

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

The Marks Of A True Apostle

November 15th, 2015

2 Corinthians 1:12-14

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 1:12. As you will recall from our first couple of messages on this letter, the Apostle Paul is defending himself against the accusations of some false teachers who have infiltrated the church in Corinth. In fact that's really the over-arching theme of the entire epistle – Paul's defence of his own apostolic ministry. This section of text that we start looking at this morning running from 1:12-2:17 is a microcosm of the entire letter. In it we see Paul defending his Apostolic ministry by pushing back on a particular accusation. This pattern will repeat several times over the course of the letter. So sooner or later we are going to have the question: why does Paul feel the need to defend himself? Right? I mean Jesus never defended himself, like a lamb before his shearers he did not open his mouth but Paul spends 13 chapters defending himself and his ministry to the Corinthians. Why did he do that? The answer will unfold over the course of the letter but I need to at least introduce it this morning as we enter the main body of the text. NT scholar Mark Seifrid writes:

It is not finally Paul, but the Gospel that is at stake. Indeed, the Corinthians themselves are being tested. The question is whether they will accept the weak and suffering apostle, who out of love suffers on their behalf.¹

¹ Mark Seifrid, *The Second Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 46.

It's a Gospel issue. God is putting Christ before them through and IN the Apostles. Paul says in verse 14 that if you lose me, then you lose Christ and I lose you and I don't want that to happen. I want us to be enjoying each other and Christ on the day of the Lord so stay in my Gospel. Those are the stakes. There is a battle going on for souls in this story between real Apostles and false Apostles. Right? And Paul says: "If you choose the wrong Apostles – if you choose the wrong INTERPRETORS OF JESUS then you end up with NO JESUS AT ALL", he says that in chapter 11. He says:

²I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:2–4 ESV)

He goes on to say:

¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds. (2 Corinthians 11:13–15 ESV)

Those are the stakes friends! We've got real Apostles trying to lead you to the real Jesus and we've got false Apostles – servants of the devil – trying to lead you away from the real Jesus, to another Jesus who is no Jesus and who cannot save you and will not own you on the last day. These false teachers are servants of hell and they will drag you down with them if you listen to them. This is life and death, heaven and hell important, Paul says.

That's the argument of this letter and that's the argument, in miniature of this section. This is important stuff and so my plan is to walk you through this entire section from 1:12 to 2:17 at the forest level. I just want you to understand the unit. Then we'll drop down to tree level and we'll look at the frame of this section – Paul uses an inclusio in verses 12 and 2:17 to indicate his main interest in the section. We'll look at that frame in detail and we'll leave the content in the middle for next week. We'll look at what he says about real Apostles and then we'll end where I think we have to end a conversation like this – we'll end by asking how we can be sure that we are united to the real Jesus by believing in the real Apostolic Gospel.

Now, this message will only work if you have an open Bible in front of you. PowerPoint is not going to cut it this morning. So please open your Bibles to 2 Corinthians 1:12 which is on page 964 in your pew Bible.

Forest Level Orientation:

The first thing I want you to see is the outline or border of this forest. You have to remember that these letters were originally written without punctuation, chapter headings or verse markings. Paper was expensive and so everything was as compact as possible and so to mark out units of thought ancient writers used something scholars call an “inclusio” – just think of it as bookends. You use bookends on your shelf to mark out a collection of books that belong together and ancient writers did the same. They would use an obvious word or phrase at the start and at the end of a unit of thought. The key word here in this unit is “sincerity”. Paul uses two versions of the word sincerity in 1:12 and then he closes the section by saying in 2:17:

For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but **as men of sincerity**, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:17 ESV)

Now, as we’ll see in a minute Paul is using the word “sincerity” in the sense of “authentic” or “genuine”. He is not saying that he is sweet and earnest, he is saying he is the real deal. This entire unit is about the importance of having the right Apostles. **If you have fake or false Apostles, you get a fake Jesus which is no Jesus which is eternal death. So you want to have the REAL Apostles, you want men of SINCERITY – AUTHENTICITY, commissioned by God, in the sight of God who speak FOR GOD IN CHRIST.** That’s what you want and that’s what this unit is about.

