

XVII. The Best Defense Is a Good Offense

May 12/13/14, 2015

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

Aim: To recognize that true gospel ministers demonstrate the credentials, character, and concerns that mark them as true shepherds of Christ's sheep.

Here Paul begins his final run at authenticating his apostleship. His heart's desire is that his enemies will accede to his authority before he makes his planned third visit to the church—for his sake and, most of all, for theirs.

A. Apostolic Credentials (2 Corinthians 12:11-12)

1. A Foolish Apostle (12:11)

¹¹I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing.

As we have observed, boasting was not Paul's thing. He despised it. However, for the sake of the Corinthian church he had briefly boasted in his Hebrew pedigree and then shyly boasted in his rapture to paradise. Nevertheless, though this boasting is true and proper, his discomfort with boasting reasserts itself: 'I have been a fool!' And with this self-deprecation, he refocuses in his attempt to get his enemies in Corinth to recognize his authenticity.

Though he reluctantly defended himself to the Corinthians, Paul found doing so distasteful, repeatedly describing it as 'foolish' (11:1, 16, 17, 21, 12:6). But instead of having to defend himself Paul should 'have been commended by' the Corinthians. There was no excuse for their confusion. They should have risen to his defense; after all, he was their spiritual father. What made their failure to defend him all the more inexcusable was that the Corinthians knew that the allegations against Paul were false.

Paul's rebuke is sharply ironic because earlier in the letter he had written affectionately (3:2). The Corinthians were his letter of commendation. The changed lives of the Corinthians had demonstrated beyond question that Paul's ministry was genuine. Thus, their failure to defend Paul was an inexcusable sin of silence. Rather they, as his letter of commendation, should have been commending and defending him.

Verse 11 lends some support to the idea that Paul was being asked for credentials by critics at Corinth. He says they had driven him to talk about himself, and it is most natural to assume therefore that he wrote as he did in response to some pressure from them. His further statement that he should have been commended by them is also illuminating. To whom was he to be commended? Presumably to those denying his claim to be an apostle. This then suggests the false apostles were behind this pressure from the Corinthian Christians to write about himself. He clearly found it difficult to believe the Corinthian believers, who should have been supporting him, were actually requiring something like this from him.

Once again Paul denies any inferiority to the 'super-apostles,' who appear to have claimed superiority over Paul by virtue of visions and revelations. The Corinthian church should have come to Paul's defense because he and his ministry were superior. Paul's 'I am nothing' implies derisively that the self-promoting super-apostles were themselves less than nothing.

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The truth is that Paul was ‘in no respect ... inferior to the most eminent apostles.’ The phrase ‘the most eminent apostles’ (or ‘super-apostles’) is a sarcastic reference to the false apostles. Most likely, that was how they billed themselves. In reality, even though Paul’s characteristic humility caused him to describe himself as a ‘nobody’ (cp. 4:7; 1 Cor. 15:9), he was superior to them, since he alone was a true apostle. Though he was humble and reluctant to boast, the Corinthians’ naïve acceptance of the false apostles’ claims left Paul no choice. Beginning in chapter 10, he directly confronted the false apostles, concluding that confrontation in 11:22ff. with a presentation of his apostolic credentials. In verse 12, Paul presented irrefutable proof that he was a genuine apostle that, in a broader sense, also establishes the uniqueness of the apostles. He showed that apostles possessed unique qualifications and powers.

2. A True Apostle (12:12)

¹²*The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works.*

a) Signs Performed

In fact, Paul alone displayed the insignia of a true apostle. ‘Signs and wonders’ is an Old Testament expression, often used in reference to what God did in the exodus in bringing about the deliverance and salvation of His people. ‘Mighty works’ is used in the New Testament for miracles. These three things together, ‘signs and wonders and mighty works,’ as used by Paul refer to the great spiritual exodus brought about by the death and resurrection of Jesus and made effectual by Paul’s preaching of the gospel. ‘Signs’ authenticated the message, ‘wonders’ evoked awe, and ‘mighty works’ manifested divine power. Paul did all of these as he preached Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead—the new covenant’s exodus from sin.

