

**2 Corinthians 1:12-2:17**  
**Probably the best ministry in the world**  
**Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool**

Some people just have to be right all the time don't they? You know the kind of person I mean? They can't bear losing an argument, asking for directions or conceding defeat in a game. That kind of person is really irritating to have to be with aren't they?

There's just no sense of graciousness about them and it's very difficult to be a work colleague, spouse or even friend of someone who needs to constantly be right about everything. I know this – because I am, by nature, just such a person myself.

That kind of compulsive need to be right all the time is, of course, simply a manifestation of significant personal insecurity. As if I will be liked and respected only if I can prove myself cleverer than other people.

Continual self-justification is a terrible idol; at once massively destructive, because it inevitably belittles anybody who crosses your path with a different opinion, and massively fragile, because someone exposing even the smallest error in your brilliance can bring the whole edifice tumbling down like a house of cards.

I don't know about you but my first instinctive reaction, as I read these verses of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, was to feel that he is doing something along those lines himself. Perhaps, I thought, Paul is one of those people who just can't bear to be in error. Perhaps, whatever the actual rights and wrongs of the situation, Paul is just going overboard here in feeling the need to justify everything he does – right down to the detail of his travel plans.

Well if, like me, that was your first reaction, I have to tell you that a more careful look at this passage will show that you, like me, have misunderstood what is going on here. For it turns out that Paul is not engaged in some defence of his own brilliance and perfection because he's a bit up himself. Not at all. In fact what is at stake as Paul explains his actions and thought processes to the Corinthian church is not merely his reputation but the very credibility of the good news about Jesus.

In this most personal of letters we're not looking at an apostle with a fragile ego who can't abide anyone thinking he might have made a mistake. Instead we see a man so passionate about the credibility of the message of Jesus that he is prepared to face down

unpleasant accusations about himself to make sure nobody can misunderstand his master.

**1      What Paul did: write instead of visit**

Reading the New Testament letters is sometimes a bit like listening to one half of a telephone conversation. All the things you need to know are here but it can take a little bit of work to piece all the information together.

The Corinthians who first received this letter, of course, knew perfectly well what Paul's plans had been and were now. But it's not quite so obvious to us. So I'll take you on a brief tour of these verses so we can reconstruct what's actually gone on...

We know from 1 Corinthians that Paul's first plan was to visit Corinth once again on his way to Jerusalem – to where he was taking some money for the relief of hard-pressed Christians.

But that plan was scuppered when he had to make an emergency visit to Corinth (which he calls his "painful visit" in 2:1) to sort out some kind of pastoral or theological crisis.

So his plan B, which presumably he told them about on his painful visit, was to visit Corinth twice more. The first time when he was on his way to Macedonia from Ephesus and the second time on route from Macedonia to Judea (show map).

But he didn't follow through that plan either. Instead, fearing that because some issues were still unresolved and his visit might again be painful for both them and him, he wrote to them instead, 2:3, sending his colleague Titus with the letter and arranging to meet Titus in a city called Troas to hear a report back about the Corinthian's response to his letter; 2:12.

In the end that plan didn't quite work out either – when he didn't find Titus in Troas Paul, by now quite beside himself with concern, abandoned his ministry there and headed off to Macedonia where, wonderfully, he actually met up with Titus who gave him the news from Corinth that prompted this letter, 2 Corinthians we are now reading.

Now we have to remember that there were some people in the church at Corinth who, for whatever reason, perhaps for a variety of different reasons, had

taken against Paul.

You can imagine how they might respond to this whole situation. Well, they say, what kind of a man is this? One minute it's plan A, then it's plan B and now we're onto plan C. What kind of a leader is he? He can't even make up his own mind! He's clearly just a people pleaser – saying whatever thing he thinks at the time is going to make people happy without any real intention of actually following through on his so-called plans.

We're not told this specifically but I suspect that there were also accusations that his cutting down from 2 visits to one and writing them a letter that was clearly very difficult – 2:4 says that he wrote with great distress and anguish of heart – meant that they weren't really that much of a priority for Paul.

Some people, perhaps, were suggesting that he now had other, more important, friends to be ministering to and that he was harshly and unlovingly cutting them out of the loop.

Well, whatever the precise allegations, it's clear that there were a number of people in Corinth who were profoundly unimpressed by Paul's actions. People who used their unhappiness to stir up others in the church and undermine Paul's authority.

