

2 Corinthians 12:14-13:14

Final appeal to an unprepared church: self-test

1. The context: Paul's third coming to them and his fear about what he will find
2. The call: test yourselves
3. The criteria:
 - a. Loving leadership
 - i. Concerned for them not what can be got from them
 - ii. Parental not professional
 - iii. Sacrificial not exploitative
 - iv. Building up not tearing down
 - b. Holiness
 - i. Repentance
 - ii. Generosity
 - c. Paradoxical leadership
 - i. Weakness – cross-shaped ministry
 - ii. Power - Christ speaking, Spirit working, through truth
 - d. Right affections
 - i. Joy in Christ
 - ii. Sorrow for sin
4. The confidence: empowered by God

Expositions for planters – Co-Mission Church Planter Training

A textual outline:

- 12:14-18 Third time I am ready to **come**
Intention – parental **love** - not burdening (x2)
or exploiting (x2)
by the same Spirit
- 12:19-21 Intention – before God, in Christ, for you
beloved – your **building up**
For I am afraid that when I **come** I will not find you as I want you to be
- 13:1-3 Third time I am **coming**
Two or three witnesses
Two warnings
when I **come**, will not spare
- 13:4-7 You seek **proof** that Christ is speaking in me
He is not **weak** but **powerful** in you
Crucified in **weakness** yet lives by God's **power**
We are **weak** in him yet live with him by God's **power**
Prove yourselves – Christ Jesus in you
Unless un-proven
We not un-proven
Pray for you not to do anything evil
Not that we appear **proven**
But that you do good
Even though we appear un-proven
- 13:8-10 Intention – no **power** against the truth, but only for the truth
we **weak** but you **powerful**
restoration
will not need to be sharp
building up
- 13:11-14 (1) Rejoice
(2) Restoration
(3) Encourage
(4) One mind
(5) Peace
Mutual holy love Trinity God of **love** and peace be with you
grace, **love**, fellowship be with you

My prop



because this is about church self-testing

1. What's the context?

Paul is coming to them again. Chapter 12:14:

Now I am ready to visit you for the third time,

13:1:

This will be my third visit to you.

And Paul is very worried that about the state he's going to find this church in – chp 12v20 – key verse

For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be,

That's the key to understanding this section – and really the whole letter.

[I'm on my way and] I'm afraid that... I'm not going to like what I find,

And there's a real seriousness to this – notice the legal language:

13 This will be my third visit to you. "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." ² I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent:

Bit of a side point here – we were talking the other day about whether 1 Timothy 5 and the two witnesses thing there – and whether that meant you can't accept one person's testimony – but here Paul is applying the law of two or three witnesses to himself coming to them three times and warning them twice. So it at least shows that – in his mind – two or three witnesses does not need to be two or three different people simultaneously being eye-witnesses to the same event.

But the key thing here is that it's a very serious warning. I'm coming – how am I going to find your church?

Now we're not going to have the apostle Paul turn up at our church – but the Lord Jesus is going to come one day and he will do the final assessment.

In 1 Corinthians Paul said that Day will reveal whether your church is built with gold or straw.

Jesus is coming – and he says – how am I going to find your church?

2. So Paul is coming and his Call is in chp 13v5

⁵ Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

Often that verse is applied on an individual level and that's not a bad thing to do but I'm persuaded that Paul is primarily intending here that they test themselves as a church.

I get that from the context – he's coming to them as a church – and he's worried about the state he's going to find the church in.

And I get that from the way the language of testing is used of Paul and his ministry team as well as of the Corinthians.

⁶ And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.

The test is basically about – is this genuine ministry? Is this Christian? Is this a genuine work of God? Is this the real thing or is it counterfeit ministry?

The Corinthians were already testing Paul and his ministry team:

³ since you are demanding proof ['test' word] that Christ is speaking through me.

So Paul is saying, I've had a lot of critique from you and I've laid out in this letter how I do actually pass the test – my ministry is genuine – and now you really need to do some self-testing.

And the purpose of this testing is positive – not condemnation but restorative.

Chp 13v9:

...our prayer is that you may be fully restored.

This self-examination may be painful but it's got a positive aim – not to destroy them but so they can get better. It's supposed to be a constructive tool for their growth.

3. So the next question is what are the test criteria?

That in many ways was the whole problem that this letter to the Corinthians is addressing – you're using the wrong criteria for what is successful ministry, what is genuine ministry.

So what are the right criteria for testing genuine ministry?

