

2 Corinthians and Christian Leadership

- 1) Charles Spurgeon was a nineteenth-century preacher who regularly preached to vast congregations in London. His essay “Earnestness: Its Marring and Maintenance”¹ argues that a preacher, to be godly and effective, must be zealously committed to the message and to spreading the gospel (82) – “for if we are not zealous, neither will they be” (81). Preaching must be something one feels compelled to do (84) and truly believes (84). He proposes four ways to cultivate this “earnestness”:
 - i) **Study scripture**, without being excessively focused on abstract theory (82-83)
 - ii) **Take care in the company you keep**: neither with those who are too empty in their pursuits (83) nor those who lack compassion and enthusiasm for the kingdom (83)
 - iii) **Go where the need is**: Visit not just middle-class living rooms but also slums (“love men rather than opinions”); “get into close quarters with those who are in an anxious state” (86)
 - iv) **Feed your zeal with prayer**, both by yourself and with others (85)

What do you think of his advice? Is there anything in Spurgeon’s advice unique to preachers or do the same principles apply to other church leaders and laypersons?

- 2) Running throughout 1 and 2 Corinthians is the theme of *weakness*. Paul says that

God chose what is *weak* in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (1 Cor 1:27b-29)

Paul admits to, and even embraces his weakness: “And I came to you in *weakness* and in much trembling” (1 Cor 2:3), despite encouraging believers elsewhere to be “strong in the Lord and in the power of his might” (Eph 6:10) – after all, in Christ believers are “more than conquerors” (Rom 8:37). Paul tells the Corinthians, “For we rejoice when we are *weak* and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect” (2 Cor 13:9). Paul’s view culminates in the famous passage where he refers to his “thorn in the flesh”²,

...but [God] said to me, “my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:9-10; cf. Also Jn 15:5)

So for Paul, “weaknesses” includes a vast array: low status and natural ability (1 Cor 1:27-29); hardships, persecutions, etc. (2 Cor 12:9-10); and internal forms of suffering such as feeling afflicted, perplexed and cast down (2 Cor 4:7-10).

Paul goes beyond simply saying these are all evidence that he’s more invested than the “super apostles” who are trying to oust him. For Paul, we “carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of

¹ *Encounter with Spurgeon*, Helmut Thielicke (Fortress, Philadelphia) 1963, pp. 80-87.

² As we discussed last time, interpreters have historically disagreed on the identity of the “thorn in the flesh”; some have found physical ailments and handicaps, others see Paul’s opponents, and yet others think he refers to an internal burden such as guilt, anxiety or depression over his fellow Jews, or some sort of temptation.

Jesus may be revealed in our body" (2 Cor 4:10). That is, Paul's perspective is the exact opposite of Nietzsche's: That which *does* kill us makes us stronger.

How do we lead or minister in the church with this perspective? And, based on 2 Cor 4:15-18 and elsewhere, how can we keep from being discouraged when beset by the troubles of ministry? What mindset or practices are needed for us, in those moments of weariness, to "[be] transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" as we "reflect the Lord's glory" in our struggles (3:18)?

- 3) In 2 Corinthians Paul models his own five guidelines for godly leaders:
- a) **Fight for your people:** A faction within this congregation had seriously rebuffed Paul, shown support for more standard preachers and the rest of the congregation was slow in correcting the rebuff and had failed to oust the new leaders. Paul could easily have put his efforts elsewhere, but kept struggling for the heart of this church, a struggle he won.
 - b) **Be transparent, and even willing to embarrass yourself:** Paul was not ashamed to share his love with the Corinthians nor to upbraid them for their behavior. Paul hated to do so but boasted of his spiritual accomplishments when it proved necessary to win back this church for Christ.
 - c) **Repeat the basic Christian viewpoint:** They had heard the gospel, and God had worked powerfully among them, but they needed to hear again the message of the suffering servant.
 - d) **Be willing to play by the cultural rules to win hearts:** Much recent scholarship on this letter shows how Paul made the effort to follow the rhetorical conventions of his day in order to combat the polished speakers who were trying to take over his church.
 - e) **Recognize the stakes of acculturation:** There is no indication that the "super-apostles" were undermining belief in Christ, and in fact there's no refutation of false doctrine in 2 Corinthians. Still, Paul unloads the heavy artillery because something just as serious was undermining the foundations of their faith: the Corinthians were being taught that true spirituality need not involve suffering.

What else can leaders learn from the way Paul handles the sticky situation with the Corinthians? How do the above differ from or overlap with Spurgeon's advice?

- 4) 2 Corinthians is about Paul's response to accusations of malfeasance and weakness, his attempt to wrest control from interloping (Jewish-Christian?) leaders who were questioning his credentials, and the basic message of the cross. 2 Corinthians is also chock full of famous verses. What does each of these refer to in context?
- "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (5:16-17)
 - "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?" (6:14)
 - "The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers" (4:4)
 - "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light." (11:14)
 - "But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere." (2:14)

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Fun fact: There's good reason to believe Paul succeeded with the Corinthians. However, that doesn't mean everything remained hunky-dory. Some years later Clement of Rome wrote to the Corinthians castigating them again for their factions and writing, "It is a shameful report, beloved, extremely shameful and unworthy of your training in Christ, that on account of one or two persons the steadfast and ancient church of the Corinthians is being disloyal to the elders!" (1 Clement 47:6)