

**SERIES: Power through Weakness**  
**SERMON: Going Against the Grain**  
**SCRIPTURE: 2 Corinthians 1:1, 2**  
**SPEAKER: Michael P. Andrus**  
**DATE: September 4, 2005**

Let me begin this morning by expressing my gratitude for the study month I just experienced. When I went to St. Louis in 1984 one of the really attractive carrots the leaders there enticed me with was a 3-month sabbatical every five years. I suspect their thinking was that within five years the church plant would either succeed to the point they could afford to let me have the sabbatical or it would fail and they wouldn't have to give it to me after all.

Well, in God's grace the church grew and I thoroughly enjoyed those major breaks at the end of 5 years and then again at the end of ten years. But as I was approaching my 15<sup>th</sup> year the church had grown to the point that it did not seem wise for me to be gone for three months at a time. Furthermore, I was in my mid-fifties and found myself tiring more easily; in fact, the time between sabbaticals began to seem like an eternity. So I traded in my 3-month sabbatical every five years (which had no requirements attached) for a month every year which I agreed to use as a study month. It turned out to be a life-saver for me and, I think, profitable for the congregation as well. When the Search Committee and Elder Board here asked me to serve as your Lead Pastor again, I asked for the same arrangement, and they kindly granted it..

I want you to know that I don't take this privilege lightly. During August I worked on a number of projects, including preparing for the two Lay Bible Institute classes I will be teaching; studying for a regional retreat for World Impact staff at the beginning of next month; I got caught up on some reading and correspondence; and I worked on some business for Trinity International University, where I serve on the Board of Regents. But the bulk of my time was spent studying and meditating on the book of 2 Corinthians. Second Corinthians is one of only four books in the New Testament that I have never preached and the only one I have never taught (the others being Mark and 1 and 2 Thessalonians).

I can't tell you why I have neglected it except that it always seemed difficult and intimidating to me. You know me well enough to know that I am a very analytical thinker. I have to outline something in order to feel like I really have a handle on it. In fact, my wife has been known to complain that I used to outline my love letters to her:

- I. You're the one for me.
  - A. Because God intended it.
  - B. Because I need you.
  - C. Etc.

Well, 2 Corinthians in places is virtually impossible to outline (although you can be sure I will give it a noble try).

Instead of being primarily doctrinal and theological, as most of Paul's other letters are, this one is very personal and emotional. Someone has called 2 Corinthians "theology wrapped in autobiography." There are powerful truths in this book that are encased in powerful emotions that you and I need to wrestle with, because everyone of us will eventually face the kinds of

situations that produced those emotions in Paul. Later this morning I will share some very specific reasons why we need what 2 Corinthians has to offer. I want you to know that I am downright excited about the coming six months that it will take us to do justice to this amazing treatise.

### **What is the background and context of Second Corinthians?**

**Who was the writer?** He identifies himself as “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” The term “apostle” means “a sent one,” an ambassador, a representative. An ambassador has no inherent authority of his own—all of his authority is delegated. He can speak only what the one who sent him decides he should speak. And lest anyone think Paul appointed himself to this office, he specifically claims that his was a divine appointment; he was called by the will of God. This point is critical throughout the book because Paul is consistently being challenged and criticized by some of the members of the church for real or imagined shortcomings. He wants to establish right from the beginning that he does not ultimately answer to them but to God!

In case there are some here who have not been exposed to the New Testament a lot, let me identify Paul further by saying that he was the greatest theologian and evangelist the church has ever had. But he did not readily become a follower of Jesus. In fact, he was a Jewish intellectual, an activist who hated Christ and all Christians, believing they were a dangerous cult. He persecuted them in Palestine and even pursued them in foreign countries so as to extradite them back to Jerusalem so they could be executed.

But one day the risen Christ confronted Paul in a vision while he was on the way to Damascus pursuing his vendetta against the followers of Jesus. The vision was so powerful that it blinded Paul, but in a more profound way it opened his spiritual eyes to see that Jesus was exactly who He always claimed to be—the Son of God and the Savior of the World. From that point on Paul became a great defender of the Christian faith. He traveled nearly the entire then-known world planting churches among Jewish people and among pagan Gentiles. He also wrote great theological treatises like Romans and Galatians, which systematized and clarified the great truths of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is the Apostle who wrote the letter we will be studying.

**Who were the recipients?** This letter is addressed “To the church of God in Corinth.” The church belongs to God and is therefore answerable to Him, just as His apostles are. This establishes the fact that any disputes between Paul and the believers in Corinth should be settled on God’s terms.