In 1:12-14 Paul puts himself forward as that kind of Apostle. That’s the sub-unit we’ll look at from tree level in just a minute. Then in verse 15 Paul begins to address one of the particular accusations of these false Apostles. It had to do with Paul’s delay in visiting them personally. In verse 15 he says:

¹⁵ Because I was sure of this, **I wanted to come to you first**, so that you might have a second experience of grace.

Paul had planned to visit them but then upon reflection, he realized that they were not in a good

place to receive a personal visit. If he had come when he had planned to come, while they were still in disobedience to his clear instructions, that visit would have been an unmitigated disaster. So he delayed. His accusers say that this proves that Paul is untrustworthy – Paul turns that around and he says, far from it, this only proves that my ministry is a reflection of God’s ministry towards you. My reasons for delay are the same as God’s reasons for delay. **God delays in hope that you will get in the right place to be blessed rather than cursed.** That’s why God hasn’t come, and that’s why I didn’t come. My delay is a GOSPEL DELAY. It MIRRORS the delay of God. We’ll get to that next week.

In verse 20 Paul talks about the place he wants them to be – the place of blessing. He says:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

There is a place where you can receive EVERY GRACE and BLESSING OF GOD – my delay was in hope that you would get there – God’s delay is in hope that many people GET THERE – that’s where you want to be in the day of visitation. In Christ RECEIVING all the promised blessings of God. Hallelujah! That’s the place you want to be and that’s the place I want to get you by every and any means possible, even delay, Paul says.

Then in 2:1-11 he tells them what they need to do, specifically with respect to the unresolved discipline issue in order to get everyone in that place of proper Gospel relation to Jesus Christ, we’ll talk about that as well. If there is unforgiveness in our hearts that can BLOCK the blessings of God in Christ can’t it? That will be a very important discussion.

Then in 2:12-17 he rounds off this discussion about Apostolic ministry by introducing some very colourful imagery. **He says that real Apostles are like a fragrant display of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their message and their martyrdom will either disgust you or en-trance you. It will push you away or it will draw you in. Therefore, what you do with the Apostolic witness to Jesus Christ determines your eternal destiny.** There is no bypassing the Apostles on your way to Jesus Christ; in the Apostles God is putting Christ before you.

That’s the body of the argument in this section – that’s the forest that we’re in. Now, let’s drop down to tree level in verses 12-14 of chapter 1. We’ll look at what Paul says about real Apostles

and then we'll respond as I think he meant us to do.

Tree Level Observations: The Marks Of A Real Apostle

Hear now the Word of the Lord:

¹²For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. ¹³For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—¹⁴just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you. (2 Corinthians 1:12–14 ESV)

As we said, this is part of the frame for this whole section, so before we make our observations, let me just read to you the other side of the frame as well – these verses are meant to be seen together.

For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. (2 Corinthians 2:17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God.

As we look at this frame I think we can easily observe 4 characteristics of a REAL APOSTLE. First of all we notice the repeated use of some form of the word:

1. Sincere

We see two versions of that word in verse 12 and then another usage in 2:17. We Apostles are “men of sincerity”. In 2:17 the word sincere is presented in contrast to the false Apostles who are “peddlers of God's word” so the first thing we would want to say about this word is that it must indicate that:

i. Real Apostles have pure motives

The peddlers are obviously people who have financial motivations – they see Gospel ministry as representing a potentially lucrative industry. There has never been a shortage of false shepherds in the church who have made their living by fleecing the sheep. That's not a new thing. Pastors

buying 45 million dollar private jets or sitting on golden toilet seats may be new, but fleecing the sheep has been around since the Old Testament. Being a false teacher can be a great way to make a living. Real Apostles however are sincere in their motives. They are selfless, willing to suffer and focused on feeding not fleecing the sheep.

ii. Real Apostles are singular in their allegiance

We are still defining the word “sincere”. As I mentioned Paul uses two versions of the word in verse 12. The second version translated in some of your Bibles as “simplicity” means literally “uncompounded”, “unmixed” or “single”. They are not watered down, they are not divided, they are not trying to please two masters. In verse 17 of chapter 2 it is clear that real Apostles are singular in their allegiance to God. They are “commissioned by God”, speaking “in the sight of God” in Christ.

I think that is most of what Paul means when he says that Apostles are sincere.