In verse 12, Paul makes his final reference to his apostolic qualifications. It is interesting that his reference to signs, wonders, and miracles comes right at the end of his argument. These three words probably refer to the same phenomena, but from different points of view. A ‘sign’ is a miracle considered from the standpoint of its significance, the way it points to something or someone beyond itself. John’s Gospel is largely a gospel of signs (John 20:30-31). Then Paul writes of ‘wonders.’ These are miracles viewed in terms of the impression they make on the observer – he is awestruck by them, they amaze him. Here our chief witness is the Acts of the Apostles, where there are numerous references to the amazement of the crowds at what God was doing through the gospel and at the miracles that accompanied its preaching (e.g., Acts 2:2; 3:10; 13:11-12). Finally, there is ‘miracles,’ simply meaning ‘powers.’ This is a more general word than the other two and can refer to any manifestation of power, whether supernatural or natural, God’s dynamic exhibited in some special way.

These three words do not describe three types of miracles but miracles in general considered from three different aspects—their ability to authenticate the message (‘signs’), evoke awe (‘wonders’), and display divine power (‘mighty deeds’). The supernatural miracles done by the apostles were signs pointing to them as genuine messengers of God. They were wonders that created amazement and astonishment, drawing the onlookers’ attention to the message the apostles proclaimed.

That miracles are not normative for all periods of church history should be obvious from Paul’s designation of them as the signs of an apostle. If they were commonplace, they could hardly

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have distinguished the apostles from ordinary believers. It was their rarity, as well as their unusual extent, that made them definitive signs of the apostles.

b) Patience Displayed

Of equal apostolic significance is that Paul performed these apostolic signs ‘with utmost patience’ (or literally, ‘with all perseverance or endurance’) amidst incessant beatings and shipwrecks and dangers and pastoral afflictions. It was not just the signs that proved his apostleship; it was that he did them under great stress with magnificent patience and perseverance. Astonishing apostolic fortitude!

There was a moral quality associated with these miracles, perseverance or patient endurance. The miracles were not the easy solution to every problem, like a kind of *deus ex machina* for extricating Paul from difficulties, any more than Christ used His miraculous powers in Gethsemane’s garden to avoid arrest. ‘Perseverance’ implies the presence of difficulties which need to be overcome.

Unlike the false apostles who sought wealth, fame, and power, Paul’s goal was to be faithful to the Lord. Because he was determined to be loyal to God’s will no matter what the cost, he performed the signs of an apostle ‘with all perseverance.’ Despite all the hostility, opposition, and persecution from the world he faced, Paul remained faithful. *Hupomonē* (‘perseverance’) literally means, ‘to remain under.’ Paul endured the pressure of worldly opposition throughout his ministry without abandoning his position.

That such signs were said to be ‘done among you’ means that it was God who performed them (cp. Rom. 15:16). (It is interesting that that Acts makes no reference to miracles by Paul in Corinth, an indication perhaps of the selective character of Luke’s account). His words ‘with great perseverance’ suggest Paul’s circumspection in the performance of these signs as opposed to a possibly more spectacular approach adopted by his opponents.

c) Apostolic Marks

The apostles had a one-of-a-kind, non-repeatable, and non-transferrable role in the history of the church. ‘Apostle’ translates the Greek word *apostolos* (from the verb *apostellō*; ‘to send’), which appears eighty times in the New Testament. The term, which means ‘messenger,’ ‘delegate,’ or ‘ambassador,’ is primarily used in the New Testament to designate fourteen men—The Twelve (Mt. 10:2), Matthias (Acts 1:26), and Paul (1 Cor. 9:1).

The Acts of the Apostles describes some of these signs, wonders, and mighty works. Such signs provided the visible evidence to those who doubted Paul’s claims of God’s unique calling of him to be apostle to the Gentiles. The phrase ‘the things that mark an apostle, then is not a pointer to numerous ‘apostles,’ loosely defined, who performed miracles. On the contrary, it is a reference to Paul’s distinctive and unique calling as an apostle, of which these signs are visible proof.

The word ‘sign’ (*semeion*) actually occurs twice in the verse, for ‘the things that mark an apostle’ means literally ‘the signs of an apostle.’ Paul is therefore suggesting that God validated the ministry of the apostles through miracles, and that these miracles pointed beyond themselves. They were, in other words, evidence, evidence that God was at work in association with the gospel.

It is vital to distinguish between ‘the things that mark an apostle,’ and spiritual gifts in the churches, which are not limited to the apostles. While we may expect various manifestations of

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‘extraordinary’ as well as ‘ordinary’ spiritual gifts within the churches, we must insist that apostolic signs and wonders no longer occur, simply because the apostolic age is long past. The very phrase ‘the things that mark an apostle’ clearly implies that only apostles performed them.