The term “church” is used in several different ways. On the one hand, it sometimes speaks of the universal church, meaning “the whole family of God.” The Apostle’s creed uses this sense when it says, “I believe in the holy, catholic church.” The term “catholic” there has a small “c” and means “universal.” That’s a very legitimate way of speaking of the church—all true believers everywhere.

The other, more common New Testament meaning of “church” is the local church, meaning all the Christians who gather together in a single place on a regular basis for teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer. That’s clearly its use here in 2 Corinthians 1:1. Interestingly, the NT never uses the term “church” of a denomination or a building. That is why the sign on our church in St. Louis reads, “The *Home* of First Evangelical Free Church.” The church is people; the building merely houses them.<sup>1</sup>

Paul is writing to the local church at Corinth, but he specifically states that he is also addressing “all the saints throughout Achaia,” that is, the believers in the whole southern half of Greece. I take it from that this is something of a circular letter that was intended to give advice and encouragement to the larger church. In fact, his comments have relevance for *all* local churches of *all* ages, including ours, for he speaks with apostolic authority to the people of God.

When Paul addresses “the saints” in the church at Corinth and elsewhere, he is *not* speaking to those pious departed souls who have been beatified and canonized through a long, arduous process by the church hierarchy. Sainthood is not something achieved by a few of the spiritually elite and only years after their death. In the NT every true believer is a saint, someone “set apart” by God to experience His saving grace through Christ. He or she may not always act very saintly, but sainthood isn’t just about behavior; it’s about one’s position in Christ. If you know anything about the book of 1 Corinthians, you know that the members there were anything but a paragon of virtue, yet Paul calls them saints.

**How does he greet them?** In verse 2 we find the salutation of the Epistle: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Salutations should not be overanalyzed, but they do tell us something. I remember when I was a young teen I attended Bible Camp in the Ozarks, and every year I would fall in love with a new girlfriend. Unfortunately she always seemed to live in Decatur or Cairo or some other place a hundred miles away, so the blazing courtships had to be carried on by mail. I remember the first thing I would look for when I would receive one of these perfumed epistles was the salutation. If it said, “Dear Mike,” I knew things were cool. If it said, “Dearest Mike,” I was ready to go back to camp. But if later on a letter came which just said, “Hi Mike,” I knew I was in trouble. The one I really dreaded was the one that read, “Dear John.”

Paul’s salutation to his friends in Corinth is, “Grace and Peace.” Those are the Greek and Hebrew words for “Hello.” *Charis* and *shalom*, “Hello and Hello.” But he is really saying more than that, for to Paul these words had profound spiritual meaning. Grace is the unmerited goodness of God to those who have forfeited it and are by nature under a sentence of condemnation. Peace describes the rest, safety and harmony which results when a man’s life is right with God. The fact that he almost always mentions grace before peace indicates that God’s grace is necessary before God’s peace can be experienced. And because the supply of God’s grace is inexhaustible, peace with God and with one another in the church is possible.

**What kind of place was Corinth?** Corinth was one of the great cities of ancient Greece

in Paul's day. If Athens was the intellectual and cultural capital of the ancient world, it's neighboring city of Corinth, fifty miles to the west, was the commercial and sin capital. Corinth stood on a little neck of land between the Aegean Sea and the Adriatic Sea in southern Greece. Since the route around the islands to the south was very treacherous, almost all ships from the east or west stopped at one of Corinth's two ports and transported their goods overland, and sometimes even the ships themselves. Eventually an amazing canal was dug through five miles of solid rock, 500 feet deep in places, but it was not there in Paul's day.

Corinth was swarming with sailors far from home. They had no better reputation then than they have in major ports today, so it's not surprising Corinth was known as a city of vice and corruption. In fact, the term "to Corinthianize" came to be synonymous with "go to the Devil." Religiously Corinth was a hodgepodge, with pagan temples dotting the landscape. But all this didn't discourage Paul; rather it caused him to see Corinth as a city with a great need for the Gospel.

But perhaps the most important thing for us to learn about Corinth is the attitudes and world view that were common there, for these form the backdrop for most of the issues Paul addresses. I read a book on my study month entitled *Power Through Weakness* by Timothy Savage, the long-time pastor of Camelback Bible Church in Phoenix. Tim got a Ph.D. from Cambridge University and the University Press published his dissertation. The whole book is full of amazing research about the culture of Corinth, how the church members had adopted that culture, and how the Apostle Paul stood up against it, going against the grain. Perhaps the best way for me to present some of his conclusions is to read a couple of paragraphs from Tim's book. I think this will be very helpful, so please follow with me:

*To sum up, first-century Corinth differed greatly from other Mediterranean cities. Little in the city was more than a century old: traditions were few, the aristocracy fluid, the society open. This suited the populace, mostly ambitious people of ultimately servile descent [former slaves] eager to win respectability and power. In their hands the economy exploded ... . Corinth had become the envy of the Empire—a city of pleasure, a tribute to human-made splendor, a place where assertiveness and pride reaped great reward... It was a city "inferior in celebrity to no region of the earth" (Pliny HN 4.9).*

*How did first-century Corinthians appraise fellow-humans and religion? ... Since the Corinthians were largely [former slaves] they possessed, on the whole, greater thrust and vigor than people living where freedmen were less dominant. Consequently, they placed a higher premium on social prominence and self-display, on personal power and boasting. Likewise, they were more inclined to honor success and reward primacy and more prone to ridicule the poor and humble. When Corinthians evaluated each other they looked for the same symbols of worth which they prized for themselves—wealth, assertive speech, abusive behavior, a head carried high—anything which might elevate them above their neighbors.*

*The same values influenced their perspective of religion. It mattered little who the gods were or what the cults taught. What was important was whether one's needs were being met—whether everyday desires for health, wealth and safety and, more importantly, power and esteem were being fulfilled. In Corinth, perhaps more than elsewhere, people*

*looked to the cults for satisfaction, and satisfaction as they defined it—personal exaltation and glory. They wanted religion to confirm and satisfy their yearnings, not challenge and transform them.*<sup>ii</sup>

I'm going to continually come back to these issues—boasting, pride, prosperity, health-wealth, self-promotion, arrogance, competition, sophistication, power—because the church at Corinth had bought into the culture in these areas, and these are the issues that created major conflict between them and Paul. But there's another reason for focusing on these issues—these are clearly characteristics of our own culture. I wonder whether Paul with his attitudes and viewpoint would be any more welcome in our churches than he was in Corinth.

**Why did the Apostle Paul write this letter?** Our book known as 2 Corinthians is probably actually the fourth letter Paul wrote to the church there, the first and third having not survived. It might be helpful for us to go back to the founding of the church, as recorded in Acts 18, and briefly trace the history of the relationship between Paul and this church. Paul planted the church while on his second missionary journey. He stayed there 18 months, an eternity for a traveling evangelist. He had just come from Athens, where he experienced a rather disappointing reception to the Gospel message. The philosophers who debated him on Mars Hill, just below the Acropolis, ridiculed his witness to the resurrection of the dead, though a few believed and became disciples.

In Corinth he found a more fertile field in which to plant the church. Paul's philosophy of ministry was always one of identification with the community, so he found a couple of the same trade as himself, tent makers, obtained room and board in their home, and used his Sabbath days to preach in the synagogue. Not only did that couple, whose names were Aquila and Priscilla, come to faith in Christ, but so did the president of the synagogue. That raised the ire of the other Jews significantly, and they took the opportunity provided by the arrival of a new Roman governor to take Paul to court. But their complaint was dismissed as without merit, and Paul was able to continue his ministry in the city. The next president of the synagogue, interestingly, also converted to faith in Christ, and by the time Paul moved on, there was a viable church established in Corinth.

After Paul left, however, spiritual termites got into the church and began to undermine the foundation he had laid. Disunity developed, believers were filing lawsuits against one another, people were getting drunk on communion wine, some were going haywire with the charismatic gifts, and doctrinal confusion over the resurrection was rampant. In fact, things had deteriorated so much, that a man who was openly engaged in an incestuous relationship was being tolerated as a member. Deeply disturbed, Paul sent the church a letter of rebuke, a letter which has not been preserved for us but is mentioned in 1 Cor. 5:9: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people." The church leaders responded with a letter of their own to Paul while he was ministering across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus (Turkey), and the letter we know as First Corinthians was Paul's answer to theirs.

While First Corinthians apparently resolved a number of the issues in the church, a new and

potentially more dangerous threat soon raised its ugly head. It came in the form of new leaders who drew the congregation away from their personal loyalty to Paul and to the truth he so faithfully proclaimed. When Paul heard about this threat, he left Ephesus and made an emergency visit to Corinth, referred to in 2 Cor. 2:1 as a “painful visit.” Things did not go well, for it seems that some of the leaders defied Paul to his face and the congregation refused to stand up for him. He returned to Ephesus and wrote another letter, his third (also not preserved for us), to which he refers in 2 Cor. 2:4: “I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears.”