Secondly Paul says, a true Apostle is:

2. Dependent

Another word for that might be “contingent” or even “connected”. The point is that real Apostles do not preach themselves. They do not minister out of their own thoughts, talents and resources – their ministry is from God, FOR PEOPLE. They are VESSELS ONLY. Look at 1:12; Paul says we are what we are and we do what we do:

not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God (2 Corinthians 1:12 ESV)

In 2:17 he says that we are Apostles and we speak the Apostolic Gospel “in Christ”. Now, he doesn’t say “for Christ” he says “in Christ”. I actually thought that was a bad translation so I went to the Greek and checked and it really is IN CHRIST. That’s not normal Greek – meaning that isn’t what a Greek speaker would expect to hear – Paul is catching our attention with unusual language. He is saying that his Apostolic ministry is not really “FOR CHRIST” as if Christ needed his help, rather it is IN CHRIST because Paul needs HIS HELP. Paul can only be what

he is and do what he does IN Christ. He says this sort of thing all the time. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15:10 ESV)

A false Apostle deals in worldly wisdom and human strength. A real Apostle is a conduit for the GRACE AND GOODNESS OF GOD. A false Apostle tells you about his dreams and his visions, he tells stories in which HE IS THE HERO – a real Apostle points to Christ. A real Apostle has nothing to offer BUT CHRIST. He is utterly, knowingly and GLADLY dependent upon the grace of God in Christ.

The third and fourth mark of a real Apostle come out of the same two verses. In verses 13-14 he says:

¹³For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—¹⁴just as you did partially understand us (2 Corinthians 1:13–14 ESV)

The third thing we would notice then is that real Apostles are:

3. Consistent

One of the charges against Paul was that he was very forceful in his writings but very weak in personal appearance. It was also suggested that he behaved one way while up in Macedonia but another way while down in Achaia. Paul says no, everything we are writing to you is of a piece with everything we have ever said to you before. Our Gospel doesn't change – even if your understanding of it does.

This has significance obviously for how we read the Bible. Paul tells us some things about how to interpret his letters. He says in verse 13 that there is NO DEVELOPMENT in his theology; there is NO TRAJECTORY. Paul isn't saying anything different than what you can find in his previous writings. Now, that is very important because you will often hear liberal Christians speak about development in Paul's thought. They will say that early in his ministry he expected Jesus to return right away, later in his ministry he did not. They will say that early in his ministry

he considered men and women to be exactly the same in all respects – quoting Galatians 3 usually – but then later in his ministry under pressure from Jewish power brokers, he reverted to traditional Old Testament perspectives on gender. That is non-sense, Paul says here. **The mark of a true Apostle is CONSISTENCY.** There is no trajectory – there is no development because **Paul’s theology is not DISCERNED it is REVEALED.** It comes from the mind of God in whom **there is no shadow or variation of change.** Therefore real Apostles are consistent.

Lastly, and from the same verses we notice that a true Apostle is:

iv. Clear

We mentioned in our 1 Corinthians series that some folks were pretending to be confused about Paul’s teaching in order to delay their own obedience. Here again we see Paul saying in essence if there is any confusion here it is due to your lack of progress not our lack of clarity. My teaching is consistent with what you **UNDERSTOOD** even if you still need to grow toward full understanding. In 2:17 he says that his teaching is “in the sight of God” – it is in the open, in the light, it is transparent and clear.

This is also very important for how we read the Bible today. We have all these folks running around in the modern day Evangelical church telling us that Paul doesn’t mean what he says. He says certain things about sexuality in 1 Corinthians 6 but he doesn’t **MEAN THAT.** You have to look **DEEPER** – you have to understand the underlying cultural **REALITIES** that caused Paul to speak in this highly nuanced way. That’s the same nonsense they were pulling 2000 years ago in Corinth. They were pretending to be confused so as not to have to comply with Paul’s teaching. Paul’s not buying it. This isn’t confusing teaching. Its straight forward, plain spoken truth. If you don’t understand it that’s because you don’t want to obey it. The teaching itself is remarkably clear.