B. Apostolic Character (2 Corinthians 12:13-18)

1. Paternal (12:13-15)

a) Irony (12:13)

¹³For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul was not finished with his irony. In fact, he turns it up as he transitions to another proof of his authenticity—namely, his sacrifice for the Corinthians. The reproachful tone breathes frustration and hurt—‘Forgive me for working to support myself so that I would not be a financial burden to you. Forgive me for attempting to do good to you. Forgive my selfless sacrifice.’ Paul’s emotions were on the surface. He felt deeply.

Verse 13 suggests that another criticism had been made of him at Corinth, probably based on his failure to arrive as previously arranged (1:15-2:1). It was being said that he was putting other churches ahead of them by continuing to serve them instead of coming to Corinth as promised. Yet he had worked for them at Corinth without any charge, surely evidence of genuine concern for them. With irony, he asks forgiveness for not charging them for his services (cp. 117; 1 Cor. 9:12, 18)!

The only way the Corinthians were treated differently was that Paul ‘did not become a burden to’ them; the only thing they did not get from him was a bill. Although he had a right to their support (1 Cor. 9:1-18), Paul chose not to accept it, preferring to distance himself from the money-loving false apostles. They, of course, took everything they could get from the Corinthians (11:20) and hated Paul for making them look bad. To salvage their reputations, they attempted to put a negative spin on Paul’s selflessness. They alleged that Paul did not want the Corinthians’ money because he did not love them and thus did not want to be obligated to them. But as Paul has already shown, those allegations were completely false (11:7-9).

Resorting again to sarcasm to bring the Corinthians to their senses, Paul exclaimed, ‘Forgive me this wrong!’ The false apostles’ claim that he had mistreated the Corinthians by not taking money from them was ludicrous. The only thing they had not been deprived of was the burden of supporting Paul and his companions.

b) Tenderness (12:14-15)

¹⁴Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

But Paul’s tone was, as we know, the reproach of an aching heart, and the next lines switch from irony to tenderness. Paul’s lines ‘I seek not what is yours but you’ and ‘I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls’ are moving testaments of pastoral intent and set the standard for all true ministry.

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It was now something like six years since he had first come to Corinth with the gospel, and he had already paid them a second visit – one which was apparently unpleasant both for him and for them (1:23-2:1). Now he was about to come a third time, and one of the purposes of his letter will have been to prepare the way for this.

On Paul's first visit to Corinth he founded the church (Acts 18); his second was the painful disciplinary visit described in 2:1 (cp. 13:2). When he visited Corinth for the third time he would still refuse to be a burden to the church.

(1) 'Not What Is Yours But You' (12:14a)

Paul expresses his determination to hold on to his practice of not being a financial burden to the Corinthians. As we saw earlier, his practice of maintaining his financial independence where he felt it wise, was misunderstood or misinterpreted by some at Corinth. The different practice of the 'super-apostles' almost certainly prompted this criticism.

Paul says he will not be a burden to them. He is not coming to receive but to give. There could be here a passing allusion to the outlook of the false apostles, who were more likely to have been receivers, not givers. He did not want the possessions of the Corinthians, but he did want the Corinthians themselves. This suggests an eagerness for fellowship with those it had been his privilege to lead to Christ.

The apostle's 'I seek not what is yours but you' was said with a disapproving glance at his opponents, who lived off the Corinthians (cp. 11:20). Far from their money, Paul wanted the whole of the Corinthians (their souls), so he could present them to Christ as a bride (cp. 11:2).

Paul wanted it to be plain that it was not the material possessions of the Corinthians that he was interested in, but their spiritual well-being.

(2) 'Parents for Their Children' (12:14b)

Paul illustrated his point using the analogy of parents caring for their children, pointing out the axiomatic truth that 'children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.' The Corinthians were, of course, Paul's spiritual children (1 Cor. 4:15), and he willingly sacrificed himself for them.

Paul saw his relationship to the Corinthian church as a fatherly one, and as we see also in 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12, this seems to have been the way he viewed all the churches God used him to establish. He had 'begotten' them (1 Cor. 4:14-17), through the gospel he was commissioned to preach. He saw the role of the parent as that of a giver and the child as a receiver.

As he was the Corinthians' spiritual father, selfless, other-directed sacrifice drove Paul's labors. He wanted nothing but them—their souls—for Christ. This is the hallmark of all true ministry at every level.

