2 Corinthians 12:11-21

The Continued Authenticity of Paul’s Apostolic Ministry

Continuing on in Paul’s defense of his interactions with the church he is drawing closer to the end of the book with great weight and passion. If the church had somehow been able to make their way through the letter until now thinking that Paul had done anything in his ministry to them through selfishness and arrogance, we would be shocked. However, Paul carries on in this second to last chapter with the same theme of defense and authenticity.

*Is this hefty defense ultimately out of anger, frustration, or care for the body in Corinth?*

It’s hard to read this book without feeling like Paul is belaboring these points. Since he was the bringer of the gospel to Corinth and fulfilling his duties as a spiritual parent, we can see that his love for the body drove him to push their faith towards the point of abiding rather than carnality. Verse 19 speaks plainly of Paul’s purpose: All of this writing is for the building up of the body.

# What Should Have Happened (11-13)

11 I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody. 12 The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles. 13 For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

## Compelled or Commended?

The church ‘compelled’ Paul and pushed him to the point of writing with such intensity so much about how he was the apostle and servant that God had called him to be. Instead of this, Paul could have written any number of other doctrinal truths like we find in Ephesians, Colossians or Philippians. However, their lack of understanding demanded this different track of writing. When we read letters like Philippians we find that they had specifically been participating in the ministry Paul had and working towards the gospel (c.f. Philippians 1:5, 7, 12-18, 27; 2:15, 17-18, etc.).

## Apostleship is Apostleship

*Paul writes about the most eminent apostles, who is this referring?*

If we assume Paul’s earlier writing to the church as a reference to which apostles were eminent then we can look at 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:22, 9:5, and 15:5. Other than Cephas/Peter we don’t see others mentioned by name. The apostleship role did not seem to have anything to do with a pecking order or hierarchy, but instead was a responsibility for sharing the gospel and establishing the church. This comes with it several aspects that are worth calling out in this context from Paul’s letter:

1. Signs that verify the role’s having been given by God (Acts 3:1-9; Acts 19:11)
2. The Holy Spirit revealed doctrine through them so that the gospel could be given clearly and without division (Acts 2:42; Acts 11:1-18; Acts 15:1-29)

Paul’s letters we have more of, but it is clear that the other apostles were engaged in the same body building activities.

## Signs & Wonders

If we review 1 Corinthians 12-14 we see that the church in Corinth had a very confused understanding of the miraculous. Their understanding of the body was impacted, their understanding of the purpose of the church gathering was impacted, and their desire for social status damaged meant they didn’t see abiding as a key issue. Paul did signs and wonders to establish the church as an apostle; healings change lives (thus his desire to have the thorn of the flesh taken away supernaturally).

*Why do signs and wonders not maintain a body’s long term growth?*

## Mistreated by No Financial Burden

Paul then asks them how they were mistreated beyond not having had their finances taxed by his presence. If Paul was doing the miraculous that could not be perceived as mistreatment. When Paul came through and was not taking their financial resources this is indicative of the Holy Spirit leading him to not be asking for financial support. 2 Corinthians 11:9 mentions this as being a goal of Paul’s when he is at Corinth each and every time, so we see that the finances were a concern there – and in relationship to the collection of donations for Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:7-9) – we see Paul is concerned for the greater church and not himself.

*Why is it the church should not ‘muzzle the ox’ for elders, but Paul doesn’t want resources from Corinth?*

# What’s Going to Happen (14-15)

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

## Ready to Come to You

Paul’s letter is partially in response to their being offended by him not coming again, but he references here that he wants to come see them as being ‘ready’. This is not to get their hopes up and then dash them, but an earnest expression of his desire to do so. His focus isn’t on the readiness in this case, but in his motivation: he wants to see them! 2 Corinthians 13:1 also indicates Paul is coming to see them even though his previous letter (that we don’t have) says he was not going to be able to at an earlier time.

## No What is Yours, but You!

Paul doesn’t care about their financial assets, their material wealth, or their ability to make him become wealthy in any way – he wants to see the believers he loves in Corinth. Though we find the expressions of intensity hard in this book we should see that Paul’s correction are rooted in establishing the church and maintaining their integrity so that when he returns there will be a body at all. Carnality tends towards tribalism and division, which is utterly destructive to bodies and as an apostle Paul wanted none of that in the church. What he desired was for his ability to return to Corinth and see his beloved family in Christ there.

## The Parent Should Not Burden the Children

As a general financial illustration Paul refers to his needing to be prepared so as to not have his spiritual children take care of him in a burdensome way. While entire books have been on personal finance and this verse may have been included, Paul’s focus is on the principle of stewardship here and how his stewardship is focused on caring for the church in Corinth.