The whole letter of 2 Corinthians! The whole thing is giving us the test criteria.

And as we look at the whole letter there are several themes which we see Paul drawing together in this concluding section.

2 of the themes are mainly about the leaders

2 of the themes are about the whole church

a) First theme is loving leadership

Paul has made a massive point in this letter of telling them how much he loves them.¹ In contrast to how counterfeit leaders don't love the church. And he returns to this theme in chapter 12:

¹⁴ Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. ¹⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well. If I love you more, will you love me less?

Couple of things to notice straight away there:

- There's a great intensity and passion to this language that is almost worrying. But as I've reflected on this – I think there's a danger that we can think that the opposite of abusive, controlling, inappropriate pastoral relationships is a more distanced, cooler kind of relating. But Paul is saying, the opposite of counterfeit love is real love – the opposite of abusive, controlling, inappropriate relationships is a very warm, zealous, appropriate love.
- There's a shape and detail to this love. It's not a fluffy vague sentimental love. There's a sharpness of aim and form to this love.

i. Concerned for them not what can be got from them

That's what the middle of verse 14 means:

what I want is not your possessions but you.

Paul is not trying to get anything from his interactions with them. He's not trying to get their affirmation. He's not using them for his own power project. He's just focused on them. He wants them to be fully devoted disciples of Christ. He wants to present them as a pure virgin to Christ (11:2-3).

ii. Parental not professional

End of verse 14:

After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.

In chapter 2 Paul talked about so many who peddle the word of God for profit. It's just a job for them. It's about the career progression and the pay cheque and the pension and the benefits. But Paul is the parent who gets up in the middle of the night for the small child who can't sleep:

⁵ So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

Which flows into the next one:

iii. Sacrificial not exploitative

Twice he says hasn't been a burden.

Then he says – ok maybe I was a "crafty fellow" – maybe I tricked you with my free ministry – like a free month of Amazon Prime luring you into a plan you can't get out of – or maybe I played the nice guy and I used my lieutenants to play the bad cop and be my enforcers.

But twice he says his team hasn't been exploitative.

¹ E.g. 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:3-7.

In complete contrast to the counterfeit ministers who exploit you and take advantage of you.²

iv. Building up not tearing down

¹⁹ [end of verse] ...everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.

Then go over to chp. 13 – end of verse 10:

—the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for tearing you down.

Exactly what he said in chapter 10. All his ministry – his preaching, his exercise of church discipline – it's all constructive – wanting them to be stronger in love for Christ, even if it weakens him in the process or he ends up looking bad.³

Paul says all this about loving leadership because he knows the Corinthians don't get it. The more he loves him the less they respect him. Because their categories are all messed up. This is a key criteria they need – **do you have leaders where everything they do they're doing it not as a performance, not for the pay, not as a power play – but for your good, to strengthen your devotion to Christ?**

Second theme:

b) Holiness

This was a big thing in the middle chapters of the letter (6-9) and again he returns to it in chapter 12:

²⁰ For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder. ²¹ I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged.

- i) It's an issue of repentance. That was the key missing element in the church in Corinth and it could be said that it is a key missing element in many churches in London. Repentance. Admitting the wrong, stopping and turning around and living differently. Individually and in church culture. Repenting of jealousy and arrogance and fighting and turning to pursue peace and being of one mind and encouraging one another (13:11). Repenting of sexual sin and turning to pursue good biblical patterns of relationship (13:12).
- j) And a particular emphasis in 2 Corinthians is repentance of stinginess and turning to a life of generosity. That's what chapters 8 and 9 were all about. Their repentance and holiness and love would be demonstrated very practically by their giving as a church to other churches.

So the test criteria here is – **is there life transformation and culture transformation going on in your church? Are you repenting as a church? Are you becoming increasingly less like the world; and are you becoming increasingly Christ-like? Which might be indicated by something as practical as an increasing percentage of your budget being given away to other churches.**

² 2 Cor. 11:20.

³ Calvin: "A pastor should have no regard for himself, but should be devoted exclusively to the building up of the Church. Let him be concerned for his own reputation in so far as he sees that it affects the public advantage, but let him also be ready to neglect it, whenever he can do so without public disadvantage."

Next theme:

c) Paradoxical leadership

This is the 'power made perfect in weakness' thing that has been so strong all through the letter. There's a reason why people entitle sermon series on 2 Corinthians – treasure in jars of clay – and commentaries on 2 Corinthians have a jar of clay on the front - because that is what it's all about. And Paul comes back to it again at the end of his letter:

Chp 13:

⁴For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him in our dealing with you.