Paul was the spiritual father of many of them. He reminds them of a human principle that has spiritual relevance and application: 'children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.' Parents should be prepared to make sacrifices for their children rather than the other way round.

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(3) ‘Spend and Be Spent’ (12:15a)

Verse 15 shows he still intends to work among them freely, presumably through the support of other churches. His self-giving would go beyond finance. Holding to this principle of spiritual application, Paul determined to spend everything he had, if necessary, for the Corinthians, as well as giving himself and all his energies to them. With such determination, he followed in his Master’s footsteps.

Paul’s selfless sacrifice is restated and intensified by his parallel great statement, ‘I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.’ Again, this is exactly what Christ did as described by Paul in 8:9. The apostle’s spending of himself replicated the suffering of Christ who gave Himself for His people. True ministry selflessly seeks the spiritual welfare of others, gladly spending and being spent. This is what is most needed if authentic ministry is to take place—joyously seeking the best for others and gladly spending self. This is Christlike, apostolic, true ministry.

The superlative form of the adjective *hēdeō* (‘most gladly’) expresses extreme elation. Paul was not reluctant or hesitant to sacrifice for the Corinthians; he was thrilled, or overjoyed, at being able ‘to spend and be expended for’ them. ‘Spend’ translates a form of the verb *dapanaō*, which means ‘to spend freely’ (cp. Mk. 5:26; Lk. 15:14). *Exdapanaō* (‘be expended’) appears only here in the New Testament. It is a strengthened form of *dapanaō* and means, ‘to be completely spent.’ Paul was willing to sacrifice himself for his people until he had nothing left to give.

Paul willingly spent everything for the Corinthians—all his material resources and all his energies. The price he paid was impoverishment, poor health, premature old age, and, as we know, a martyr’s death.

(4) ‘How Can You Love Me Less?’ (12:15b)

Parents may not expect much in the way of presents or gifts from their young children, but they do anticipate that love given will find a response in love returned. Paul finds it difficult to understand why his own self-giving expression of love has not been reciprocated by all the members of the church. If he comes again and gives himself to them still more, will they reciprocate?

Sadly, the Corinthians responded inversely to Paul’s self-sacrificial love for them, prompting the apostle’s pathetic heart cry, ‘If I love you more, am I to be loved less?’ The relationship was going backwards; the more affection he gave them, the less they returned (cp. 6:11-13). Paul had poured his life into the Corinthian church, joyously laboring and sacrificing for them. All he asked for in return was their love—and they were unwilling to give it.

Sadly, as a result of the insinuations of Paul’s detractors, his endeavors to do the right and best thing for the Corinthians only inclined them to love him less. Paul’s pain is incredulous: ‘My love for you exceeds that of parents for their children, so how can you love me less than a parent?’

2. Trustworthy (12:16-18)

a) *The Charge (12:16)*

¹⁶*But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.*

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Verse 16 puts it virtually beyond doubt that Paul had been the object of calumny at Corinth and that there had been charges of financial underhandedness. Perhaps some were saying the collection of money for the poor Christians in Jerusalem would never get to its intended recipients but would go straight into his pocket, and that Titus and another Christian brother had been sent by Paul to Corinth so that this financial chicanery of his could be covert rather than overt.

His enemies in the church had to concede that he had not burdened them by asking for support, but they argued, rather, that his self-support was a deceptive ploy. Some actually believed that Paul was a con man. They reasoned that his working with his hands and refusing support was done to make them believe he was a man of integrity, with the result that when he asked them to give to the poor in Jerusalem they gave generously, and from their abundance Paul lined his own pockets. Paul's refusal of Corinthian support was nothing more than a clever psychological ploy to extort more money, they charged. Clearly, this was a case of projection if there ever was one! Paul's enemies imputed to him the very things they did when they had the chance.

If Paul was plotting to defraud the Corinthians, as the false apostles charged, the point of his plot was not immediately obvious. As noted in the previous point, he took nothing from them. The idea that he would run a scam that netted him nothing was absurd, and Paul rebuked the Corinthians once again for their naiveté, writing sarcastically, 'Nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.' That was, no doubt, what the false apostles were saying about him. *Panourgos* ('crafty fellow') used only here in the New Testament, literally means 'ready to do anything.' It has the negative connotation of 'unscrupulous,' 'tricky,' or 'deceptive.' *Dolos* ('deceit') refers literally to bait used to catch fish. Paul, so the false teachers claimed, was willing to do anything to hook the Corinthians with his devious scheme.