Leaving Ephesus Paul went north to Troas and eventually back across the Aegean to Macedonia (northern Greece), where he received the news from Titus that the Corinthians, at least in part, had repented and reaffirmed their loyalty to Paul (see 7:6, 7). This news obviously encouraged Paul, but he was also discerning enough to know that the church was not yet out of danger, and so he wrote 2 Corinthians, actually his fourth letter to them that we know of, to announce his intention of making a third visit to Corinth (12:14: “Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you.”). In this letter he vigorously defends his apostleship and his pastoral care for the congregation against the attacks of his detractors. At the same time he provides profound insight for all of us as to how to go against the grain instead of just adopting the culture around us.

Now with that as introductory information from the salutation of the letter, I want us to spend the remainder of our time this morning asking the question:

**Why should we study 2 Corinthians?** What should we expect to learn? What does God want to do for us over these next six months?

**1. It is a letter for Christians who are willing to be counter-cultural.** I have already noted that we live in a day and time when the church has largely bought into the culture. Survey after survey demonstrates that born-again Christians are hardly distinguishable from the rest of society when it comes to world views, attitudes, life-style standards, behavior, divorce, materialism, etc. (See [GeorgeBarna.com](http://GeorgeBarna.com)).

Not only has the average person in the pew adopted the culture; that is also true of their leaders, including well-known pastors. Health/wealth theology is rampant—sometimes lightly disguised but often blatant in its appeal to our society’s materialistic instincts. The seeker church movement is urging us to remove all the barriers to the unchurched. (1) Since unchurched Harry never sees pews anywhere else in the culture outside the church, therefore the church should get rid of pews in favor of theater seats, which pagans are used to. (2) Since unchurched Mary never hears sacred music with choirs and organs, we should get rid of those as well and use the musical mediums of the culture—pop music, jazz, or even rock. (3) Since the average worker never sees anyone in authority wearing a robe, and perhaps rarely even a suit, so preachers should shed these symbols of authority and dress in dockers, polo shirts, and sandals.

But it’s not just in respect to atmosphere that the modern church is adopting the culture. The

same is true in respect to the message. Two years ago I went to a three-hour seminar at our own Free Church national conference and heard something I never thought I would hear at one of *our* conferences—a cynical critique of expository preaching. The speaker, one of our young mega-church pastors, advocated short topical sermons on the felt needs of the congregation, with lots of humor, stories, illustrations and application. Since the attention span of our modern audience today is short and geared toward fast-moving visual images, he advocated the use of Hollywood video clips to introduce or drive home ideas. Preaching through books of the Bible, he maintained, was boring and irrelevant to the average congregational member. Sadly, his viewpoint is widespread and growing.

Now let me say that this question of how the church is to engage the culture is not a simple, cut-and-dried issue. There are some legitimate questions here that we need to examine and wrestle with. Several key passages in the NT encourage us to be sensitive to the culture in which we live so that we might communicate the Gospel more effectively. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:19ff Paul says,

*“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews... . To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law... . I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the Gospel... .” )*

I think Paul is suggesting here that we must not allow our own personal customs and traditions to prevent the Gospel from being accessible to our audience. This happened a lot in missions fifty years ago, as missionaries would sometimes expect natives of third-world countries to adopt American customs, dress, and even musical styles in order to be deemed legitimate followers of Jesus. The fact is Africans don’t have to be Americanized in order to be Christianized, any more than ancient Gentiles had to become Jewish in order to become Christians (that was the big issue decided at the first Jerusalem Council in Acts 15).

But we can make this same mistake in our efforts to reach Gen-X or Gen-Y young people. We can unintentionally send the message, “Unless you adopt our baby boomer or even builder customs and dress and musical styles, you’re not welcome here.” You know something? Every culture has good and bad in it, including the one we grew up in and identify with, and we desperately need to be discerning about what we should reject and what we can accept as we seek to share the timeless message of Christ with a lost and dying world.

I do not think the Amish way of life, which is definitely antagonistic to culture, is an effective barrier against the encroachments of sin. But total adaptation to the culture is not healthy either. On the one hand people shouldn’t feel like they’ve entered a time warp when they go to church. On the other hand, the experience should be distinguishable from a rock concert or a therapy session with Dr. Phil.<sup>iii</sup>

And how does the book of 2 Corinthians speak to this issue? Well, as we work our way through

this book, we are going to discover that the Apostle Paul, the founder of the church, has been marginalized by the leaders who succeeded him. They have attacked him for his appearance (he was not impressive in appearance—in fact, perhaps downright ugly—and he probably didn't have the slick, wavy hair of a typical evangelist), for his poor communication skills (he didn't scratch their itching ears with slick oratory that rolled off his tongue; in fact, he was known to put his listeners to sleep [one fell out of a window during a long sermon and had to be resuscitated]), for his lack of credentials (he didn't have a doctorate from the right seminary, nor did he have reference letters from all the muckety-mucks on the covers of his latest books), for the fact that he didn't charge for his services (implying that they weren't worth much), and even for his suffering (implying that he must have deserved it or God wouldn't have allowed it, the old health/wealth lie).

