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# Apostolic Defense in Ministry Challenge

## 2 Corinthians 10:1-18<sup>11</sup>

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Is it right to examine, evaluate or even challenge ministry? Yes it is if in the godly way.

Is it necessary to defend, correct or even confront critics? Yes it is if in the godly way.

So what had gone wrong in the church at Corinth? As D. A. Carson explains:

In short, the Corinthians were quick to seize every emphasis in Christianity that spoke (or seemed to speak) of spiritual power, of exaltation with Christ, of freedom, of triumph, of victorious Christian living, of leadership, of religious success; but they neglected or suppressed those accents in Christianity that stressed meekness, servanthood, obedience, humility, and the need to follow Christ in his suffering if one is to follow him in his crown. They glimpsed what Christ had done, yet failed to contemplate what remains to be done; they understood that D-day had arrived, but mistook it for V-day. They loved Christian triumphalism, but they did not know how to live under the sign of the cross. (Carson, p. 44).

Now Paul was facing a small unrepentant minority of such detractors and impostors who opposed him. There was a critic inside the church and false apostles visiting the church. Guided by their upside-down beliefs and values, they arrived at the conclusion that Paul's ministry was simply fleshly. One writer said, "His unimpressive persona, his lack of rhetorical skills, his meek and humble demeanor, his poverty, his working with his hands, the absence of ecstatic experiences and visions, his incessant trials and difficulties (rather than "success") were, to his opponents, incontrovertible evidence that his ministry was of the flesh and not of the Spirit." adapted from (Hughes, p. 180)

It is here that 2 Corinthians takes a sudden turn. Chapters 1-9 were directed to the repentant majority in Corinth and thus rejoiced at the confession, repentance, reconciliation and progress they were making. But now, chapters 10-13 focus on the unrepentant minority. Paul begins to confront and challenge the unrepentant and rebellious. He now begins to escalate his call for genuine repentance. Short of that, he is prepared to call them unbelievers.

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## Personal Standards for Public Ministry (v. 1–12)

<sup>1</sup> I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!— <sup>2</sup> I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup> For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup> We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, <sup>6</sup> being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

### *A Humble Attitude (v. 1)*

He appeals with the meekness and gentleness of Christ to the Corinthian believers. He sets the standard for humility and meekness. The Corinthian church had mistaken Paul's meek and humble attitude for weakness. So he appeals to them in what they have been taught about Christ. We know so much more because we have the gospels. Christ was certainly meek and gentle, with those who were expressing faith and repentance. With the arrogant religious hypocrites, he leveled strong words and biting sarcasm and fearful doom in warnings.

He repeats their charge that he is two-faced. He is kind and gentle, maybe even weak when he is with them. Maybe he is fearful when he is there in contrast to the dynamic, powerful impressive way of their super-apostles. But when he is not face-to-face, he is hard, harsh and bold. This is what they accuse him of. Many of us know people like this: smile to your face and cut you to shreds in other conversations. They seem to charge him with both personal timidity and the use of worldly techniques in rhetoric.

### *A Biblical Strategy (v. 2–6)*

Paul responds to concerns over why he is doing ministry the way he does. He insists that he has a Biblical strategy for ministry.

<sup>2</sup> I beg of you that when I am present I may not have to show boldness with such confidence as I count on showing against some who suspect us of walking according to the flesh. <sup>3</sup> For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. <sup>4</sup> For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. <sup>5</sup> We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, <sup>6</sup> being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

### **What must be Rejected (v. 2–3)**

He does not depend upon the tactics of the flesh. We live in this present time, age and place which Paul calls the world, the flesh, the old. This is simply a physical reality. This is where culture and psychology and business strategies exist. This is

the challenge of being immersed in our world and culture. Since it feels so right and so normal, it seems like we should use those strategies to do the work of the ministry.

