
Relationship Pain in Ministry Interactions

2 Corinthians 2:1-11¹

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Shepherding and serving as a leader is often very difficult.

The pressures of serving in the midst of busy lives...

The desire to do ministry well and to see people served well...

The love for people that wants to them to be pleasing to God...

The struggle sometimes when people quietly undermine or openly oppose ministry efforts...

In the gospels, we often see Jesus' pain as He engages disciples and followers...

Paul struggled with the church at Corinth. There were many problems and much pain in the relationship. Ministry can bring real anxiety and worry. Paul had been hugely surprised by the opposition to his ministry to them. This occurred during his second visit to the church in Corinth. Paul had founded the church. Now he was seeking to meet and correct the problems that had arisen there. He cut short his visit and went back to Ephesus. While there he wrote a severe letter rebuking and correcting the Corinthians. Not long after he sent Titus to Corinth to find out how it had been received. He traveled to Troas where they had agreed to rendezvous. (Adapted from Kent Hughes)

How do we know this is the back story? It is difficult to discern. The church knew what Paul was referring to in this letter. After all, they lived it. We have to piece it together from bits and pieces in the two letters Paul wrote to them. Listen to what Paul says at the end of the book alluding to these events. **2 Corinthians 12:11-18** (NLT)

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!

¹⁴ Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you. For children are not obligated to save up for

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their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

...

¹⁶ But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit. ¹⁷ Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? ¹⁸ I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?

After the Apostle Paul's defense of his integrity, which he grounded in conscience, grace, truth, mutuality, mercy, and love (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4), he then turned in 2:5-11 to the one who had been disciplined and maybe had attacked him. but not as we might expect. Paul pled for forgiveness for the offender because he had already suffered the discipline of the church.

A Troubled Relationship (v. 1-4)

Paul refers to his previous letter to the believers in Corinth and his heart for them.

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.

¹ For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ² For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³ And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴ For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

The Purpose for Writing Now (v. 1-3)

He wrote hoping the church would address these issues before he visited them. He intended to spare them pain by not coming as planned. But that does not mean that he was willing to ignore the problems still troubling the church. And he wrote so that there would be no repeat of what happened before. He did not want to go through the pain that he experienced on his prior visit.

The Pain in Writing Now (v. 4)

What he before was out of great distress and anguish. He was not angry. He was not vindictive. He was hurt and deeply concerned for their spiritual well-being. He was not trying to hurt them in return. He was writing them out of love and care and concern for them.

A Needed Restoration (v. 5-11)

Broken relationships need reconciliation and restoration. The path to restoration winds its way through repentance, confession and forgiveness.

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

The Difficulty (v. 5–6)

Many point to the disciplined man in 1 Corinthians 5 as being the person referred to here. The church previously ousted an immoral and unrepentant believer (see 1 Corinthians 5). He had repented but the church had not restored him.

The problem is that this does not fit into the flow of the text. Whatever the man referred to here had done was a sin against Paul, that was public in the church, that the man and the church had repented of. Yet the church was now refusing to forgive him. Since this man sinned against Paul, it is more likely that this is the man who publicly opposed Paul and accused him of all the things that Paul has been defending himself against. Paul's appeal to the church is to forgive the man because Paul has forgiven him. They should not be carrying an offense him on Paul's behalf nor because of their own embarrassment.

Kent Hughes and Paul Barnett write helpfully on this:

It had happened like this: When Paul learned from Timothy's visit to Corinth that there were troubles in the church, Paul paid the Corinthians an unscheduled visit, presuming that he would quickly fix things and be on his way. To his surprise, he was opposed to his face. Apparently a leader of the Corinthian church publicly assailed Paul while the church passively observed (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:11). The attacker evidently had come under the sway of Paul's opponents who had recently come to Corinth. As to the nature of the insults, we surmise that they had to do with Paul's integrity—namely, that he was dishonest and double-minded and lacking in courage. Also, it was likely charged or insinuated that he was appropriating the collection for the poor in Jerusalem for his own needs. Moreover, all this was probably laced with *ad hominem* comments about his ministerial effectiveness. In any event the humiliating surprise attack, coupled with a lack of support by the church, had so taken Paul aback that he elected to leave Corinth for a time.

