

2 Corinthians 10 • The Mark of a True Apostle

Introduction

One of the things which Jesus personally commends the church at Ephesus is that they actually tested apostles.

'I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false;

— Revelation 2:2

Not only are there many individuals within Christendom who insist on being addressed by the title “apostle”, but we live at a time when one of the most prominent so-called Christian organizations on the planet is comprised of several hundred men and women claiming to be apostles as part of “The New Apostolic Reformation”. Today such need to be put to the test of God’s Word just as the Ephesians did in their day, and this is a good place to start. Paul provides what we should find present not just in a true biblical apostle specifically, but in true spiritual leaders in general.

¹ Now I, Paul, myself urge you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ—I who am meek when face to face with you, but bold toward you when absent!

[Read v.1]

Q: We need to first re-visit the background of the church at Corinth. What seems to be the basic problem in this church when it comes to leaders?

A: They appear to glory in men, especially having been “swept off their feet” by the Judaizers who came in after Paul. (1 Co. 3:21; 1 Co. 4:6-7)

Q: How were the Corinthians treating these other teachers?

A: They regarded and honored them above Paul even though they were preaching false doctrine (2 Co. 11:4) and taking advantage of Christians (2 Co. 11:18-20). Appearance mattered more than substance.

Q: What seems to be intimated in the way these false teachers represented themselves vs. Paul?

A: Recognizing that Paul founded the church, they appeared to discredit him with the accusation that he was weak while at the same time elevating their selves with claims of displaying real power. Their chief aim was to place the focus on outward appearances.

Application: Does this sound even vaguely familiar today? It may be telling that every televangelist and popular false teacher of our own day precisely fits this pattern. They produce a charisma and outward appearance of power which, like an illusionist using misdirection, points away from the foundational teachings of God’s Word. In colloquial terms it is, “All show, no go”.

Q: What is Paul’s focus? What guides him in both substance and outward appearance?

A: “...the meekness and gentleness of Christ”. Paul did not try to establish the force of his own personality, but to emulate Christ’s example.

Q: How was Christ’s ministry characterized by “meekness and gentleness”?

A: His power was exercised in meekness and humility. He not only refused to put on displays of power, but He was never one to “lord it over” the people He ministered to.

Q: Is “meekness” the same as “weakness” as the false teachers accuse Paul of?

A: No, biblical meekness is power that is under control. It is the ability to be angry at sin and yet willing to suffer abuse for the sake of Christ. It is

spiritual authority in perfect concert with the biblical mandate to always deal with others in love.

Application: *A true apostle is a walking, talking visible example of Christ. We should not make the mistake of judging them by outward appearance but whether or not their words and deeds align precisely with Scripture instead of the world's standards of a charismatic leader.*

² I ask that when I am present I need not be bold with the confidence with which I propose to be courageous against some, who regard us as if we walked according to the flesh. ³ For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵ We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, ⁶ and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete.

[Read v.2-6]

Q: What is the chief distinction Paul is making between true biblical leaders and false ones?

A: The false walk and operate in the flesh but the true walk and operate in the Spirit. The surest proof of a false leader is operating in the flesh.

Q: How does this directly address the issue of Paul's standing in their eyes?

A: They thought that because Paul did not employ carnal, earthly methods and exert the power of a strong personality that he was weak.

Q: How does Paul partially substantiate their view of him?

A: He readily admits "we walk in the flesh" – that he has all the weaknesses of the flesh that everyone else has, but "we do not war according to the flesh". (v.3) The false leaders operate according to worldly ways, the true according to the Spirit.

Q: What are the spiritual weapons which characterize the ministry of a true leader?

A: "...not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for destruction of fortresses". (v.4) Paul refers to the working of sin to produce an earthly fortress based on pride and rebellion which cannot be overcome by the force of personality but spiritual means. A good illustration is the fall of Jericho.

Q: Who might be a prime biblical example of having to learn the lesson that they could not accomplish God's work and calling through the flesh and force of their personality, but only by spiritual means in personal subjection to Him?

A: One that especially stands out is Moses, who though appearing to be born in the best worldly situation to fulfill God's calling to lead His people, had to undergo vigorous spiritual change in order to return and accomplish God's purposes in concert with spiritual means. He began as a charismatic leader by worldly standards, but returned meek and gentle in God's character so as to do it God's way rather than his own way.

Q: What comprises earthly fortresses?

1. "...speculations..." (v.5) This expresses a situation where people seek their own purpose and guidelines for living from sources outside of God's Word and ways.
2. "...every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God..." (v.5) This expresses the false doctrines which seek to replace the plain teachings of God, things in direct conflict with God's Word.
3. "...every thought captive to the obedience of Christ..." (v.5) Not just changing outward appearance, but the inner nature so as to replace the pursuit of pleasing one's self with obedience of Christ's Word, rejecting speculations outside of God's Word or false doctrines in direct conflict with it.