To get around the glaringly obvious difficulty that Paul had not taken any money from the Corinthians, the false apostles insisted that he had not yet sprung his trap. Paul had already described in detail the collection he was taking for the poor saints at Jerusalem (chapters 8-9). That, according to the false apostles, was the point of Paul's scheme; the money that was collected at Corinth would never reach Jerusalem. Instead, they claimed, it would go to line Paul's pockets. After all, that is what they would have done if they were in his place. The false apostles projected their own greedy attitude onto Paul and assumed that he was acting as they would have.

b) The Counter (12:17-18)

¹⁷Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

Some members of the church may have used Paul's refusal to demand financial support to suggest he was engaged in subtle trickery. He answers this possible suggestion by drawing attention to the integrity of those he sent to Corinth to administer the gifts for the poor saints at Jerusalem. Titus and the brother who accompanied him were in complete harmony with Paul's motives and actions.

The visits made by Titus, this other brother, and Paul himself had given no cause whatever for such allegations. Everything they had done was completely above board and without financial strings attached. It is easy sometimes to forget what has actually happened in a particular

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situation, especially if we have been fed an alternative version by others. Paul is asking them to use their memories and retrace the course of events. We see from these verses that Paul had confidence that his financial integrity would be completely vindicated if only the Corinthians would think things through.

To refute the false teachers' outrageous accusation, Paul reminded the Corinthians that he was not acting alone in taking the collection. Not only had he not personally defrauded the Corinthians, but he also had not taken advantage of them through any of those whom he had sent to Corinth. By impugning Paul's motives, the false apostles were also impugning those of his ministry partners who were also involved in the collection. If Paul had, as the false apostles insisted, planned to embezzle the collection, he could not have acted alone. There would have had to have been collusion between him and his ministry partners. That, of course, made the allegations even more far-fetched. Titus, whom the Corinthians knew well (8:23), was also involved in the collection (8:6, 16). In addition, two unnamed brothers in Christ (8:18-19, 22) had assisted him. The idea that three such highly respected individuals would join Paul in a plot to defraud the Corinthians was completely absurd. But if they were not involved in any such plot, how could Paul have been? They had all acted with the same integrity and honesty toward the Corinthians, and they knew it.

So Paul here exposes the hollowness of their accusations with some pointed questions. The absurdity of his enemies' accusations was embarrassingly clear to all. Titus' integrity, plus the great care with which Paul had earlier arranged to send Titus and a respected 'brother' to Corinth to gather the offering for transport to Jerusalem, proved the emptiness of the charges.

C. Apostolic Concerns (2 Corinthians 12:19-21)

The logic of Paul's intensely emotional argument so far has been that his ministry is authenticated, first, by his performance of the apostolic signs and, second, by his sacrifices. Now he adds that his fears are authenticating.

1. Upbuilding the Corinthians (12:19)

¹⁹Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved.

The question which opens verse 19 seems strange, for it certainly seems Paul has been engaging in a lengthy self-defense, its purpose to get the Corinthians to think better of him. His comment here is probably due to concern that the Corinthians might misunderstand why he has written thus. He had been motivated by concern for their spiritual well-being, and the first person plural shows that Timothy, named with him at the start of the epistle (1:1), was fully with him in this. The motive was not self-vindication but their own upbuilding in Christ. He had to establish with them the authenticity of his ministry, for otherwise he could not continue to exercise it among them. This would certainly have been detrimental to them, for he was God's messenger. He says too that this had been done 'in the sight of God.' He was aware that God saw into his heart and was able to discern his motives.

Paul knew that some of the Corinthians, and especially his enemies, would dismiss his letter as a defensive, self-serving epistle. Of course, Paul had been defending his ministry, but far from expressing a self-serving rant he has been speaking literally 'before God in Christ.' He was not a man merely arguing on his own self-interests but was speaking in the presence of God who sees

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all and of Christ who is both his Savior and his Judge (cp. 5:10). Every part of the letter, including the defensive parts, is meant to build up his beloved Corinthian church.

Throughout the letter, including these last chapters, Paul has been engaged in a defense of his message and ministry. In answer to his question, we would probably reply that what he had written seemed just that – a defense, an apologia for his apostleship. In part, perhaps; yet essentially, it has all been for their sakes. Paul has written openly about himself and all his weaknesses so that the Corinthians might see in him the reality of their own weaknesses.