It was in the wake of this rejection that Paul wrote his severe, painful letter, poignantly described in the opening verses of chapter 2. (Hughes, p. 47)

Paul's method of dealing with this problem is interesting in establishing principles of pastoral relationships. Unlike the newcomers who 'enslave' them (11:20) Paul does not lord it over the Corinthians (verse 24). Jesus is their Lord; Paul is their servant (4:5), their 'co-worker' (1:24). Again, unlike the newcomers, he does not

pretend to be self-sufficient (2:16; 3:4-6), but expresses his dependence upon them (verse 2). Although he is their apostle he also belongs to them (1:6).

... If Paul is transparent, then, clearly, so too should the Corinthians be transparent. In embodying the gospel qualities of dependence and openness Paul shows himself to be the great Christian leader and teacher he was, continually modelling a godly lifestyle before the people. (Barnett, p.44-45)

Whichever it is and it could possibly be both - the man who confronted Paul was the man the church had failed to remove and led to the painful confrontation in the church and with the letter - the underlying problem is the same.

The man had sinned. He had sinned against Paul. He had repented. Paul had forgiven him.

The Directives (v. 7-10)

⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ...

The man repented, forgiveness had been granted and therefore, Paul commands the church to restore him, lest Satan take advantage of their unforgiving spirit.

Now this somewhat complicated text is saying some clear things. I am going to write these in a way that acknowledges that we do not know for certain whether the sinning and disciplined man was the same as in 1 Corinthians or is the man who sinfully confronted Paul. We do know the following.

Someone in the church had sinned and had refused to repent of that sin.

The church had disciplined that person, removing him from the fellowship as directed by the Scriptures.

The man had repented of his sin. It is possible he has sought the forgiveness of the people he has sinned against who appear to be Paul and the church.

The person sinned against has forgiven the offender. That appears to be Paul here. The language also could be that if the church forgives, then Paul will forgive as well.

Forgiveness and restoration will help them man to not be overcome with too much sadness over his sin and its consequences. Restoration allows him to turn from grief to gladness.

The church has not restored him. Paul seems to be accusing the church of not forgiving and thus not restoring him.

The church is commanded by Paul to forgive and restore since there has been repentance and forgiveness by the offended party.

The church is to show its true love for him by restoring him. God's kind of love is shown in forgiving and restoring repentant believers. This will reaffirm the church's love for him and his welcome into the church.

The church is being tested by their obedience. Will they be a true church? Will they show that they are truly a Biblical church?

The church at Corinth struggled in so many of its relationships. It struggled with division among its leaders which fractured the church. It struggled to deal with sinning people in the church. It struggled with women who were defying the leadership. It struggled with people who misused spiritual gifts. It struggled to submit to Paul and to treat him with respect. And now it struggled with forgiving the repentant. Hopefully, they will overcome the inertia of disobedience and do what they should.

The Danger (v. 11)

¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

We must be aware that our enemy, Satan, is trying to destroy the church. He can do so through error. He can do so through division. He can do so through disobedience. He can do so through a lack of forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration. So while God is testing us, even as a church, Satan is tempting us to disobedience, unloving attitudes, unforgiveness and failures to recognize the repentant as restored to Christ.

The gospel speaks into and brings about the resolution (v. 12-17)

¹² When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, ¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.

¹⁴ But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? 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.

Reflect and Respond

To be a church that pleases God:

We must confront people in the church who keep on sinning and refuse to repent of that sin.

We must do discipline, removing the person from the fellowship as directed by the Scriptures.

When the person repents of sin, forgiveness is to be granted.

If someone was sinned against, then they must forgive the offender.

We are, as a church, commanded by Paul to forgive and restore since there has been repentance and forgiveness by the offended party.

The church is to restore the person as an act of God's kind of love.

Forgiveness and restoration will help the person to not be overcome with too much sadness over his sin and its consequences.

We are being tested by our obedience. Will we be a true church? Will we show that we are truly a Biblical church?

May the Lord help us all to be serious about sin, quick to repent and poised to forgive.

Let us commit to be a church that does NOT cause pain in ministry relationships.