Paul is emphatic that he has rejected reliance on the strategies, the strengths, ways of the world. He is not pursuing the work of the church to expand the kingdom of God using the weapons of the world. For Paul this primarily related to his “way” when he was with the Corinthian church. When he was meek with them and strong in writing he was not doing so driven by his appreciation and appropriation of fleshly strategies.

Don’t miss the astounding irony of the church at Corinth accusing Paul of being worldly. They who had allowed the world and its ways to influence and infiltrate the church had no grounds to call Paul out. This was a self-defensive mechanism designed to deflect Paul’s counsel and deny his commands.

This must give us real pause in our pragmatic world today. How much of the commonly adopted means and methods used in the ministry are simply the appropriation and reliance on the flesh? They may be great and useful and productive strategies in the world. But what is designed to work well among sinners should be the primary things we rely to work well among the saints. It is a sobering thought that our sophisticated systems of evangelism, promotion and growth are simply the natural product of the world’s wisdom and weapons. What if... ?

### **What must be Employed (v. 4–6)**

<sup>4</sup> We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. <sup>5</sup> We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ. <sup>6</sup> And after you have become fully obedient, we will punish everyone who remains disobedient. [New Living Translation, NLT]

He uses God’s mighty weapons to knock down the strongholds of false thinking. This is one of the most important verses for understanding what tools and strategies are to be used in the church. This is partly related to evangelism, but primarily to edification.

These verses have been widely misused down through the last century. They do not refer to Satanic strongholds or geographic locations held as territory by demonic forces. We are not employing worldly strategies. But nor are we magicians using the power of the Spirit to zap demonic forces encamped in towns and cities.

Well, what is this about then? What is Paul saying that he and we must employ in ministry? This about the power of God through the Word of God preached by the servant of God to destroy error, false thinking and worldly philosophies. Paul is certainly seeing the value of going after them in terms of the gospel to the world. But what Paul is primarily concerned about is how these errors and false thinking have permeated the church.

To deal with the wrong thinking, Paul sets for us some standards. These are what he was encountering in the unrepentant opponents to him. Taking our cue from Paul, I want to state these as declarations and affirmations of what we aim to do in following his example.

### **We rely on God's power.**

All true lasting spiritual change comes as a result of God at work. Natural human reasoning may be used by God to effect transformation. But natural human reasoning apart from God's power can only affect the natural man.

### **We answer and destroy false thinking.**

In our preaching, teaching, counseling and discipling, we expose the error and explain the truth so people may know God truly.

### **We help them to control their thinking.**

Christians need to learn to discipline their minds so that they control their thinking with the aim of obeying Jesus. A disciplined mind is not the final goal. Right thinking is always to lead to submission to Christ.

### **We are prepared to deal with unrepentant disobedience.**

Those who refuse to repent will be dealt with. Paul was warning the church that their current situation had to be addressed. Thank God for those who heard and heeded the Word of God through the writing of Paul. But the unrepentant who continued to resist Paul and his Biblical authority would be dealt with. This was beginning at this point in the letter with escalating pressure.

Therefore, we must use the Word of God rightly. We must use logic and argument dependent on the power of the Spirit. But we must deconstruct the fortresses and towers of error so that people will be able to subject the process and the content of their thinking to the Lord Jesus Christ.

## ***A Clear Authority (v. 7-11)***

Paul had a unique place in the church in his day. No one stands to the church in the same way today. However, when someone stands to teach the Word, there is an authority that comes with the Word.

<sup>7</sup> Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. <sup>8</sup> For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. <sup>9</sup> I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. <sup>10</sup> For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." <sup>11</sup> Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. <sup>12</sup> Not

that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

This paragraph deals with two accusations and gives his answers.

### **In its Source (v. 7)**

The first accusation is that He possesses no power or authority over them (v. 7a). There seems to be a critic who is very confident of his own place and power in the church. Paul uses a double-edged way of speaking. This person is so confident that they are Christ's ordained authority. They mean that they belong to Christ's elite preachers or missionaries. Paul means, they are overconfident about their own salvation – that they belong to Christ at all. So they are challenging Paul's authority. He is questioning his salvation.

