

# REALITY CHECK

By Steve Zeisler

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I saw a political cartoon this week decrying the leadership of our nation during this budget crisis. The first frame of the cartoon said something like, "Certain cuts will be necessary in Washington." The next frame showed the President and leaders of Congress with their heads lopped off---those were the "necessary cuts" to be taken if we are to extricate ourselves from the current mess.

Humanity longs to have effective leaders in every sphere, and feels shaky in their absence. Leadership is an important subject that the Bible speaks frequently about. In the passage we're studying now, chapters 10 through 13 of the book of 2 Corinthians, the grand theme is what Christian leadership ought to be. Paul exposes leadership in the city of Corinth that is not what it ought to be. He also makes himself known so the good example of apostolic leadership can be understood and embraced.

Scholars have asked why this section of the book is so different from the previous ones. Some have even speculated that this was a separate letter that was patched on at the end. I don't think that's the case; the letter of 2 Corinthians is a unity. But it's very clear that there is a major break in thought between chapters 9 and 10. I think Paul took a break for perhaps a few hours or days, then came back to finish the letter, and changed topics when he resumed. In this section we can sense, too, a certain reticence on Paul's part to talk about himself. He's clearly experiencing a tension; he's saying that he is a good example they ought to follow, but boasting about himself makes him uncomfortable, as it would most of us. One of the reasons I like this passage so much is its marvelous autobiographical quality. You get great insight into Paul's reading of his own life and why he thinks as he does. I hope you'll find it fascinating as I have.

## **The problems in Corinth**

There are two key sentences in 2 Cor. 10:7-18 that will help us see what's going on in this section. The first is in verse 7: "You are looking only on the surface of things." Part of the problem of the phony leadership which had come late to Corinth that Paul is going to confront is that they were too enamored with appearance. Their thinking was shallow. Paul is saying they need to look deeper in order to see what is important. The second sentence is at the end of verse 12: "When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise." The second problem of this inadequate Corinthian leadership is that they drew a tight circle around themselves, established criteria for themselves that they could easily meet, and proceeded to congratulate themselves. But they didn't compare themselves to anything outside their small circle. That is foolish. The proper question is whether God is pleased with them. That's why in verse 18 we read that it is the one whom God commends who is approved.

With these key sentences in mind, let us consider the failed leadership in Corinth and what Paul offers as an alternative, using himself as a good example. Verses 7-11:

You are looking only on the surface of things. If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, he should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as he. For even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed of it. I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing." Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.

**Real Christian leadership is based on the heart of things not just the surface**

Apparently a particular individual is boasting about his confident intimacy with God. In 1 Cor. 1:12 one of the groups that had separated themselves off claimed unique status as followers of Christ. It may be their leader who is in view here. In any case, somebody is claiming in glowing terms that he belongs to Christ, and he is exalted as his hearers are caught up in his self-promotion. But Paul says that's a silly thing to be impressed with, because of the false implication that other people are not of Christ. This individual should consider that if he is of Christ, Paul is at least as much of Christ himself. He's asking the Corinthians to think back to their experience with him, hearing him preach and watching him follow the Lord. The fact that someone promotes himself does not diminish Paul's value. Yet that was what was intended.

Every once in awhile I meet a young Christian who says he or she has just been to a group where "they are filled with the Spirit," or they "sing in the Spirit," or "they have the Spirit in their meeting." I find myself thinking, that's great, but does it imply the Spirit is not in other kinds of meetings? Does one know the Spirit is there because of the kind of songs they sing or the physical posture that they adopt? Is the Spirit only in certain kinds of situations? That's how these people sound when they're speaking. But the Spirit is wherever real Christians are. To be indwelt by the Spirit is to be genuinely Christian; it's not a particular category of experience that only some Christians have. That, however, is the sort of false distinction that was being fostered in Corinth, by the boasts of "belonging to Christ."

### **Effective authority**

Then Paul goes on to make the point that he has deliberately veiled his authority for meekness' sake. He has not taken advantage of every opportunity he had to put his foot down. He says in the section we just read that if he were to speak in much more powerful terms of his authority, he could still back up everything he said. He wouldn't look like a fool. Even though there is some dissonance between his letters and his personal appearance, he is perfectly ready to use the authority granted him by Jesus himself as an apostle to the Gentiles. He wants them to realize that there are some in Corinth who have made bolder claims than they'll ever be able to back up. They have advanced themselves by their statements so that they appear to be something that in reality they are not. Real Christian leadership is based on the heart of things, not just on the surface.

Many stories of human drama have as their hero the strong, silent type. Hollywood has caught on to it, and you can find it in the myths of most cultures. It's not usually the braggart or the self-styled personality claiming great things for himself who ends up being the critical figure on the stage at the end.