Those, then, are the circumstances. So let's turn now to see what Paul has to say in response to his accusers...

## **2 Why Paul did it: because he loved the Corinthians**

Just occasionally, from time-to-time, one or other of my small children misbehaves. You know how it is. Before I because a parent people would say to me things like "oh I hate telling the kids off. I'm sure it's more painful for more than it is for them." And I would smile sweetly, nod and say something sympathetic and think "what ARE you talking about? Of course it's more painful for them to be punished than it is for you." Not any more. Those people were right! Making Rosie miss her pudding or depriving Tom of an episode of Bob the Builder for some misdemeanor is just incredibly painful. You look at their little sad faces and wish you didn't have to do it.

But as every parent knows the way to really love your children is not simply to give them what they want all the time. Because that is to create not only a massive millstone for your own neck but to set them on a path to arrogant, self-centredness that will make their own

lives probably very disappointing for them, and certainly very difficult for everyone else they meet.

Real love involves tough choices. It sometimes needs hard words. It often takes difficult decisions. And that kind of love, Paul insists, is exactly the motivation that lay behind his changed travel plans and his difficult letter. He is most definite about it. Look at 1:23 – "*I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth.*"

He loves this church very much and, 2:3, he doesn't want to be distressed by people who, as partners who share his faith in Christ, ought to make him joyful and glad. He wrote to them, 2:4, not to have a go at them or flatter them but to let them know the depth of his love for them. Paul behaved towards them the way he did because he loved them.

The opening paragraph of our section really summarizes Paul's own feelings about how he has dealt with the Corinthian church. His conscience clearly tells him that he has acted, as a messenger of Jesus, with great purity and sincerity, in his relationships with everybody. And, he says, that is especially the case with them. Not because he has had less integrity with other people but because he has spent so much time with the Corinthians that they ought to know better than others how transparent and honest he is with people. He hasn't treated them according to "worldly wisdom" – perhaps better rendered "cunningly" or "shrewdly" – but according to God's grace.

It's very easy to treat people according to worldly wisdom. I've been reading a book this week which is all about conversation skills and meeting new people. It's quite an interesting book and there are lots of helpful practical tips in it to make you a better communicator and a more engaging conversationalist. But I have to say that the fundamental basis of the book is quite disturbing. Because it's all based around you getting to know the people you want to know who you think will make your life better for you. In the end the use the book makes of honing your communication skills is to let you get what you want out of people for your own ends. That is a shrewd way of dealing with people. A worldly way. And that's not what Paul was like. He dealt with them in love. How could they know? How could they tell he wasn't just a flatterer?

Well, 1:13, because of the way he wrote to them. It was all stuff they could read and understand. He was straightforward. There were no hidden agendas. Nothing you had to read between the lines. Just the

basic realities of life set before them. Paul didn't hide anything. There were no weasel words. He just told it how it was.

And sometimes that meant saying hard things. But because he loved them Paul said the hard things anyway. That is brilliantly illustrated by some of the things Paul had to say in the painful letter that he wrote to them.

We don't know exactly what was in that letter – God, in his great wisdom, has not chosen to preserve it for us. But we do know that one of the big issues was a man (or woman) who had behaved very badly in the church and, as a result, had to undergo some sort of process of discipline.

Let's have a look at 2:5-11 and see how Paul's love led him to deal with this issue...

We don't know what this man or woman had done. Some speculate that Paul here is talking about the man who had been sleeping with his stepmother and is talked about in 1 Corinthians 5. I think it's much more likely that this was actually somebody who had made a personal attack on the apostle Paul himself – but you can ask about that at the end if you like.

Anyway whatever the offence Paul's love for the church at Corinth leads him to be clear that it's not all about him being offended; it's about the undermining of the church itself. They have all been grieved by this bad deed – whatever it was.

Have you ever wondered why it is that if you stab someone it is not them or their family, generally, who prosecute you but the state – in Britain it is, technically, the Queen who will take you to court.

Why is that? Well it's because where a crime is committed it is not just the immediate victim who is offended against. It is the whole of society. The nation as represented by the Queen. So the nation steps in to punish the offender.

Well, Paul says, it is just the same in the church. When someone does wrong in the church everybody is grieved by it. Some more than others he says. And he doesn't want to overestimate it or put it too severely. But everybody is effected.