In defending himself Paul argues strongly against a culture that saw wealth and power and influence and oratory and good looks as the evidence of godly success. Instead, he chooses humility and weakness and suffering and integrity as the true signs of successful ministry.

**2. It is a letter for Christians who want to reach a lost generation with the truth of the Gospel.** In much of the western world the church has been either static or in retreat for many decades. I read recently that in spite of the explosion of mega-churches in the United States, there is not a single county where there the born-again population is larger today than ten years ago—not even the counties where the largest mega-churches reside. The church is losing the fight for our nation's soul.

In this letter of 2 Corinthians Paul reminds us that the key to reaching a lost world is not found in methods or techniques, however valuable these might be in their proper place, but with godly motivation and truth. If we were more like Paul, our perceptions would be increasingly shaped by two factors found in chapter five: the fear of the Lord (5:11) and the love of Christ (5:14): “Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men... . For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all.”

**3. It is a letter for Christians who care about holiness.** The Apostle Paul was not merely an outstanding evangelist, a superb missionary, and a theologian without peer; he was also a man of great godliness and holiness. He cared passionately about the inner life. The unique contribution of 2 Corinthians is that he responded to the challenges that faced him in Corinth by baring his soul and becoming vulnerable to his readers.

What made Paul tick? What were the motives and attitudes that molded his life of service for Christ? This letter provides us with a compelling portrait of Paul as he really was, with all his intense, passionate longing for the glory of Christ, his sacrificial love for others, and his phenomenal discipline and courage in the face of the most severe persecution and suffering.<sup>iv</sup>

**4. It is a letter for Christians who care about spiritual leadership.** This to me may be the most important contribution of all made by 2 Corinthians. In their pathetic, anemic condition many evangelical churches are looking for solutions in all the wrong places. They are looking for

dynamic young leaders, gifted communicators, visionary entrepreneurs, men with charisma, management ability, marketing savvy, and motivational skills. What 2 Corinthians tells us is that the church needs shepherds, men and women who are humble, who know how to handle suffering, who know how to love God's people, who have confidence in the Word of God, who are patient yet strong, courageous yet gentle.

In conclusion, let me say that God cares about the church. He has taken great care in establishing it, and Jesus said that the gates of Hell will not be able to prevail against it. Friends, it is not an exaggeration to say that the local church is the hope of the world—not as we see it currently functioning but as God intended for it to function. May all of us be willing to go against the grain when integrity and the cause of the Gospel requires it.

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i. It is possible to be a member of the universal church but not a member of a local church. We have families in our church who have attended faithfully for many years, some for a dozen or more, who give, and serve, and pray for the Body, but they have never joined. I don't know why; perhaps something happened in the past that made them jittery about joining. I don't think that's particularly healthy, but I am certain they are members of the universal church though not of a local church.

On the other hand, it is possible to be a member of a local church but *not* of the universal church. This is a much more common and a much more serious matter. Many of you were church members before you became believers. I have even known pastors who served in churches for a number of years before coming to personal faith in Christ. In fact, our denomination, the Evangelical Free Church, had its origin when a Lutheran pastor had the courage on Easter Sunday, 1817, to stand before his congregation in Geneva, Switzerland and tell them that he had just been born again by faith in Christ. He was promptly defrocked by the bishop for heresy; after all, he had been baptized as an infant—that automatically made him a Christian according to Lutheran doctrine. In order to continue in ministry he had to start a Free Church, that is, one free from the control of the church hierarchy (or the state). That's where we came from.

ii. Timothy Savage, *Power Through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*, 52, 53.

iii. When I see what is happening in some of the largest churches in our country I am deeply disturbed by the extent to which cultural adaptation and cultural adoption is taking place. There are notable exceptions in the mega-churches pastored by men like John MacArthur, David Jeremiah, and John Piper, but there are many pastors and churches that have completely caved to the culture. I mentioned Joel Osteen several months ago, who pastors the largest church in the country—Lakewood Church in Houston. I challenge you to listen to a whole service of his (you can't avoid him because he's on TV constantly) and ask yourself, "How does this service differ from an Amway Convention? Am I hearing anything that goes against the grain of our materialistic, narcissistic, culture? Anything that challenges sin in my life? Anything that helps me understand the Bible better?"

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iv. Some of this wording is borrowed from J. Phillip Arthur, *Strength in Weakness: 2 Corinthians Simply Explained*, 15.