When I was young I loved the story *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. It is set during the French Revolution. An English aristocrat adopts the guise of a dandy who acts like an airhead, giggling in a high-pitched voice and offering nothing but blather to the world. But at night he becomes the Scarlet Pimpernel who rides into France liberating the captives, full of derring-do. It's a perfect disguise, because you don't expect someone who talks that much, who is that silly, self-promoting, and useless to be in fact the hero. The hero is the one who can do what he says and therefore doesn't have to say very much. That's really what Paul is saying here: don't ask what they say, but ask what's true at the heart.

In the play *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller, a man named Willy Loman raises his sons, speaking frequently about himself and how they are to live. He promotes himself as a great, successful figure in life. The crushing end of the story is his son's discovery of how shallow he was. All his life he had built castles in the air in their thinking, yet he was much different in reality.

Some of you may have had that sort of experience with your parents, discovering as adults that their leadership was false, that their lives never matched the image they projected. Others, however, have the opposite experience. They grow up thinking of their parents as embarrassing and uneducated--the sophisticated world they enter makes their family seem old-fashioned-- only to discover in adulthood that there was character, wisdom, and love in their family, and that all the sophistication of the world pales in comparison. Recall Paul's warning in 10:7 against looking at appearances alone.

Saul was elevated to king of Israel because he stood a head taller than all the rest of the nation. He was physically impressive, a man who was at ease in front of a crowd. He easily called attention to himself, but he was a terrible king. He looked good but had nothing of the Lord on the inside. In contrast, David was not invited to meet Samuel when it became clear that one of the sons of Jesse would be chosen to succeed Saul. Even his own father didn't think enough of his appearance to consider that he might be king. Yet this was a man after God's heart, according to scripture; this was the man who would be the greatest of kings.

### **Leadership that builds up others**

Another point Paul makes in this paragraph is that his leadership was to build up, not tear down his listeners. Verse 8: "Even if I boast... about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than pulling you down, I will not be ashamed." He's insinuating that much of the self-promotion taking place in Corinth is having the effect of destroying people and dividing the body. It brings anger and misunderstanding, so that instead of growing, people are being torn down. On the other hand, Paul says his authority in the Lord is to build people up, to give life.

Now let's look at the next paragraph, in which he says that he would not dare to join their small circle of self-commendation. Verses 12-18:

We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise. We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory. But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

If the pond is small enough, almost anybody can appear to be a large fish. If the criteria are drawn with sufficient care ahead of time, almost anyone can succeed. But this is foolishness, and Paul says there's an arrogance about such behavior that he would never engage in. He recognizes that in the cause of Christ the question is, does God approve? If he were to spend his time in silly human societies in which the members attempt to raise themselves in their own estimation, it might very well be an affront to the God who has called us to other things.

### **Correct assessment**

I remember watching my children pass from elementary school to junior high school. There are about 10 elementary schools in Palo Alto. By the time students reach sixth grade they are at the top of the elementary school; big fish in the pond. But unfortunately, while there are 10 elementary schools, there's only one junior high school in town. Seventh graders must judge their social and academic success against 600 rather than 60 peers. It can be very disconcerting to all of a sudden be in a situation where the competition is much more difficult and success is uncertain.

I wonder if Saddam Hussein might have been better served if he hadn't compared himself with other Middle Eastern leaders, with Iran's inability to defeat him in warfare, for instance, before invading Kuwait. His decision to take on the world might have been different if the initial comparisons were more realistic, and the questions he had asked himself were harder.

If you're a baseball fan, you probably know that one of the stories that has come out of the recent American League championship series is the confrontation between Dave Stewart and Roger Clemens. The last seven times these pitchers have faced each other, Roger Clemens has lost. Clemens is the much more high-profile

figure. He signs his autograph "Roger the Rocket." He throws his weight around and tells his manager what he will or will not do. There's a dramatic, attention-getting self-importance about him with which he is comfortable. Stewart, on the other hand, is a much more soft-spoken person. But when they face one another, the important question is, who wins?

Paul is saying here that if you make comparisons just among you and your cronies, you may have done a very foolish thing. You may have set yourself up for a terrible fall. You may someday have to answer to God for your arrogance in looking at yourself in that fashion.

