

# THE CHURCH AS A FELLOWSHIP OF TRANSPARENCY

## *SERIES: THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNITY OF GRACE AND PEACE*

By Doug Goins

---

In this series, 2 Corinthians 1:1-2:11, we are taking inventory of our church life, asking ourselves what kind of a church God wants us to be as we enter into the new millennium. Throughout this letter the apostle Paul challenges us to resist the temptation to be a church of sophistication or wealth or power or knowledge in order to be attractive to the world. Instead he calls us to have the same attitude as Jesus Christ in John 15. Christ calls his disciples to a lifestyle of loving sacrifice for one another and for the world, countering the temptation to impress people by how we "do church."

### **Our church as a fellowship of suffering**

Let's review how Paul greets his spiritual family in 2 Corinthians 1:1-3:

**Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy *our* brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints who are throughout Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort...**

Paul defines the church as a community where all of God's gifts, benefits and resources are poured out in full. God gives everything we need to live as his people. We have his grace, mercy, and peace to enjoy as a community, and then we can express those resources to the world around us.

In the first 11 verses of chapter 1, we are identified as a fellowship of suffering. We understand one another because we all have the same experience of affliction, struggle, stress, and difficulty. Paul shows us that we have the privilege of comforting one another because we have experienced the strength and comfort of God in the midst of our suffering. We impact one another's lives, and that impacts the world because it sees the strength of Jesus Christ in our weakness.

### **Paul's honest explanation**

In 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4, we will examine the church as a fellowship of transparency. The apostle Paul risks being vulnerable with the Corinthian church in his explanation of two issues. First, he tells the Corinthians why he changed his travel plans and did not follow through on the itinerary he had previously given them. He says in 2:1, "But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again." *The New International Version* translates it, "I would not make another painful visit to you." It refers to the trip he made to Corinth after hearing that a faction in the church rejected his first letter to them.

The second thing Paul explains is why he wrote them a severe letter of discipline after the painful visit. He had said he would come back for a visit, but instead of personally returning to them, he wrote the letter. In 2:4 he says, "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you." These two issues, changed travel

plans and his letters, resulted in the Corinthians accusing Paul of irresponsibility and dishonesty.

## **A unique relationship**

The last phrase in 2:4 speaks of the depth and uniqueness of Paul's love relationship with the church: "...that you might know the love which I have especially for you." *The New International Version* translates it, "...to let you know the depth of my love for you." In spite of their mistrust of him, the Corinthians still have a special place in Paul's heart, different than all the other churches in his circle. He wants them to know of "the love I have *especially for you*" (italics mine). It is the same phrase that Paul uses to begin this section in verse 12: "For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and *especially toward you*" (italics mine).

The church in Corinth knew Paul better than any other church in which he ministered because he spent the most time with them, working through difficult issues. In his relationship with them they could not deny that he had lived a life of holiness and godly sincerity.

## **Called to openness and vulnerability**

The vocabulary of verse 12 defines the transparency of his life, the openness and vulnerability to which we are called as well. Paul is not afraid to make an example of himself, to be Exhibit A of this kind of transparency. The word translated as sincerity or purity describes something that passes inspection for defects when held up to the light of the sun. It is a picture of translucence, of spotless purity. Paul says he lives his life transparently, there is nothing hidden.

Along with the Corinthians, we as a church are called to live together openly, but we all know that it is difficult to do. It involves tremendous risk, and most of us hide behind masks because we fear what people will think of us. We hide behind masks of religious pretense, trying to look as if we have it all together in relationship to God, our families, and our work. The idea of complete vulnerability can feel like a dangerous way to live, because it leaves us open to the kind of hurt that Paul felt from the Corinthians. His example of vulnerability goes against all of our fleshly survival instincts.