His answer is that He possesses the power and authority of Christ himself (v. 7b). If the critic is a Christian, then he should be recognizing Paul's apostolic authority. He cannot appeal to both of them being equal as Christians to deny the God ordained authority of Paul. To defiantly and without repentance reject Paul's authority as an apostle may mean the person is not a Christian at all.

Again, listen to me carefully – no one here is a Paul. However, in the Scriptures, God has ordained among believers. Believers are equal as Christians. But servants are to submit to masters. Children are to obey parents. Wives are to submit to husbands. Christian people are to submit to the elders of the church. And when the Apostles were alive, the church, the people of the church, were to submit to them.

So, this critic who challenged Paul was making a fundamental mistake. Equals submit to those in authority. This is grounded in the Trinity: God the Son submits to God the Father, even though they are equally God. Christians submit to those in authority, even though they are equal. Paul and this critic are both in Christ. But the critic must submit to Paul or something is drastically wrong in their heart.

### **In its Use (v. 9-11)**

The second accusation is that Paul misuses the authority he claims to have. Paul writes with force and strength but in person he is weak and unimpressive (v. 10). Both are being used as evidence that Paul has no authority. The abuse of his supposed authority means that he has no right to exercise it and he, the critic, is free to ignore it or even openly oppose it.

His answer is that they will soon discover he is mighty both in pen and in person (v. 9, 11). It is his words and truths that are powerful and persuasive. His personal presence may not measure up but just wait until he comes. His words and the truths he will say will carry the full weight of the Scripture. He does not need to defend or to elevate his authority. He will just exercise it when he comes. The Words he has written from a distance will be the words he will speak in person. The words themselves carry the authority God has given him. How Paul's word

is responded to is evidence of whether he, the critic and possibly his followers, have repented and humbled themselves under the Scripture.

### ***A Wise Measure (v. 12)***

Listen to verse 12 from the New Living Translation.

<sup>12</sup> Oh, don't worry; we wouldn't dare say that we are as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, using themselves as the standard of measurement. How ignorant! [NLT]

He does not compare himself to other men. This is a transition from dealing with his critic who is a member of the church at Corinth to dealing with the traveling false-apostles. These false apostles were affirming their own authority and of necessity, denying the authority of Paul. But to do so, they were using the external measurement they thought would be accepted by the church. They attacked Paul's history with them and his way with them.

They also compare Paul unfavorably with them. Look at Paul. He is not at all how a leader should be or how a leader should look. He doesn't talk like a leader. He is not elegant and sophisticated in his bearing or in his speech. But we, we are the very embodiment of leadership. So Paul's leadership is being undermined by unfavorable contrasts with others and specifically, with themselves.

Paul calls this ignorant and without understanding. Comparing people's history or outward appearance to undercut or to establish authority is foolish. God has either established the authority, or not. God has either put that person in the authority, or not. Paul is an apostle even if he is short, bow-legged, bent and broken physically and partially blind. Paul is an apostle even if he does not meet the current cultural standards for public speaking. Unfavorable comparisons are foolish and ignorant and betray a heart that craves the place, power and position of another.

D.A. Carson writes, "The folly of the self-appointed apostles is that they had set up their own subjective standards of excellence (training in rhetoric, speaking fees, ecstatic experiences, commendations, awards, and so on) and then judged themselves by conformity to those standards! These false apostles had no desire to measure themselves by the objective criteria used by Paul – allegiance to the gospel, conformity to Christ's character, and participation in Christ's sufferings." Cited in (Hughes, p. 189)

There is an interesting insight into sinful thinking here. In order to maximize one's own authority to rule or to be free of rule, one must minimize the legitimate authority of another. For the false apostles to be able to exercise their authority, they have to minimize the authority of Paul. For the critic to be free of Paul's authority, he has to minimize if not outright deny Paul's authority. In either case, legitimate, God-given, Scriptural authority is being denied or minimized. The heart motivation is to free oneself from the obligation to submit to the authority God has ordained.