And we need to remember that. If you take advantage of someone in the church financially. If you treat somebody cruelly in a romantic relationship. If you speak ill of another church member. If you do any of those things – or hundreds more – it won't do to hide

behind the standard British excuse of "it's nobody else's business." Because it is somebody else's business. It is the church's business.

That's not to say that everybody has to know everything about every failing. And many things are rightly best dealt with privately. But it does mean we have no ground for complaint if another church member, a leader or the church as a whole, picks us up on the way we have treated someone else in the family.

The offence is against the church as a whole.

Secondly the offence here, whatever it was, was important enough to merit some sort of formal church discipline. There are some things, Paul is clear, that have the potential for such a negative impact on the church that when they come to light they ought to be dealt with in some sort of ordered way.

Again that's not to say we ought to be sniffing round, looking for dirt on people to drag into the open. Not at all. Thinking the best of people unless we have really good reasons to do otherwise is always better!

But when things become widely known they need dealt with Paul says. And that happens, fundamentally, not by a pastor exercising some sort of rule. Not by a committee of important people deciding what to do with someone who has behaved wickedly. But with the whole church membership agreeing a course of action by a majority.

That's one of the reasons we really believe in church membership here at Christ Church. Because on the, fortunately, very rare occasions when we need to formally rebuke someone for something and take some sort of action, we need to know who the people are who have submitted themselves to that family discipline and who ought therefore to be responsible for deciding what to do.

Now in case there's anyone who is worried about this please let me assure you that our understanding at Christ Church is that this kind of discipline, removing someone from church membership, is to be used sparingly and only in the most obvious of circumstances; a member committing a serious crime perhaps, living in an immoral way, undermining the work of the church, denying the fundamental truths of the Christian faith or simply jacking in church and not continuing to be part of the family.

But, that said, church discipline by the members of a local church is a biblical thing to do and we are not

afraid to do it.

Third the purpose of Paul encouraging the congregation to discipline this person was not merely to punish him. It was to encourage him to see the seriousness of his error so that he would repent. Wonderfully it seems that this has happened and so Paul urges the Corinthians to forgive the wrongs done and welcome this brother or sister back into the church family with open arms. For them not to do this, 2:11, would be to play into the hands of the evil one.

There is nothing you can do that God cannot forgive you for. And so there is nothing you can do that the church cannot forgive you for – if you are repentant. That might mean making amends with people you have hurt. It might mean spending some time proving the sincerity of your repentance by a changed life. But nobody in this or any other church has any right to withhold forgiveness, warmth and love from any person who is sorry for their past wrongdoing and determined to turn away from it.

That, then, is how Paul dealt with the particular issue affecting this church. And you can see shining through it his love and concern for the Christian in Corinth.

But we're still left with the question: why does it matter so much? Why is Paul so seemingly obsessed with vindicating his own ministry? What does it matter if he got a few things wrong? Isn't this just some sort of insecurity driven ego-trip on his part?

Well as I hinted at the beginning that's not what's happening here. Because what Paul tells us is that his credibility as an apostle, a messenger of Jesus, affects not only what we ought to think of him – it reflects on the very gospel, the good news about Jesus itself.

Why does Paul feel the need to defend himself? Because the gospel messenger must match the gospel message.

### **3 Why it matters: because the gospel messenger must match the gospel message**

That's the connection that lies behind the seemingly slightly odd transition from 1:17 to 1:18. Did you notice that?

In 1:17 Paul is talking about his travel plans and says that when he changed his mind he did so thoughtfully and not just randomly or because he felt like it.

And then in 1:18 and following he's suddenly talking

about how Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises.

How on earth did he get from the one to the other? Well it took me quite a while to work it out but here's what I think – see if you agree with me...

The Corinthians, Paul is saying, know all about his message. They have heard him talk about Jesus. Paul, and his companions Silas and Timothy, all preached the same thing – a message about Jesus who is the fulfillment of all God's promises. A YES Jesus! A Jesus who doesn't change his mind and mess people about but whose word is trustworthy and consistent.

That was the message that Paul brought. And the Corinthian Christians knew that. They knew that God keeps his promises. They knew that he does so through Jesus. And, v20, they said "amen" to that. They agreed with Paul. They became Christians. They accepted the wonderful promises of God in Jesus and believed them as trustworthy and consistent.