Early in my time as a pastor at Peninsula Bible Church, I shared in one of our pastoral staff meetings and ended up in tears. I do not remember the names or the faces, but I remember responses. There were strong directives as to how I ought to feel and think and behave. I am sure it was all true, and that the things I shared were somewhat immature and overly emotional, but I remember coming away from that meeting feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and foolish. For several months following that experience I was careful and selective about what I said in staff meetings, because I did not want to live transparently any more. It was too much of a risk to be misunderstood and lectured.

## **Transparent living comes from openness to God**

Many of us are afraid of transparency and vulnerability for similar reasons, but I think Paul's response to criticism can be an encouraging example for us to live before one another in openness. The point that Paul makes in verses 12-14 is that we can live transparently before one another only as we live in perfect openness to God. The two are linked:

**For our proud confidence is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you. For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end; just as you also partially did understand us, that we are your reason to be proud as you also are ours, in the day of our Lord Jesus.**

If we are honest with God, we can learn to be honest with one another, and then we can see one another as the

Lord sees us. Paul's confidence, or boasting, is in the Lord. He attributes nothing to himself in this regard. The moral clarity of his conduct and his sincerity are controlled and guided by the grace of God. He lives that way as a gift, it does not come from him.

This brings to mind the lyric from the great 19th century hymn, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The hymn writer says, "O to grace how great a debtor Daily I'm constrained to be!" (1) That is what the apostle Paul believed, and it controlled how he lived. The grace of God allowed him to be an open person, not resorting to what he calls fleshly wisdom, a facade involving guile and manipulation.

In verse 13, Paul mentions his correspondence with the Corinthians. It represents three different letters that Paul wrote to the church before this letter, 2 Corinthians. First, there was the letter mentioned in the 1 Corinthians letter that is now lost to us. Then there was our New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians. Finally, the severe letter that is mentioned in the passage we are studying has been lost to us as well. In all three letters, Paul reminds his brothers and sisters in Corinth, they never had to read between the lines. He was never guilty of double-talk. His motives in writing have always been pure, and he has always tried to be clear and understandable in what he says and writes.

The issue of living openly is a struggle for us all. It is all too easy for me to write or to say one thing when I really mean something else. It is like the joke about a graduating seminary student who asked one of his professors to write a letter of reference to a church that was interested in calling him as their pastor. The professor did not have a lot of confidence in the student, but he did not want to single-handedly ruin his chances of getting a job. Not wanting to lie to the search committee, he wrote, "If you knew him the way I know him, then you would feel about him the way I do." Paul says that he never talks that way to the Corinthians.

Paul's humility is apparent in verse 14. He is able to see his critics from God's perspective, even though some of them are upset with his letters, the severe letter in particular. But Paul views them through the eyes of hope. They have at least understood his writings to some extent, and that is a positive thing. As they are vulnerable and work at a deeper relationship with him, they will understand him more completely. Verse 14 affirms Paul's confidence in the genuineness of their faith in the gospel. He is proud of them, and he expresses loving affection for them: "We want you to be proud of us as we are of you when we stand together before our Master Jesus." In this we can be confident that we will end up that way also. Paul's model encourages us that we can live transparently before one another when we live in perfect openness to God.

### **Transparent living is possible because of God's character and faithfulness**

In verses 15-22, we see that the transparency of our motives and behavior is possible because of the character and actions of the faithful God we love and serve. Again, it does not come from us, but from a God of incredible openness and self-giving. It is because of his character and actions that we have any chance of being transparent people. In verses 15-17, there is a reality check because our open honesty can be misunderstood and mistrusted at times:

**And in this confidence I intended at first to come to you, that you might twice receive a blessing; that is, to pass your way into Macedonia, and again from Macedonia to come to you, and by you to be helped on my journey to Judea. Therefore, I was not vacillating when I intended to do this, was I? Or that which I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with me there should be yes, yes and no, no at the same time?**

Paul responds directly to the Corinthian accusations of his irresponsibility towards them. He is accused of being fickle and dishonest in his letters to them because his travel plans had changed several times. First Corinthians 16:5-9 includes the first itinerary that he committed to them, written about a year prior to the 2 Corinthian letter: "But I shall come to you after I go through Macedonia, for I am going through Macedonia; and perhaps I shall stay with you, or even spend the winter, that you may send me on my way wherever I may go. For I do not wish to see you now just in passing; for I hope to remain with you for some time, if the Lord permits. But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many

adversaries."