## Personal Restraint in Public Ministry (v. 13–18)

In a carefully worded and ironically powerful way, Paul answers the traveling, super-apostles. Basically, he says, “We must be careful to not take credit for the work of others while relishing the work God has done through us.”

<sup>13</sup> But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. <sup>14</sup> For we are not overextending ourselves, as though we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ. <sup>15</sup> We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged, <sup>16</sup> so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another’s area of influence. <sup>17</sup> “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” <sup>18</sup> For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Each of these statements about what he is doing or not doing is countering the false apostles. As a result, Paul has established some basic standards for those who lead and serve in the Lord’s church.

### ***Serve in the sphere God has assigned (v. 13)***

Paul does not overstep his bounds. Except, he really has no bounds. He is an apostle. The others are not. They have overstepped their bounds. They are asserting their own influence and authority. They are out of bounds. For us this means caution in how we engage with other churches and church people. We can advise and counsel. We can preach and teach what the Scriptures say. But we should serve and submit in the spheres in which God has actually assigned us.

### ***Recognize what God has accomplished (v. 14)***

Paul reminds them that it was through his own apostolic, missionary preaching that God saved people in Corinth and the church was formed there. He had a powerful, God-ordained history with them that exhibited his apostolic authority. But they needed to be reminded to recognize and affirm what God had accomplished. This is important for us as well. Part of having a right attitude as we serve and submit in the spheres God has ordained (remember, this is the fundamental question here) rises from recognizing the past work of God in our lives together.

### ***Seek to expand the work as God enables (v. 15-16)***

What concerns Paul the most is that the church continues to be a partner and a platform for the spread of the gospel. This is being undermined by those who seek to undermine the authority of Paul and ultimately, the Scriptures. His purpose, prayers and pursuit is that they will continue to join with him as he spreads the gospel everywhere he goes.

***Give all the glory to the Lord (v. 17)***

Is the way we lead and way we submit and follow bringing the Lord all the glory? This is Paul's great aim in life. This is his great concern. God is not glorified in rebellion disobedience, sin, and strife. God is glorified when we hear and heed His Word and bend our wills to it.

***Aim to be pleasing to and approved by God (v. 18)***

Self-commendation almost always comes on the heels of self-justification. We approve ourselves no matter how wrong we may be and so we are compelled to seek the affirmation of others. Boasting is simply soliciting others agreement and affirmation of our own self-deceived approval. Boasting is pride seeking the affirmation of others. Pity is pride wounded when others won't affirm us.

So, if this is what we must put off, what must be put on? We must seek to be pleasing to and approved by God. People may agree that my sin is ok. People may affirm my ungodly attitudes and actions. But it does not matter. God's approval and affirmation is all you need.

But notice how the sentence is worded. Who is it that we are to approve? We are to approve and affirm those whom the Lord commends. Who does the Lord commend? God commends you who please Him by obeying His Word, recognizing your authorities and submitting gladly to them. We should commend those whose life of serving and leading is pleasing to God and has His approval.

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**Reflect and Respond**

Some personal exhortations aimed at our hearts and our behavior.

Repent of not submitting to the authorities God has placed in your life. This is first, and foremost, a heart attitude. This question I ask myself and I want to ask you.: are you poised, inclined and moved by the Word to submit to your government, to your bosses, to your parents, to your husbands, to your elders?

Humble yourself and repent of pride, both the pride the boasts about self and the pride that is self-pity. Both will deafen our ears and harden our hearts to those whom God has truly commended.

Live up to the standards of God's Word for leaders and disciples. Reject doing ministry with the methods and means of the world. Pursue Biblical ministry through being transformed in the thinking of our hearts.

Rely on God's power not human persuasion in the gospel work you do.

In all of this? Seek God's approval. Seek God's glory.