In other words they knew that Paul was a man who dedicated his whole life to bringing a message that was about promises that are kept. That was about truth. That was about sincerity and holiness.

But if they are now saying that Paul can't be trusted. If they are now saying that when he changed his travel plans it was not because of a good reason but just because he doesn't love them or isn't really interested in them... If that's what they are saying they aren't just undermining Paul. They aren't just knocking his credibility. They are attacking the credibility of the whole Christian message.

For Paul it is not just moderately important that his life bears some resemblance to the life of Jesus. No. It is absolutely, crucially, totally essential that he deals with people according to God's grace. That Paul is, imperfectly yes, but absolutely sincerely and genuinely a reflection of the message that he brings.

It's a message about keeping promises. So Paul must keep his promises. It's a message about faithfulness. So Paul must be faithful. It's a message about truthfulness. So Paul must be truthful. It's a message about love. So Paul must be loving.

If the apostle, the messenger, of Christ isn't trustworthy. If it's true that he doesn't really love his churches. If he changes his travel plans not because it's the best thing to do but on a whim... well that undermines the very message about Jesus that he brings.

But “so what?” you may be wondering. Well the great news for us this morning is that Paul could be trusted. He didn’t mess the Corinthians about. He did deal with them, 1:12, in the holiness and sincerity that come from God.

And that’s good news for us too. Not because Paul is planning to visit us – he isn’t! But because it means that we can trust his message! Paul himself was captivated and transformed by the message about Jesus, and the evidence of his life is one of the wonderful testimonies to the reliability of the Christian gospel.

Paul sees himself, according to 2:14, as part of a procession. When a Roman general conquered another people group he would parade the prisoners through the streets of his town to show his greatness.

Well Paul sees himself as a prisoner of the victorious general Jesus. He is a happy prisoner. A willing prisoner. His heart has been won by the king who has not so much captured and captivated him.

Everything about Paul’s life has been changed by knowing Jesus. It’s as if something about Jesus so infuses Paul’s life that he smells of the Christian message. To some that smell is a wonderful scent of life as they accept that Christ has come to die so that their sins can be forgiven. To others the same smell is a terrible scent of death as they look at Paul but refuse to accept that they need a perfect man, a god-man, to be judged in their place.

Paul is a living aroma of his own message. And that should give us great confidence that his message is true.

This morning please can I encourage you to rejoice in the truth of the Christian message, as evidenced by the personal integrity and trustworthiness of its messenger, Paul.

Nobody today is an apostle. And the trustworthiness and transforming power of the Christian message has now been demonstrated in history and in the New Testament for all to see.

Despite that, however, it still matters today that the gospel messenger matches the gospel message.

That’s a truth that applies first of all to church leaders; in our church to the elders. Our task is to bring to people the aroma of Christ.

And who is equal to such a task? You might expect Paul to answer that question by saying “no-one”. Nobody is equal to the task of being Christ’s representatives in the world are they?

Well that’s not what Paul says. Who is equal to such a task? V17 people who do not peddle the word of God for profit and who speak with sincerity.

That, members of Christ Church, is what you need to be looking for in those you choose as elders of the church. Not that none of us should get paid. Paul will have much more to say about that later in the book and in his other letters and his general views seems to be that church leaders who earn their living from the church should be well paid – which is a challenge to most churches!

It’s OK for elders to be paid. But we should not be hucksters. Not in it for a fast buck. Not watering down the content of the Christian message to make it more popular so there’ll be more profit in it.

Of course what’s true of elders is true of everybody else too. There’s plenty of profit for many of you in not standing up for Jesus in your workplace – because standing up for Jesus in your workplace will cost you a promotion, a bonus or maybe even a job.

And there’s plenty of room for all Christians, not just for preachers, to fail to speak with sincerity about Jesus.

Let us all be warned. The gospel messenger must match the gospel message. We must be ourselves transformed by it. If we are not we will undermine it fundamentally. And God will not be pleased with that.

Paul is not a self-righteous egotist defending his every action.

But he is a man who understood that it mattered that his life reflected the things he taught.

This morning we should rejoice that Paul’s life matched his message – because that means the message is true. And you should be determined, if you’re a Christian here today, that your life too will demonstrate in the world the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

*Andrew Evans  
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