
Personal Integrity in Ministry Planning

2 Corinthians 1:12-24

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The history of the church is full of examples of people misunderstanding leadership motivations and ministries.

People can be tough – like the purported churchgoers in a small town in northwest Scotland, of whom it was said that while others went to church to hear the gospel preached, they went to hear if the gospel was preached! Such hostile, quick-to-see-the-worst, graceless attributes are as old as the church.

People can be unfair – like the criticism leveled at one church leader whose actions and focus on preparation for preaching were regularly misinterpreted as being uninterested in people. A ten-minute window of time between services were being mapped over his whole ministry.

People can be wicked – like the several year period in which people locked the pews they had bought or donated to prevent Charles Simeon's congregation from being able to sit while he preached.

Well, none of this is new. Paul faced similar issues in several of the churches he was involved with. The church at Corinth was a real problem. What had been questions about Paul's authority and status in the church had become personal and ugly.

Paul had planned to come to Corinth and had evidently announced those plans. He later changed those travel plans due to the poor response to his letters.

The church began questioning his integrity and truthfulness. They accused him of saying he was coming when he had no intention to come. We can put it nicely and say they were challenging his integrity. This sounds to me like some of the tiptoeing you heard in media about recent political leaders in the US government. Frankly, they were accusing Paul of lying when he said he was coming.

Right at the opening of this letter, Paul wants to address this. With real skill and diplomacy, he both defends himself and encourages a restoration of what is obviously a very broken relationship.

Its Strong Affirmation (v. 12-14)

Paul's conscience is clear. There was no resorting to worldly wisdom or ways.

¹² For 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. ¹³ For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—
¹⁴ just 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.

This paragraph begins and ends with an unusual use of "boasting". Paul generally has eschewed using this word in a positive way. But now as a counter to their boasting, he has his own boasts.

He boasts in how he has behaved among them. He is contrasting what governs his behavior with what seems to be governing theirs.

There will be a reciprocal boasting in each other before the Lord in the final day. Hopefully what has been confrontation will become commendation.

Watch then how Paul turns their boasting in themselves on its head...

Of his Godly Behavior (v. 12)

His conscience was clear. The conscience is the internal function of the soul designed by God to make moral self-judgments. So Paul is saying that his assertions are attested to by his conscience. He is not guilty of what they accuse him of.

He was guided by integrity and grace, not worldly ways. It is the world that espouses a way of talking in which what is said could be taken either way. Doublespeak was the norm then and is a high art form practiced by politicians and by advertising. But Paul says that this form of worldly wisdom did not guide him. His conscience is informed by the Scriptures. He knows what he intended when he promised to come. He was not using doublespeak to assure them of his care for them while having no intention to actually carry out that promise.

Instead, his own words and actions were marked by simplicity and sincerity. He was not creating elaborate schemes or ways of talking. He was not saying one thing and intentionally doing another. He had rejected the world's ways and wisdom. He had functioned according to the grace of God. The decisions he made were largely in the area of wisdom. They were not made by the "leading of the Spirit." He simply chose what was best. He simply did what he did by the grace of God.

Now I want to pause and call and commend this kind of speech among ourselves and particularly from our leaders. We want to be clear. We want to be honest. We want you to be able to trust what we say. And we ask that you be careful reading hidden motives and agendas into what we say. Don't make assumptions that what we purpose, plan and execute as elders fits into a business model of leadership. Don't read into a

transition plan for pulpit ministry that I am retiring. And as you lead ministries, be honest, clear and trustworthy in what you say you will do.

Of his Personal Goal (v. 13-14)

He was aiming for them to understand him in what he wrote. Oh, they had understood some. But apparently only enough to actually misunderstand him. They were half-listening. When it gets to this point, they were looking for something. When you start looking for something, you often find it. So instead of reading and listening to Paul in what he said, they were listening to him through the lens of what they thought of him.

His writing to them was also clear, simple and honest. HE had been so honest, so clear that the rebuke and correction were painful. But it was easier to turn around and attack Paul's integrity than to listen carefully to what he wrote and repent of their error and sin.

But Paul is hopeful that God will bring repentance and restore the breach. He hopes that when the day of accounting to the Lord comes, they will be able to commend one another.

Its Personal Clarification (v. 15-18)

Paul's intentions are clarified. There was no vacillation in his plans.

¹⁵ Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶ I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷ Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say "Yes, yes" and "No, no" at the same time?

His Desires (v. 15-16)

He wants them to have a second experience of grace. What does this mean?

It is a facet of Paul's ministry as an Apostle. God had appointed Paul to be an Apostle. Through him God's grace flowed into their lives.

It is connected to Paul's earlier visit. Just like before, his coming to them would bring a certain kind of grace to them.

It is what Paul will deliver rather than what they have mis-characterized what his visits are like.

This is not some second work of grace that is related to an extraordinary experience of the Spirit or a new realization of the Lordship of Christ. Paul is not bringing them something that will launch into the power of the Spirit or the deeper life. The grace that will come will lift them out of the deep sin they have fallen into. It seems to me that he is asserting the possibility that many in the church need God's saving grace. As this letter unfolds, we will see that to be that case. Here is the first intimation that Paul is serious questions about the genuineness of the faith of many in the church.

