, their source of hope, their use of money, and their attitudes to others in the church. In all these areas they are to examine and test themselves to see if they are in the faith.

Since this is the major appeal of the letter, it needs to be the dominant emphasis in a sermon series from 2 Corinthians. This letter should be preached so as to help a church live the radical lifestyle of disciples of Jesus Christ. That lifestyle is at odds with many of the emphases of our own culture, where image, individualism, materialism and egotism are lauded and typical role models are beautiful, wealthy and successful even if they lead shallow or immoral lives. This letter calls us to a very different way of life, a different measure of success, and a different set of priorities. Cruciform living is supremely counter-cultural and yet, in God's strange wisdom, the path to strength.

#### ***4. Preaching Paul's Narrative, Theology and Appeal Today***

We have seen that in 2 Corinthians, the most personal of his letters, Paul intertwines a complex pastoral narrative, robust gospel theology, and strong personal appeal. We have also noted some implications of each theme for preaching today.

We turn now to the question of how we might preach 2 Corinthians in a way that reflects this distinct literary content. If genre is to shape homiletics, how do we preach this letter in a way that does justice to these three elements? Can a model for preaching 2 Corinthians be suggested from the content of the letter itself? Is it possible that the way this particular letter is written should shape not only *what* we preach from 2 Corinthians, but *how* we preach it?

At the most basic level, we would be true to the character of the letter if our sermons also sought to entwine elements of narrative, theology and appeal. But how? It is one thing to rehearse Paul's narrative, re-state his theology and re-issue his appeals, but how do we preach these three things today when our circumstances are, most likely, quite different from his? As we have noted, we are not apostles and our church is not Corinth. There may well not

be any super apostles on the horizon and, contrary to Corinth, things in our church may be quite positive and harmonious rather than tense and divided.

The preacher’s task, therefore, is not simply to rehearse the three elements of the letter, but to interface them with a fourth element, namely, his own narrative and that of those to whom he is preaching. We can only apply Paul’s narrative, theology and appeal today if we understand how our narrative relates to his, and therefore how his theology and appeal impacts our own situation.

In 2 Corinthians the order of the three elements constantly changes (for example, Paul begins with theology in 1:3-7 and then moves to the narrative that lies behind it in vv. 8-13). Logically, however, the movement is from narrative to theology to appeal (see Fig. 1). When we preach the letter an additional step needs to be added. We must move from the narrative of the letter, to its theology, to *our* pastoral narrative, and then to the appeal we need to make that echoes in our context the appeal Paul made in his (Fig 2).

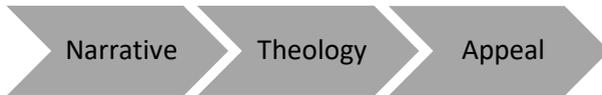


Figure 1 – Logical movement of content in 2 Corinthians



Figure 2 – Logical movement in sermons on 2 Corinthians

This schema is suggestive of four things we should seek to address in preaching sermons from 2 Corinthians.

First, we should give, potentially at some length, Paul’s back story, because that is what gives rise to the theology and appeal. His story, as we have seen, is itself an important message. We will do well to open up the dynamics of his relationship with the Corinthians, treating the letter first and foremost as narrative. As with other narrative portions of Scripture we will pay attention

to such things as plot, characterisation, setting and point of view.<sup>32</sup> We should seek to recount the story as engagingly as possible so as to draw people into the dynamics of Paul's experience. We may well do so by interfacing his story with our own and other people's as we demonstrate the realities of the cruciform living he is describing. Sermons from 2 Corinthians should be rich in story.

Second, we must proclaim the gospel theology Paul expounds. As we have seen, the narrative always leads to theological reflection. Paul is concerned to live the gospel and so as he explains his actions he also provides the theological underpinning for what he has said and done. We have seen some of the rich theological themes preachers will proclaim as this letter is unfolded, with the accent falling on the theme-tune of 2 Corinthians: weakness is the way – the way of Christ, of the gospel, of Paul and of all those who are in the faith. Sermons from 2 Corinthians should be rich in gospel theology.

Third, we will connect that theology to our context as we interface it with our own narrative. Just as the theology Paul preached arose from his own unique narrative, so it must connect to ours. But as we have seen, the narrative we are to work with is not so much our story as a pastor, or the story of our relationship to our church, but the story of us/our people in relation to the gospel.

In reality, then, the story we must tell is that of our/our people's relation to Paul, his gospel, his cruciform model of ministry, and his writings, including 2 Corinthians. And therefore, by implication, the story of our/our people's relation to other gospels, other models of Christian life and ministry, and other cultural agendas that run counter to the gospel of Christ but that look most appealing. That is the story we must tell, and sermons on 2 Corinthians should be rich in expounding our church's gospel and cultural story.

This is a new piece of work we must undertake that does not arise directly from our exegesis of 2 Corinthians. We must also exegete our church and

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<sup>32</sup> These are the four things Arthurs identifies as the key features of narrative literature. Fee and Stuart state that narrative has three basic parts: characters, plot and plot resolution. Greidanus identifies the main features of Hebrew narrative as scene, characterization, dialogue, plot, narrator, and rhetorical structures. See Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 68, Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 90, and Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher*, 199.

Christianity today in relation to our cultural setting and to contemporary ministry idols and current theological aberrations. As Paul pressed the importance of his gospel, his apostolic foundations and his cruciform ministry against the mindset of the Corinthians, so we must press them against the mindset of our church and culture.

Finally, then, we will engage in affirmation and appeal in the light both of his context and ours. The appeals we make will be essentially the same as the appeals he makes, but they will be fitted to the narrative of our people. Our ultimate appeal will be to “test and examine” yourself to see if this is the gospel you live, and to “be reconciled to God” and live God-reconciled lives. Subordinate appeals will include exhortations to accept suffering and expect life through death, to measure ministry and ministry leaders not by their outward success but their conformity to gospel patterns of life, to give generously in response to the poverty-in-riches paradigm of Christ, and to learn to embrace rather than despise weakness because it is so often the means by which God works his glorious gospel power. Sermons from 2 Corinthians should be rich in pastoral affirmation and appeal.

Moving from Paul’s narrative, to his theology, to our narrative and then to appeal is the logical order, but just as in the letter the elements are intertwined and appear in varying orders, so in our sermons the elements may do the same. We may well begin, for example, with our own church-cultural narrative, then move to his theology, then to his narrative, and finally to his appeal and ours. There are countless homiletic options and a series of sermons on the letter ought not sound predictable. The literary content of 2 Corinthians does not prescribe a particular homiletical form but it does clearly inform the kind of content sermons from this epistle ought to contain.

If in every sermon a preacher opens up rich aspects of Paul’s story, expounds key features of his gospel theology, interfaces it with the narrative of his own church’s gospel and cultural story, and makes pertinent affirmations and appeals that arise from those three things, arguably each sermon will reflect the unique and compelling character of 2 Corinthians.