*What are some of the problems of ignoring this principle for the church in general?*

*What are some of the problems of ignoring this principle for Paul?*

## Expended for You Because I Love You

*Why was Paul willing to be expended for the body in Corinth?*

Paul was willing to be fully poured out on the Corinthians’ behalf as a service of love. His commendation to them was that they love him in return. When we consider 1 Corinthians 13 we see he had already called for them to be loving in an agape way toward all believers. Paul wanted that to be in the body, but also extended towards himself as he loved them so sacrificially.

# What Happened (16-19)

16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit. 17 Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I? 18 I urged Titus to go, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps? 19 All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for your up-building, beloved.

## I Took You in by Deceit

Paul’s ‘deceit’ was like his ‘foolishness’ – he’s being exaggeratively facetious here. He deceived them by not being a burden and by sending Titus and ‘the brother’ also as not having been abusive of the Corinthian church.

### Titus Was Representative of Paul’s Ministry as Well

Paul’s selection of companions and representatives was extremely careful and dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He had suffered quite a loss with John-Mark and Barnabas earlier and so Titus as a representative was not an arbitrary decision. Paul’s defense of his ministry here now reaches to Titus’ as an extension of his own. Paul writes similarly of Timothy in 1 Corinthians 4:17.

### The Same Spirit, Same Steps

It’s worth noting that Paul and Titus operate by the same spirit and ministry approach. Paul, as an admonisher elsewhere, tells believers that they should be walking with one spirit (c.f. 1 Corinthians 6:7; Philippians 1:27) and to be copying Paul as he copies Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1). If we wonder what that looks like in those places it looks like Titus shadowing Paul’s example.

## The Craftiness Revealed: It’s for Your Upbuilding

Paul finally pulls out the surprise ‘deception’ of this letter: All of it is for the building up of the body in Corinth! So the defense of his ministry looked like it was just a defense of his ministry, but really it served a greater purpose.

*Why was Paul worried about their being built up?*

# Fear of What Could Happen (20-21)

20 For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps there will be strife, jealousy, angry tempers, disputes, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances; 21 I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.

## What Does Spiritual Parenting Look Like?

Just as in chapter 11:29 we see Paul is concerned about the carnality of the church in Corinth. His work with that church was intensive and hands on and he had spent much time there attempting to correct them and restore them and build them up. His fear was that as a steward before God he would be found wanting in their establishment as a body.

### Spiritual Parents

Paul’s example of spiritual parenting represents the following cyclical pattern:

1. Share the Gospel
   1. Who we are in Adam (Romans 5:8-10)
   2. We are alive in Christ (Romans 5:11-21)
2. Establish why we live for Christ
   1. Grace as a motivator (Romans 6:1-2)
   2. Sanctification as normative (Romans 6:3-23)
   3. We have died to the Law (Romans 7:1-25)
3. Establish principle of Abiding life
   1. Empowered by the Holy Spirit to live His life (Romans 8:1-8)
   2. Understanding progressive sanctification through transformation and conformation (Romans 8:9-39)
4. Prod towards next steps
   1. Correct and challenge to build up the body (Romans 12:1-13)
   2. Share the Gospel (Romans 12:14-21)

*Do we simply tell those who we’re discipling what to believe?*

It is a common practice to tell smaller children what to believe, but it’s important to explain to maturing believers core principles like hermeneutics and how to study the Bible consistently so that there I no division in the body.

### Spiritual Listeners

As listeners we need to understand the pattern and be receptive to it. We need to understand our role within the longevity of the church so that we are not just learners, but passers on of the truth of the Gospel and its impact on our lives. Truth doesn’t stop with us as listeners and learners.

## Pre-Correction

Paul’s letters are rooted in correcting the problems of carnality in Corinth and the goal Paul has for that is that his arrival will result in a further building up of meaty doctrine rather than further correction. This will require Titus (who is bringing this letter) to help the church body sort out any leadership issues so that the leaders of the church can then shepherd the body and help restore normative abiding life (instead of sinning), doctrinal understanding, fellowship between those needing reconciliation, and resulting in a Christ-like body life in Corinth.

# Conclusion

Paul brings us in this second to last chapter to a surprise purpose of the letter: the building of the body in Corinth. Paul is going to transition into a corrective practices section in the next chapter and without this context of building up as the focus it will be hard to understand his intensity. Paul’s fear was real given the sequential reports of Timothy and Titus about the body’s health. Paul was optimistic, but he knew that sin, when it takes hold, can be a long fought battle, so he wanted them to be realizing the seriousness of the problem, not just the forgiveness of the problem.

*Why, while under grace, do we still take sin seriously?*