Paul wanted to bring them God's grace. Paul wanted to visit them as a part of his travel itinerary. It seems that he actually intended two visits: one on the way and the other on the return from Macedonia.

His Honesty (v. 17)

With a penetrating question, he rejects their criticism. Was he functioning according to the flesh? Was he treating his commitment casually? He was not saying, "yes, yes" or "no, no" at the same time. This is what the church accused him of.

When he said he was coming, he was not planning something else. He planned to come and said so. He was honest and clear in his speech. He was not equivocating or wavering or hesitating. He knew at that point what he wanted to do and was determined to do. God knows his heart. God knows what he was thinking when he made the plans and committed to coming.

Its Theological Foundation (v. 18-22)

Paul's reasons are communicated. There was no violation of God's pattern of promise-keeping.

¹⁸ As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹ For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰ For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

God's Sure Promises (v. 18-20)

Want to know how sure the church can be that Paul's words were true, honest, trustworthy? It was just as sure as God's faithfulness. Paul found in the faithfulness of God the motivation for his own faithfulness to his word. God was trustworthy. We should be trustworthy.

Where did Paul focus the faithfulness of God? In the sure promise of Jesus's coming in the incarnation, referenced as Son of God and the Messiah. All through the Old Testament, God promised over and over again to send His Son, Jesus, the Messiah into the world. He promised to come to His people and deliver them from their sins. He promised that Jesus would be Redeemer and Ruler over His people. But this promise was long in coming to be fulfilled. But the promise never wavered, was never in doubt, was not Yes and No. It was totally Yes. God's faithfulness and trustworthiness was staked to it.

But, only God through Christ can guarantee that a promise will absolutely be Yes. All God's promises are Yes, Amen, secured through Christ. Therefore, we also say, "Amen, So be it, Yes," to God's promises in Christ. But we are human, frail and dependent. We are not like God who can absolutely make His promises come true. We

make promises intending to keep them We endeavor to keep them. But we are dependent on God's providences to be able to. This is part of the point here. Our faithfulness and trustworthiness is ALWAYS under God's providences. So being Christians means we give grace to those who made commitments with the best intentions but God in His providences brought about something else.

God's Saving Provision (v. 21-22)

Look at what God has done to fulfill His promises and to provide for the church.

God has established both Paul's team and the people in Corinth in Christ

God has anointed us setting us aside to serve.

God has also put His seal or mark of ownership on us.

God has given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee that we will be His.

This is what God has done for Paul for the believers at Corinth and for all of us.

Note how Paul roots his conduct in the character of God. God is like this and so I behave like this. It is not just at the principled level, but at the detail level. God speaks clearly, plainly, honestly. He makes promises. There is no wavering, vacillation or double-speak in His words. And so, that hugely governs how Paul speaks and makes commitments.

Its Divine Witness (v. 23-24)

God's witness is called. There was no attempt to be a dictator over their faith.

²³ But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴ Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

To his Motivation (v. 23)

Paul explains why he changed his mind. He decided not to come to them in order to spare them more pain. This is the truth. God is a witness. He decided not to come out of concern for what would happen when he did come. He wants to give them an opportunity to listen, to consider, to repent. So his motivation was not to serve himself but to show mercy to them.

To his Manner (v. 24)

He does not want to dictate to their faith. They stand firm in their faith. He intends to partner with them for their joy. Now, this makes me stop a moment and ask why he would say this? Given Paul's regular use of irony you have to wonder.

Were they accusing him of trying to lord it over their faith? Or was Paul actually exercising his legitimate authority over them?

Were they really standing firm in their faith? Or had they functionally slipped away from the faith that is common to the churches?

Was their relationship really full of joy? Wasn't their relationship actually full of trouble and pain?

Yet this was really Paul's hope in ministering to others. He wanted to minister in such a way that they were advancing in their faith with the result that they stood firm in their faith and thus, there was joy in the relationship.

Reflect and Respond

There is a lot to reflect on from this text for all who lead the church.

The Lord's character is the foundation and motivation for our conduct. He is faithful and trustworthy. We should be faithful and trustworthy.

Leaders need to conduct themselves with honesty in their words and particularly, in their commitments and promises. Be sure you mean what you say and say what you mean.

Leaders need to have some level of flexibility as God's providences unfold. We plan and make commitments but there must be some ability to adapt to what God is doing.

Leaders should be allowed to clarify misunderstandings. Because it is easy to impute motives and misunderstand intentions, you need to be open and poised to listen and accept explanations.

And for those who are loving and following leaders.

Recognize that leaders are usually doing the best they can. There is no sovereign leading of the Spirit in wisdom issues that guarantees infallibility.

If you have questions about a leader's decision or direction, ask, don't assume.

Work together to grow in maturity, to be stable in the faith and to work together with joy.

So, what is needed in these kinds of situations? Grace. We need grace to lead well. We need to give grace to those who lead. We hope for grace to overflow in all our work of ministry together.