The key phrase is "if the Lord permits." There is a godly tentativeness in Paul laying out his itinerary in the first letter, but the Corinthians apparently missed the spiritual principle. The trip he proposed only included one extended stop in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 1:15-16, we see that things turned out differently for Paul. He had to leave Ephesus early for the brief, painful visit to Corinth. He probably gave them the new travel plans that are detailed in 1:15-16 during that visit, but before things got difficult. Paul thought that this itinerary would be well received because he would be able to visit them twice, at the beginning and the end of the Macedonian ministry trip. He also was convinced that there would be mutual spiritual benefit in his coming to Corinth. But after leaving Corinth he heard, possibly through Titus, that a group of leaders in the church continued to oppose him, and were using his letters and travel plans to accuse him of living like a non-Christian in decision-making. The little phrase in verse 17 "according to the flesh," means doing what is expedient, serving himself, and not keeping his word. Paul's response in verse 17 is strong and clear. He is a man of open honesty in making his plans, and these were dictated by changing circumstances for which the Corinthians were partly responsible. He acts consistently with God's plans and purposes. Paul is under God's authority, and it is the ministry that God directs that is most important.

### **Our open honesty is based on God -- "Yes!" in Christ**

In verses 18-22, Paul takes no personal credit for his integrity. He insists that its source is in a God whose yes never turns to no:

**But as God is faithful, our word to you is not yes and no. For the Son of God, Christ Jesus, who was preached among you by us-by me and Silvanus [Silas] and Timothy-was not yes and no, but is yes in Him. For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him [Jesus Christ] they are yes; wherefore also by Him [Jesus] is our Amen to the glory of God through us. Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge.**

Paul now takes a different approach to this issue of honesty. Concerning his role as a preacher of the gospel of Jesus Christ, he argues from the integrity of the message that he, Silas, and Timothy preached when the church was planted. He appeals to the transforming work of God in their lives, who brought them to salvation. Their response, the community "Amen" reflects their joy in God's work. His argument proceeds from the results of the message to the integrity of the messengers themselves. To say it another way, the Corinthians knew that Paul preached God's faithfulness in and through Jesus Christ without any wavering or inconsistency. So the consistency of his message insures the consistent character of his motives and actions.

Paul reinforces the argument in verses 21 and 22 by pointing to the joint possession that he, Silas, Timothy and all the Corinthians share through God in Christ, the work of the Holy Spirit in their life. There is an emphasis on the unity that he has with the Corinthians: "Now He who establishes us with you in Christ...." Paul says he knows that there is an adversarial relationship right now, but the spiritual reality is that they are one in Christ. They have been established together, and God anoints and seals them. In the logic of verses 18-22, the God who gave them the Holy Spirit to guarantee their eternal destiny is the same God who insures the integrity of Paul's conduct. For them to question Paul's reliability in something like travel plans is to doubt the credibility of the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. It is a powerful argument.

The same is true for us as well, because we want to be people of honesty and openness. The transparency of our motives and behavior is possible because of the character and actions of the faithful God who saved us and loves us, the God who always is yes through Jesus Christ. Consider the power of the gospel in our lives and how God in Jesus Christ has saved us from things that undermine or subvert our desire to be what he calls us to be. Some of us are in the process of being established in Christ, of being saved. Perhaps it is being saved from fear that makes it difficult to even speak at all; or insecurity that makes our speech vague, imprecise and unclear; or personal ambition that drives self-serving speech; or the kind of opportunism that demands successful speech,

saying the right thing at the right time. This process of salvation is guaranteed by our God and Savior. What he is beginning in our lives he is faithful to complete.