His elaborate statement about being a ‘fool’ which began in 11:1 and which concludes only in 12:10 is not, after all, the self-defense it appears to be – at least, not in its primary intention. Paul, it seems, is engaged in a remarkable exercise in personal communication. It is that he has set himself before them as a pattern. He conveys his teachings with great variety of style. Rather than write abstractly, he has written concretely about himself. The purpose is, clearly, that the Corinthians will identify with him and then imitate him.

Paul did not want the Corinthians to misinterpret his lengthy defense of his apostleship and integrity. He was not on trial before them, and they were not his judges. Through all this time (i.e., through the entire epistle), they had been thinking that Paul was defending himself to them. Actually, Paul stood before a divine tribunal. It was ‘in the sight of God’ that he had been ‘speaking in Christ’ (cp. 2:17). God is the only audience the faithful preacher is concerned about. Paul’s goal in everything he did in relation to the Corinthian church, both in ministering to them and defending himself, was their ‘upbuilding.’ The tender term ‘beloved’ reminded the Corinthians that though he was at times exasperated with them, Paul nevertheless loved them as his spiritual children. It was not his intent to use his apostolic authority to destroy them; God gave him that authority ‘for building [them] up and not for destroying [them]’ (10:8; cp. 13:10). The Corinthians were not Paul’s judges, but they were his spiritual responsibility.

Paul was sensitive to the thought of the Corinthians imagining that his letter was purely a form of self-defense. He assures the Corinthians that he and those whom he represents have been speaking and writing ‘in the sight of God’ and ‘in Christ.’ Both phrases are worthy of thought and emphasis. To act remembering that God sees everything we do, and that we are to live in the light of our spiritual union with Christ, are secrets of holiness and integrity. Paul affirms that his basic objective was that the Corinthians should be built up in their faith. In secular use ‘upbuilding’ has to do with the erection of a building. It is used here, and elsewhere in the New Testament of building people up spiritually. Church growth is not just a matter of numbers. With growth in numbers there must be growth in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

2. Fearing for the Corinthians (12:20-21)

It is Paul’s longing for their edification that makes his fears so authenticating; they are wholly pastoral. Because Paul fathered the Corinthian church, because he had been the presiding physician at the rebirth of souls, because he had worked night and day for them through multiple discomforts and dangers, because of his sacrifice and because of his desperately passionate love for them, he was a happy man. But his gladness was never immune to the fear that someone might fall to sin or unbelief. Paul had hitched his very life to the Corinthians, and he could not help riding with them through the highs and lows.

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a) *Fear of Division (12:20)*

(1) The Fear Paul Felt (12:20a)

²⁰*For I fear that perhaps when I come I may find you not as I wish, and that you may find me not as you wish—*

During his second visit to Corinth, Paul had encountered the list of vices catalogued in verse 20. And now he feared that on his third visit he would have to reprove them. Even more, he feared that they would not find him as they wished because he would come with the rod of discipline. His fear is real and ominous. It is also a pastoral warning as it gives them time to repent.

Paul's fears concerning the Corinthians' sins were well founded, given their history. He had dealt extensively with sin in their congregation in 1 Corinthians and in the severe letter (2:3-4), and had even made a visit to Corinth to confront their sin and rebellion in person (2:1). With good reason, then, he was 'afraid that perhaps when' he visited them for the third time (12:14; 13:1) there would still be unrepentant sin in their assembly. The apostle knew that there was great potential for that, even though the majority of the congregation had repented (cp. 7:6-11).

Paul is anxious about the proposed visit. He is worried about their expectations of each other, of what he will find when he gets there, and what his feelings will be as a consequence. He is afraid that when he arrives, the Corinthians will not be as he wants them to be. They, in turn may not find him to be to their liking. As to what he may find on his arrival, he is afraid of unearthing unpleasant and unresolved problems. Expressing his concerns in this way is a gentle means of encouraging the Corinthians to deal with unresolved issues before his arrival so that the visit may be a mutual encouragement.

Paul's final visit to Corinth is now imminent. This part of the letter is obviously preparing the way for what will almost certainly be a tense arrival. Twice the apostle expresses fear. Paul, it seems, anticipates that this third visit, like the second, would prove to be painful.