- i) Weakness – that is cross-shaped ministry – we talked quite a bit about this last time – that the 'weakness' seems to be particularly about the 'insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties' (12:10) – and that's confirmed here by the really tight connection to the crucifixion. As Christ was mocked and humiliated and beaten and looked defeated – so genuine gospel ministry will often look like that.
- ii) But at the same time there is also Power – as Paul showed in chapters 3 and 4 there is a 'all surpassing power' (4:7) and glory (3:10) to his ministry – It might look like just opening the Scriptures and saying stuff but when he does that, Christ is speaking and God is doing a new creation miracle of making light shine into hearts so that people see the glory of God in the face of Christ in the pages of Scripture. There's massive spiritual power here – to demolish strongholds – as Paul says in chapter 10 – but it's all coming through the Word of Truth. See that in 13:8.

⁸For we cannot do anything [lit: exercise no power] against the truth, but only for the truth.

The Corinthians loved powerful ministers. But Paul says the real criteria is – **do you have leaders exercising this paradoxical ministry of power in weakness? Treasure in jars of clay. Leaders where you don't go away impressed with the leader but you go away impressed with the Jesus he's pointed you to in the Word.**

Final theme:

d) Right affections

It's been a very emotional letter.⁴ You see particularly in chapter 2 and chapter 7 the degree of emotional intelligence on the part of Paul. He's concerned that the Corinthians have *the right affections going in the right direction to the right extent for the right length of time.*

And here at the end of the letter he says:

¹¹Finally, brothers and sisters, rejoice!

That was his goal back in 1:24 – "we work with you for your joy." That is what most glorifies Christ. That's the expulsive power to flush out sin. That's what produces generosity even in the midst of severe trials (8:2). We need joy in our churches.

And Paul has modelled to us how you inflame that joy in Christ – by preaching Christ in all his goodness, particularly against the backdrop of the evil of the world – so in a world of

⁴ E.g. 2 Cor. 6:11-12.

exploitation – he is the one who gave up everything for you;⁵ in a world of abuse of power – he is the one who perfectly combines total power and total kindness; in a world of betrayal – he is the one who'll never let you down; in a world of dirtiness – he is the perfectly pure, clean one, who washes you. Seeing that generates joy.

But at the same time – there's also a right sorrow. Paul has talked about this several times – the godly sorrow that brings repentance (7:9). It's clearly still lacking in 12:21 where he will be grieved that they have not been grieved.

And again Paul has modelled how you bring that sorrow – by preaching Christ – Christ the holy one, Christ the judge, Christ the bridegroom you are betraying.⁶

The test criteria here is – **is our church properly emotionally engaged? Are there right affections? We're not content with just orthodoxy or even orthodoxy plus orthopraxy. We also need orthopathos. Right affections.**

Those are Paul's criteria here. Not exhaustive – you could get other criteria from other letters – but these are good ones – particularly if we're inclined towards Corinthians problems of unhealthy leadership patterns.

And finally there's this great encouragement:

4. The confidence – that Paul has – that he wants the Corinthians to have – is that all this is Empowered by God

Last verse:

¹⁴ May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

None of the marks of a genuine church are possible in their own strength.

We can't just do a 360 degree evaluation of our church – see where the problems are – get a bunch of recommendations – and just sort it.

We can't work these things up ourselves.⁷

- Loving leadership is empowered by the love of God. Paul has a divine jealousy for them (11:2) – it is the love of God himself flowing through him, God appealing through him.
- Holiness comes from the Holy Spirit – turning people around.
- Paradoxical leadership – is formed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is about being 'in Christ' and participating in his sufferings and Christ speaking through the ministry.
- Right affections – are produced in a church as corporately the Holy Spirit opens eyes to the love of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is why Paul prays twice as he closes – verse 7, verse 9

And that's why he doesn't give up on the Corinthians – because he knows God changed him and he can change this church.

Let's pray:

Lord you have all power to do this - please would our churches – your churches – pass the test – and be found to have leadership and life that pleases you, which grows in strength and which is ready for the return of the Lord Jesus. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and your love and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us. Amen

⁵ Cf. 2 Cor. 8:9.

⁶ Cf. 2 Cor. 11:2.

⁷ Notice the multiple references to the activity and power of Spirit, Christ and God through 2 Cor. 12:14-10.