God continues to answer our most profound questions with an everlasting yes. We ask him, "Do you love me? Am I forgiven? Am I secure in your love? Do you have a specific purpose for my life? Is there life beyond the grave?" And in Christ the answer always comes back to us yes, eternally so. Again, verse 20 says: "For as many as may be the promises of God, in Him they are yes; wherefore also by Him is our Amen to the glory of God through us."

### **Godly transparency is committed to clear communication**

In the closing section of 1:23-2:4 Paul explains the reason for his change of travel plans, why he did not return to Corinth after the painful visit. He explains why he wrote the severe letter instead of returning to see them. Transparency in our relationships with one another is defined by showing sensitive consideration, not manipulation, or indifference (1:23-2:2):

**But I call God as witness to my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.**

**But I determined this for my own sake, that I would not come to you in sorrow again. For if I cause you sorrow, who then makes me glad but the one whom I made sorrowful?**

Based on Paul's concerns in both 1 and 2 Corinthians about the issue of ongoing sexual immorality in the church, it seems probable that his unscheduled painful visit was to deal with that issue. Second Corinthians is the culmination of a seven-year relationship Paul had with the church, and the one problem that would not go away in that community was sexual sin. In chapter 12, Paul agonizes over many who still have not repented of impurity, of immorality and sensuality.

So he makes the painful visit, and attempts to deal with the problem. The meeting apparently went badly, and he was subjected to a personal attack by an individual in the church. Without resolution of the dispute, Paul decided before the Lord that discretion was the better part of valor, and he chose to leave Corinth. From Paul's response in this letter, some of the Corinthians thought he spoke too harshly when he was there. Others criticized him for being indecisive, that he ran away. As an apostle, he should have cleaned up the mess before leaving.

In the next passage we will examine in the series, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Paul will address the painful experience of his visit. We will explore the church as a fellowship of forgiveness, through Paul's relationship to the Corinthians and to the one individual who challenged his authority. In that context, reread Paul's explanation. Eugene Peterson paraphrases 1:23-2:2:

*Now, are you ready for the real reason I didn't visit you in Corinth? As God is my witness, the only reason I didn't come was to spare you pain. I was being considerate of you, not indifferent, not manipulative.*

*We're not in charge of how you live out the faith, looking over your shoulders, suspiciously critical. We're partners, working alongside you, joyfully expectant. I know that you stand by your own faith, not ours.*

*That's why I decided not to make another visit that could only be painful to both of us. If by merely showing up I would put you in an embarrassingly painful position, how would you then be free to cheer and refresh me? (2)*

Paul humbles himself before the Corinthians even as he grieves over their sin. Even when he exercises apostolic authority, Paul never stops being a spiritual servant to become a religious boss. He always sees himself as a

co-worker with his brothers and sisters in Christ. He works toward the mutual shared goal of their completed joy in the Lord, in their lives and relationships. It is a wonderful view of leadership in the church, in our families, and in the workplace. It is also a model of discipleship, of coming alongside people in the process of growing up together in the Lord.

At a particular point in my adolescence, my father chose not to provoke a confrontation over an issue in my life so as not to put me in an embarrassingly painful position. After I had re-established my relationship with the Lord, he told me he thought at the time that I was not in a place spiritually to be receptive. He prayed for me every day, entrusted me to God, and was confident that I had been anointed of God and sealed with the Holy Spirit. My father wanted to wait for the right time and place to deal with the issues. It has been an example to me that transparency in relationships is defined by showing sensitive consideration, not manipulation or withdrawal or indifference.