### **Assigned by God**

A corollary point Paul goes on to make is that he wants to be judged on what God has called him to do. If he refuses self-promotion in a small circle, what he chooses is to do the things the Lord God has given him, to work in the field assigned to him by the Lord, to succeed in faithful service so that at the end of the process he will be commended by God. He doesn't want to know what humans think about him; he wants to know what God thinks about him. So in verse 13 he says, "We will confine our boasting to the field God has assigned to us, a field that reaches even to you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you." If he was writing to the Corinthians, having never been there or served them, he might have gone too far in his boasting. But he came to Corinth before anyone else, shared Christ with people who had never heard his name, and spent 18 months serving that church and building its leadership. This was a field assigned to him by God, and he faithfully worked hard, long hours there. That's why he was not overstepping his bounds in saying the things they needed to hear.

He goes on to say that another problem he has avoided is building on the foundation of another man, taking credit for what someone else has done. He would never step into a growing situation and act as if it was entirely because of him that the growth was taking place, because in the long run he might be affronting God. If the Lord God wants to credit the hard work of a predecessor, he won't step in and take credit himself, because he will have to answer to God someday. There is an arrogance in this kind of self-promotion as well.

I was the college pastor here for a number of years, when the evangelical movement at Stanford University was vital and growing rapidly. There were often attempts by the liberal establishment on campus to siphon off the life, take credit for what was going on, and take over, usually because there was very little going on in their own ministry.

### **The one who is approved is the one whom the Lord commends**

A recent example of this kind of situation is Memorial Church's taking over the Easter sunrise service at Frost Amphitheater, after showing no interest for the 20 years that this event was organized by evangelical Christian students as a ministry to the community. The attempt is to use what another has done to one's own advantage. This is directly in contrast to Paul's example. He says he would never do that, and he implies that his opponents in Corinth in fact are doing that very thing. He is looking forward to going on to another field beyond Corinth, to see the gospel sown in Spain, Italy--places past the Greek peninsula---rather than sticking around to have his name put up in brighter lights, to gain temporary and useless fame.

### **Serious business**

Earlier this morning we read God's call to Ezekiel: "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel." It is a life and death calling. People may not always respond, but he must always sound the warning. Those conducting the budget discussions in Washington are important, as is the leadership of this state, our local community, and the business community. But the most important group of people on the face of the earth is the Christian church. What happens in history depends more on the invisible influence of the people of God than on anything else. It is critical that anyone who is in a position of spiritual leadership take very seriously that responsibility. Your calling may be to sound a warning or to give a word of encouragement. The field you are to minister in may be with children or with adults, with shut-ins, or doing evangelism with non-Christians. It may be a ministry of service with your hands or of speaking with your voice. Whatever our ministries, all of

us will have some occasion for spiritual influence, for leadership for the Lord's sake. All of us have a field to serve in, and it is very important. People die or live based on what God does through us.

The writer of Hebrews in chapter 13 talks about those who are spiritual leaders as being the guardians of the soul. The issues of the soul are the most important. The darkness, fears, longings, and joys we experience because we are spiritual beings are the truest things about us. So spiritual leadership needs to be true to its calling to minister in depth, not just on the surface. It needs its commendation to come from Christ, not from a small circle of friends. It needs to deal realistically with life, to tell the truth. That's why the word at the end of chapter 10 is so important. The one who is approved is not the one who commends himself, having a high profile, an impressive picture, an engaging voice to listen to. The one who is approved is the one whom the Lord commends.

### **Leaders who are under authority**

One of my favorite stories in the gospels is the story of the centurion whose servant was sick. He sent a delegation to Jesus saying he didn't deserve to have Jesus come into his house, but requesting that as an act of kindness Jesus heal his servant.

"Say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel."

Now, that's a word of commendation from the Lord. But do you hear the formulation of the centurion's faith? He says he is a soldier with a commanding officer and with men under him. It is precisely because he has learned to be commanded that he can command. He influences the men who follow him and expects to do so precisely because he is completely under the authority of those who are his superiors.

That's the question to ask about the leadership of this church or of any Christian group, from the smaller setting of a home to the larger setting of a denomination. Are these men and women humble before the Lord? Do they receive their assignments and their commendations from him? Do they obey his word and listen carefully for his voice? If they are under authority, then they may dispense authority and influence others with confidence; they may speak a clear word as watchmen. The centurion learned to obey his commander, and that's precisely what made him a good soldier. Having learned that lesson, when he met Jesus he recognized him as the commander of all-the Lord of life and death. Jesus could banish sickness or not. The centurion knew authority when he met it.

We have important business as the church. We are the family of God. We're to be one together and, as such, the light of the world. If this local congregation is to genuinely display the light of Christ, it has to be because those in leadership understand they are under authority. If, without reservation, without asking what other people think, they bow the knee to Christ, then they should be heeded.

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Catalog No. 4230  
2 Corinthians 10:7-18  
Sixteenth Message  
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October 14, 1990

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