Paul had already postponed his third visit to Corinth because he wanted to give the church there time to put right the matters causing him concern, and he shows clearly he still has fears about the situation there. Paul had written of his parental relationship with them (v. 14), but there are times when encounters between parents and children are not very pleasant for either. A parent has sometimes to show love by acting strongly in discipline. Strong words are not necessarily an indication of the absence of love; rather they are often its expression.

'Afraid' translates a form of the verb *phobeō*, from which the English word 'phobia' derives. It refers to an intense, deep-seated anxiety, fear, or misgiving, and expresses Paul's great concern over the situation at Corinth. Paul's use of the term 'perhaps' shows his restraint and tenderness. Rather than making a complete denunciation of the Corinthians, the apostle merely expressed his concern and misgivings. When he arrived in Corinth, he would determine their spiritual condition and take the appropriate action. In the meantime, he wrote this epistle to begin the process of rooting out the noxious weeds of unrepentant sin in the church.

Paul's 'wish,' of course, was for them to be growing in grace, becoming more like Jesus Christ, and repenting of their sin; his fear was that their spiritual growth would be hindered by unrepentant sin. Should that prove to be the case, the Corinthians would find Paul to be not what they would wish. Instead of loving affirmation, he would bring stern discipline (cp. 1 Cor. 4:21).

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(2) The Sins Paul Feared (12:20b)

—*that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder.*

The faults to which Paul refers in verse 20 are almost all in the realm of attitudes and of utterances expressing such attitudes. How significant that Paul's first concern in writing First Corinthians was with their party-spirit (1 Cor. 1-4)! Clearly he is afraid here that this spirit of discord had not left the church.

So that the Corinthians would be forewarned, Paul listed some of the sins that could cause such a troublesome and tragic meeting. As are his other lists of sins (e.g., Rom. 1:28-31; 1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:8-9), this one is not exhaustive but is typical of the sins with which the Corinthians struggled. The sins grouped in verse 20 involve personal conflict that destroys the church's unity, which Paul wanted preserved at all costs. They were typical of the divisive, selfish, pagan behavior of Corinthian society and were exacerbated by the destructive influence of the false apostles. That such sins existed in the Corinthian church is evident from the fact that all of them were also addressed in 1 Corinthians.

Quarrels, jealousy, outbursts of anger, hostility, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder were some of the problems he anticipated. 'Quarrels' quickly arise when human personalities are given the place that the Lord Jesus should occupy (cp. 1 Cor. 1:12-13; 3:3-5) or when disputes get out of hands (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Once started quarrels are not easily stopped (cp. Pr. 17:14). 'Jealousy' is frequently behind quarrels, and leads to strife (1 Cor. 3:3). It prompts intrigue and false accusation (Dan. 6:4-5). 'Outbursts of anger' flow from jealousy. Once anger bursts out, truth is easily lost sight of, and the devil gains the advantage. People then predictably take sides with the different parties to the argument, and 'hostilities' or factions form. The protagonists then become the subject of 'slander' and 'gossip,' activities sadly enjoyed all too much by our fallen sinful nature. Both slander and gossip display human 'conceit,' for we then quickly slip into judging others (Lk. 6:37). These unhappy acts of our sinful nature bring further sad 'disorder.' All are contrary to the fruit of the Spirit, and all grieve Him.

Eris ('strife') describes the contention, conflict, and quarrels that result from enmity and dissension. *Zēlos* can have the positive connotation of godly zeal, but here it had the negative one of 'jealousy,' the grasping, protective, self-centeredness that causes people to be suspicious of others as potential rivals. 'Angry tempers' translates *thumos*, which means, 'rage' or 'violent anger,' the anger that flares up in an instant. *Eritheia* ('disputes') describes ambitions rivalries, factions attitudes, divisiveness, and partisanship. 'Slanders' translates the onomatopoeic word *katalalia* ('insults,' 'evil reports'), which appears only here and in 1 Peter 2:1. The related verb *katalaleō* is translated 'speak against' in James 4:11. In contrast to 'gossip,' which is quiet, subtle, behind-the-back defamation (the Greek word rendered 'gossip' means, 'to whisper'), slander is open, public vilification. Both stem from 'arrogance,' and result in 'disturbances.' The net result was the divisions that plagued the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 11:18).

b) *Fear of Immorality (12:21)*

(1) The Fear Paul Felt (12:21a)

²¹*I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned earlier...*

2 Corinthians – Lesson 17

Paul's parallel expression of fear, 'I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you,' reveals even more about his heart's attachment to his people. The act of disciplining the errant Corinthians as, say, in publicly excluding them from the church, would be a great humiliation to Paul, even though it would authenticate his apostolic power. It is clear that the great apostle did not exercise his authority from an aloof plain high above the people, but as a loving pastor-father. Because he was such a man, gladness and sadness were the province of his soul.