### **Telling the truth in love**

In the last two verses of the passage, Paul explains why he wrote the painful letter instead of returning to visit the Corinthians in person. It makes the point that transparency in our relationships is defined by telling the truth in love so that we will not miss the love of God at work among us and the joy that results (2:3-4):

**And this is the very thing I wrote you, lest, when I came, I should have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears; not that you should be made sorrowful, but that you might know the love which I have especially for you.**

Paul realized after leaving Corinth that time alone would not heal the pain or bring reconciliation with the church. The letter was necessary, and Paul's desire was for it to be redemptive, to restore the joy of the deep love relationship they shared. His hope was that they would be more receptive to a disciplinary letter without the pressure of his presence. Paul's vulnerability is poignant as he shares his emotions in writing the letter. It suggests that it was so important to him that he wrote it in his own hand personally rather than through a secretary; and as he wrote, the tears fell on the parchment.

Paul's tough love that was communicated through the letter paid off. Second Corinthians 7:6-9 details the report that he received from Titus about the response from most of the church to the severe letter. This is the good news: "But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus; and not only by his coming, but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me; so that I rejoiced even more. For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it--for I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while--I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us."

Not everyone in the church agreed with Paul, but the spiritual log jam was broken, and his confidence in the majority of the believers proved accurate. God's love and joy, as their common experience in the body, was restored because they responded to truth-telling at God's direction.

To summarize, we can live transparently before one another only as we live in perfect openness to God. Secondly, the transparency of our motives and behavior is possible because of the character and actions of the faithful God that we love and serve. Third, transparency in our relationships with one another is defined by showing sensitive consideration, not manipulation or indifference. Finally, transparency in our relationships with one another is defined by telling the truth in love so that none of us will miss out on the love of God at work among us and the joy that he wants to give us.

### **We can live our lives openly and expansively**

As I said at the beginning, Paul's lifestyle of transparency and vulnerability is at once attractive, but also

frightening. Paul learned it from the Lord Jesus, and the Lord Jesus learned it from his heavenly Father (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus consistently lived out the same openness and selflessness before his disciples, and it is that to which Paul calls us. In John 15, Jesus says, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love" (verse 9). "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full" (verse 11). "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (verse 13). This evokes the image of our Savior dying on the cross for us, and saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Finally, in verse 15, Jesus says, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you." Jesus held nothing back, nothing is hidden. His was a life of complete openness and generosity of spirit to the twelve who followed him.

In 2 Corinthians 6:11-13, Paul makes one more invitation to the Corinthian church to step into a life of openness. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it as follows:

*Dear, dear Corinthians, I can't tell you how much I long for you to enter this wide-open, spacious life. We didn't fence you in. The smallness you feel comes from within you. Your lives aren't small, but you're living them in a small way. I'm speaking as plainly as I can and with great affection. Open up your lives. Live openly and expansively! (3 )*

As we apply these truths to our lives, let's examine ourselves in light of Paul's example to us. Perhaps, in terms of self-examination, there are things that God, by the Spirit, has revealed through the scripture passage we have studied. Some of us have been living dishonestly, wearing masks of pretense. Some of us need to pray for a release from the bondage to fear that makes us afraid to speak; or from ambition, a self-serving attitude in relationships; or from the insecurity that makes us manipulative in relationships. Maybe we need to ask God to forgive us for resentment and bitterness towards people who have treated us badly. Perhaps, like the apostle Paul, we have been misunderstood and criticized, and we are resentful. Perhaps it is the need for God to restore hope and optimism that relationships can work despite our differences. Perhaps we need to trust the body of Christ the way Paul does, and view others through the Lord's eyes. We need to ask the Lord to bring openness, transparency and vulnerability to us, to bring us into "this wide-open, spacious life." (4)

## NOTES

1. Robinson, Robert. *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* (public domain).
2. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The New Testament*. © NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 438 (paperback edition).
3. Ibid. P. 445 (paperback edition).
4. Ibid. P. 445 (paperback edition).

Except where noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the New American Standard Bible, © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by the Lockman Foundation. All rights reserved. Used by permission. Where noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

---

Catalog No. 4631  
2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4  
Second message  
Doug Goins  
December 5, 1999

[Back to Index Page](#)

Copyright© 1998 [Discovery Publishing](#), a ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.