2 COR. 6:14-7:1 AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF 2 CORINTHIANS

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The short paragraph 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1 has long posed a problem, in that it seems difficult to see the drift of thinking which would fit it into its context. Paul has been pleading for his converts' affection in 6:11-13, and he returns to this theme at 7:2; but the intervening verses are a stiff warning to them not to consort with ἀπιστοὶ, unbelievers, as it is usually rendered. The passage not only reads like a foreign body, but also recalls 1 Cor. 5, where Paul had written the "former" letter and had apparently said something similar. Hence there has arisen a widespread suspicion that the verses are an intrusion into the present context; or more radically, that they are not by Paul at all, or are a piece from Qumran, etc.

The lack of a clear thread of thought is the most serious problem we face. A second one is the apparent contradiction with 1 Cor. 5; for there Paul denies telling the church to shun the world of unbelievers, while here he seems to require it. The easy follow-on of 7:2 from 6:13 is not an important point, for Paul often recapitulates after a digression. I am proposing to defend the integrity of the present form of the text by a double argument therefore. First I will suggest that 2 Cor. 5-7 show a sequence of thought which is found twice elsewhere in the Corinthian letters; and second, I will argue that ἀπιστοὶ in 2 Cor. means not unbelievers but faithless Christians.

1 For a recent discussion and bibliography see Victor P. Furnish, II Corinthians (Anchor Bible 32A, New York 1984), 359-383.
3 There is a good critique of radical solutions by Gordon D. Fee, "II Corinthians VI.14-VII.1 and Food Offered to Idols", NTS 23 (1977), 140-161; his own solution is less convincing, v.i.
It is in the nature of human thought to follow established patterns. The succession of ideas which we have had before tends to repetition under similar stimulation; and humility forces us to confess that this is increasingly the case in middle age. St Paul was no exception, and this fact may help us to settle the longstanding puzzle in 2 Corinthians.

The sequence of thought in 1 Cor. 4-6 is not difficult. Paul has been under criticism (ἀποκρίθη, 4:3) as not being a full apostle, and he responds (A) by asking to be considered as a steward of the mysteries of God (4:1-5). This leads him (B) to contrast his readers’ claims to be filled, reigning, etc., with the deprivations and persecutions of his apostolic life (4:6-13). This move is necessary because other missionaries lived in style at church expense, and Paul cut a shabby figure by contrast in the eyes of some of the Corinthians. He has to show that such “weaknesses” are in fact an apostle’s glory, and the true badge of his apostleship. This in turn leads on to (C), the assertion of his authority, like a father over his children (4:14-21). This move is also in part necessary; it is the corollary of his being considered a steward of the mysteries of God. It was optional how the authority was asserted, and not every apostle would have used the father-child image; but such gentle, family images come naturally to Paul (Gal. 4:19, Eph. 5:1, 1 Thess. 2:11, cf. 2:7), and he does not really mean it about the cane (4:21).

Why does Paul want to assert his authority? Because people are not behaving properly, and he needs to stop it. Hence the reproofs over the sexual and law-suit scandals in chh. 5-6. He knows it would be ineffective to tell the sinners to improve, so he uses two forms of community pressure. (D) He stresses the corrupting effect of tolerating such behaviour. It is like leaven which needs to be cleansed out or it will infect the whole lump (5:6f). By contrast the Church was to be a holy body, in the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth (5:7); thought fit to judge the world, and even angels (6:2f). Our body is a temple of the holy spirit: will we take the members of Christ and make them members of a whore? (6:15-20). But the only method by which such pressure can be made effective is shunning. Hence (E) the requirement to keep away from those who break discipline. This may take the advanced form of handing the sinner over to Satan in (semi)permanent excommunication (5:3ff); or the temporary practice of “taking the evil out from your midst” (5:9-13, citing Deut. 17:7), that is, not consorting with them or eating with them.