

The Lost Letters: Have They Been Found?

Paul wrote at least four letters to the Corinthians, but we have only two in our Bibles. Many Christians have longed to discover copies of the missing letters, the ones identified as Letter 1 and Letter 3 in box 15.1.

Today, many scholars believe that those letters have been found and that they were right under our noses all along. A prominent theory holds that the letter known as 2 Corinthians is actually a patchwork epistle containing not only the work identified as Letter 4 in box 15.1 but also other letters:

- Second Corinthians 6:14–7:1 may be an excerpt from Letter 1. In its present context, this passage forms an odd interruption in Paul's train of thought; it also deals with the general topic that Paul says he addressed in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9).
- Second Corinthians 10–13 may be from Letter 3. These four chapters are laced with harsh rebukes and bitter sarcasm that seem out of place in what is otherwise a letter of reconciliation and renewed confidence; they are more characteristic of what we would expect to find in the difficult letter that Paul says he was sorry he had to write (2 Cor. 7:8).

There is no solid evidence to support these proposals; they just make sense to some people who think that 2 Corinthians reads more consistently and smoothly when these sections are taken out and read as separate compositions.

There have been variations and expansions on these proposals: some suggest that 2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 is part of a totally different letter that wasn't even written by Paul; some think that 2 Corinthians 10–13 is from a fifth letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians after things turned bad again.

The "patchwork epistle" theory has also been employed with regard to 2 Corinthians 8–9, which deals with the collection that Paul is taking for Jerusalem. These often are regarded as a separate fundraising letter that Paul may have written to the church on that subject, or even as two letters on the subject (chap. 8 addressed to Corinth, and chap. 9 presenting a general appeal to the province of Achaia).