Responding To The Text:

Now that’s the text. Once you pull it apart and see it in relation to the letter as a whole and this section that we’ve entered into I think the message is pretty obvious. **Our union with God through the person of Jesus Christ depends upon our right standing in the Apostolic Gospel.**

Therefore if you have the wrong Apostle then you have the wrong Jesus. And let's just state the obvious: the devil's game is to get you connected to a false Jesus through the ministry of false apostles, false preachers and false teachers. There is a real Jesus; a Jesus who can save you, a Jesus in whom ALL THE PROMISES OF GOD ARE YES AND AMEN – Praise the Lord! And there is a real Apostolic Gospel to get you there and real faithful preachers of it. And there are counterfeits. There are many false Jesuses even today within modern day Evangelicalism. We've got Red Letter Jesus, Sexually Permissive Jesus, Gender Neutral Jesus, Home-boy Jesus, Santa Jesus, Very Jewish Jesus, Prosperity Jesus and on and on it goes. And anyone with a laptop and a web address has everything they need to lead you astray from the Apostolic Gospel and the actual Jesus Christ. That's the message of the text, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

And the application of the text is equally obvious – we don't even have to guess because Paul tells us what it is at the end of the letter. He says:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. (2 Corinthians 13:5 ESV)

Self examination is the obvious response to this text. Am I in the Apostolic Gospel or have I been led astray? Let me suggest three useful questions by way of self examination – as we finish this letter we will gather many more – but let's start with these three.

1. Is your Jesus an offence to fallen culture?

The real Jesus – the crucified Jesus is an OFFENSE to every fallen culture that he enters. Jesus said “they hated me and they will hate you”. Is your Jesus in perpetual danger of being crucified? Or does he think the same things about sex and gender and politics and money that all your friends think? See the Corinthians wanted a Jesus who didn't get in the way of their sex lives and their social norms. That was the whole point of 1 Corinthians 5-10 wasn't it? They wanted a Sexually Permissive, Prosperity Preaching Jesus and there were false teachers lining up to deliver. Just like today. If your Jesus looks like everyone else in this fallen world – he is not the real Jesus. You've been duped.

2. Does your Jesus need to hide from certain passages in the New Testament?

Paul said that real Apostles are consistent and clear. No hidden meanings, no wildly nuanced statements, no radical departures from everything else that's been written. Just straight forward witness to who Jesus is and what it looks like to follow him. So here's a little test as to whether you've got the right Jesus. Are there any parts of the New Testament that seem to stand in conflict with what you believe about Jesus? Can your Jesus read through Galatians and Hebrews with you without having to resort to wildly complicated theories that only your special guy on the internet really understands? Really Jewish Jesus doesn't enjoy reading through those sections of the New Testament. Can your Jesus read through 1 Timothy or 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 without requiring wildly complicated theories to avoid the obvious meanings of the text? Gender Neutral Jesus generally doesn't feel at home in those parts of the Bible.

Your Jesus - if it's the real Jesus, should fit hand in glove with all the teachings of the Apostles. Ephesians 2:20 says that the church is built:

on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

So your Jesus, if he is the real Jesus should fit right in there with the prophets and the Apostles. If he can't quite squeeze in without making major adjustments, he's not the real Jesus.

Lastly you should ask:

3. Are you receiving the blessings of God in the person of Jesus Christ?

I don't want to say too much about this because we are going to dig into this a great deal over the next couple of weeks but Paul says that if we are in the right place, if we are IN THE RIGHT JESUS then all of the promises of God are yes and amen FOR US. The real Jesus is the place of ALL PROMISE AND BLESSING. The more time you spend there, the more time you change – as we all with unveiled faces behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ and are transformed by one degree of glory to the next into the same image – this comes the Lord, the Spirit. So are you changing? Are you growing? Are you REVIVING and EXPERIENCING the long promised gift, [s of God? The gift of a new heart, the gift of a new Spirit? The gift of right desire and transformed inclination? If you're not, then you have not found the fount of every blessing.

You're in the wrong place – you're in the wrong Jesus.

Prayer:

O God, we are lost and helpless without you. We are in darkness and we are deceived. Call us to yourself. Dig ears for us. Open our eyes. Incline our hearts and help us to believe in the Apostolic Gospel so as to be forgiven and positioned to receive all the promises of God in the person of Jesus Christ. We ask this now in Jesus' Name, Amen.