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Q: What is Paul's ultimate goal? Is it to establish his authority and place of leadership?

A: Paul's ultimate goal as expressed in v.6 is "to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete". He is not seeking to establish himself, but the authority of God's Word and ways in the character of each individual Believer. Paul would address their disobedience and embrace of lies in place of God's Word by smashing those false teachings to bring their hearts and minds to a place of obedience.

Observation: *It would seem that church problems are not solved by changing the denomination's constitution, revising a church program, or reorganizing the church board, but by confronting the people and problems themselves with the Word of God.*

Application: *A true apostle uses spiritual weapons to re-establish obedience to God's Word and ways. Obedience to Christ is the greater priority.*

⁷ You are looking at things as they are outwardly. If anyone is confident in himself that he is Christ's, let him consider this again within himself, that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. ⁸ For even if I boast somewhat further about our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be put to shame, ⁹ for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters. ¹⁰ For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible." ¹¹ Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when absent, such persons we are also in deed when present.

[Read v.7-11]

Q: How does a true spiritual assessment differ from a worldly one?

A: The worldly judges by outward appearances rather than true spirituality which comes from within.

Q: What kind of person is probably drawn to judging by appearances?

A: Most likely someone who themselves live to give a good appearance. They are not drawn to the strength and discipline of inner spiritual obedience but to merely "looking" good.

Q: What does Paul disclose as the true purpose of biblical authority?

A: "...for building you up and not for destroying you..." (v.8) Whereas the mark of a worldly leader is often dictatorial and authoritarian to the point of wielding total control over their followers, a spiritual leader is measured by the degree to which they build their followers up in Christ.

Q: What does the true spiritual leader wish to avoid doing which is a common tactic among worldly and false leaders?

A: They do not use fear. (v.9) They are the best examples of leading in the character of Christ the Good Shepherd, whereas false leaders often employ "heavy shepherding" to rule and control rather than to build and edify.

Application: *A true apostle exercises authority in the context of biblical love so as to build up Believers and the Body of Christ rather than rule over and control them.*

¹² For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding. ¹³ But we will not boast beyond our measure, but within the measure of the sphere which God apportioned to us as a measure, to reach even as far as you. ¹⁴ For we are not overextending ourselves, as if we did not reach to you, for we were the first to

[Read v.12-18]

Q: What is one of the surest ways to discern the presence of a false spiritual leader?

A: They measure and compare each other to themselves rather than by spiritual/biblical standards.

Point: *This is most noticeable today when visiting a website where the personality spends the bulk of their time not just comparing their self to others but devoting much of their time ridiculing or judging others so as to establish their own position as higher and more authoritative. In direct proportion to this it is noticeable how little they actually devote to God's Word in lieu of such comparisons.*

come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ; ¹⁵ not boasting beyond our measure, that is, in other men's labors, but with the hope that as your faith grows, we will be, within our sphere, enlarged even more by you, ¹⁶ so as to preach the gospel even to the regions beyond you, and not to boast in what has been accomplished in the sphere of another. ¹⁷ But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD. ¹⁸ For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends.

Q: How might the New Apostolic Reformation fit perfectly with Paul's description of a "mutual admiration society"?

A: This is precisely the behavior which they publicly perpetuate, commending those who have joined their ranks and attacking and demonizing those who have not.

For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.

— Galatians 6:3-4

Q: Why is it important for Paul to remind them that "we were the first to come even as far as you in the gospel of Christ"?

A: Whereas true biblical leaders seek to take the Gospel to new people and places (Rom. 15:20), false leaders invade already established territory in an attempt to take over a work already begun. True leaders are always sensitive to being in the presence of another true leader's church or ministry area, never attempting to exert themselves in place of their authority and position.

Q: When it comes to recognition, what is the compelling difference between the true and false leader?

A: All of the false leader's actions work toward the goal of gaining man's approval in the here and now; true leaders leave the matter to the Lord alone.

Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

— Jeremiah 9:23-24

Application: A true apostle seeks not the approval of men but God. They do not try to overtake another's ministry or flock but earnestly seek to fulfill their calling in their own right and area.

Overall Application

There are several lessons by which we can examine our own attitudes toward leaders as well as our personal approach to ministry:

- **Do not be influenced by external appearances.** Biblical leaders are not measured by their physical appearance, oratory skills, or personal charisma. What they say and do and how it comports with God's Word is far more important than the package it is wrapped in.
- **Spiritual results are obtained through spiritual tools.** It is not the ability to attract a crowd or erect a facility, but to build and edify each Believer toward the goal of total obedience to Christ alone. Building through prayer and the Word of God take time, dedication, and sacrifice.
- **Let God do the commending.** If we live for God's approval rather than man's, our life and ministry will be blessed. What may be characterized as failure in the eyes of others God may see as a tremendous success for His glory.