Paul also fears that because 'many' continue unrepentant of gross sexual offenses he will be grieved for them. This serious situation he had observed and learned about on his second visit (13:2). In writing his first letter, Paul drew attention to the dramatic moral conversion which some of the Corinthians had undergone (1 Cor. 6:9-11). There were others, however, who believed that everything was permissible, including fornication (1 Cor. 6:12-20). Despite the 'painful' visit and the 'sorrowful' letter, this libertine attitude had persisted; and Paul is, it seems, apprehensive about dealing with the matter once again.

In verse 21, he expresses concern at a different level (from v. 20). He knows the deeply immoral environment in which the church was called to live at Corinth and the kind of things many of the Christians will have indulged in before Christ laid hold on them (cp. 1 Cor. 6:9-11). In referring to many who had sinned earlier, is he thinking of the case of sexual immorality he addressed in 1 Corinthians 5? His words seem too far-reaching simply to apply to that. He may have encountered further evidence of immorality during his second visit.

The perfect tense participle *proēmartēkotōn* ('those who have sinned in the past') refers to those whose sin began in the past and continues in the present. In other words, it describes those who were continuing in sin and refusing to repent. Should Paul find that in the Corinthian assembly, it would affect him in two ways. First, it would deeply 'humiliate' him. His credibility was at stake. To have the Corinthian church, which Paul had pastored for nearly two years, marked by unrepentant sin would cause him shame. It would also give ammunition to those critics who attacked his authenticity. Unrepentant sin in his congregation is heartbreaking, distressing, and discouraging for a pastor. Second, the unrepentant sin in the Corinthian congregation was a source of great sorrow to Paul. He did not write that he would be angry with those who refused to repent, but rather that he would 'mourn over' them. *Pentheō* ('mourn') refers to lamenting stemming from a deep-seated sorrow or grief, not to mere superficial sadness.

We may infer that the arrival of the newcomers had hindered rather than helped in the moral problems of the Corinthians. His reference to the weak Christians being led into sin (11:29) is in the general context of the newcomers' ministry in Corinth (11:13-15, 20). Despite the Judaizers' supposed emphasis on the Jewish law and morality, they actually led the Corinthians away from their 'sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (11:3) and therefore away from the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit.

(2) The Sins Paul Mourned (12:21b)

...and have not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality that they have practiced.

'Impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality' express a sad retrogression. Sexual sin begins in the mind with impure thoughts. Impurity of thought leads to sexual sin. Unchecked, sexual sin leads to increasingly uncontrolled sexual excess.

2 Corinthians – Lesson 17

In verse 21 Paul turned to three sins that destroy the church's purity. All three refer to sexual immorality, which was rife in the idolatrous pagan culture of Corinth. *Akatharsia* ('impurity') is frequently associated in the New Testament with sexual sin. 'Immorality' translates *porneia*, the source of the English word 'pornography.' Sometimes translated 'fornication,' *porneia* refers to any sexual act outside of marriage. *Aselgeia* ('sensuality') describes public, unrestrained, flagrant, sexual sin. The KJV translates it, 'lasciviousness,' or 'wantonness;' other versions render it 'licentiousness' (cp. Rom. 13:13). Paul's great fear for the Corinthians was that, influenced by the false teachers, they would fall back into the sins which they had previously practiced.

The proofs of Paul's authenticity were there for all to see, curious and odd, as they might seem both in Corinth and in today's world. There were his *apostolic insignia*: 'signs and wonders and mighty works' wrought with the apostolic sign of 'utmost patience' (v. 12)—endurance amidst immense trials. There were the *apostolic sacrifices* of a man who, unlike the false apostles, sought only the souls of the Corinthians, gladly spending and being spent for them, like Christ Jesus Himself. And there were the authenticating *apostolic fears*, fears that only come to a heart that loves with an unremitting love. These authenticating qualities were an oddity in the self-promoting culture of that day and are curiosities in the world culture in which we live. Nevertheless, they are indicators of the real thing.

For next time: Read 2 Corinthians 13:1-14.