

We observed in an earlier study that commentators refer to 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4 as “the great digression,” for his train of thought in 2:12–13 picks up again in 7:5. This digression focuses largely on new covenant ministry. In it, Paul argues that the message of the new covenant is more important and more enduring than the messenger. In fact, he makes another mini-digression in 4:16–5:10 when he talks about the hope of resurrection in light of the sufferings he faces for the cause of the gospel. Following that mini-digression, he returns to the larger theme of his great digression: the ministry of the new covenant. In 5:11–6:2, he frames it in terms of a ministry of reconciliation.

The Motivation for Reconciliation (5:11–15)

First, Paul offers his motivation for involvement in the ministry of reconciliation. In fact, in 5:11–15 he offers a twofold motivation.

1. The fear of the Lord (5:11–13). Paul’s first motivation for involvement in the ministry of reconciliation was “the fear of the Lord.” The phrase here must be tied to his teaching on the judgement seat of Christ, which immediately precedes this section (5:9–10). He knew that he would stand before Christ’s judgement seat, not to be judged for salvation, but for faithfulness as a believer and minister of the gospel, and knowing the reality of the judgement, he was moved to persuade others of gospel truth.

TO THINK ABOUT

Is it our responsibility to persuade others of the truth of the gospel? Why, or why not? If it is, in what way must we persuade others?

This ministry of persuasion was driven by his fear of God, not by a desire to be applauded by others. God knew his motive, and he knew that, deep down, the Corinthians knew it too (5:11b). He was not seeking to commend his external oratorical ability or rhetorical eloquence to the Corinthians (v. 12). The superapostles boasted “about outward appearance” (lit. “the face”), but the heart is far more important than the face (see 1 Samuel 16:7).

TO THINK ABOUT

The superapostles boasted, literally, “about the face.” The phrase (translated “outward appearance”) speaks of external matters, which were able to impress people. Are we still guilty of this attitude in 21st century Christianity? In what ways can we be guilty of boasting of outward appearance rather than of what is in the heart?

The superapostles seemed to have been criticising Paul’s sanity—why on earth would he be willing to suffer what he suffered when he could have a far more comfortable ministry by simply tampering a little with his message?—but he was persuaded that his primary audience was God, not others, although faithful gospel ministry of course benefited his readers (v. 13).

2. The love of Christ (5:14–15). The second motivation that Paul had was the constraining love of Christ. If we read these verses together, we see that it was not primarily his love for Christ, but Christ’s love for him (and for others), that constrained him. Christ died as the representative of his people (including Paul), and so Paul was constrained to take the gospel to those whom Christ loved and for whom he died. He knew that there were people around the world whom Christ loved and for whom he therefore died, and he was determined to find those people and persuade them of the truth of the gospel.

The Means of Reconciliation (5:16–17)

Paul next draws attention to the means of reconciliation: that those whom Christ loved, and for whom he died, can become new creations in and through him. The means of reconciliation has nothing to do with “the flesh.” That is, Jews do not have an inherent advantage under the new covenant, even if they enjoyed it under the old covenant. Christ himself was Jewish, but the ministry of reconciliation extends beyond the Jews to “anyone” who is “in Christ.” Whatever obstacles formerly hindered people from living in relationship with God are done away with in Christ. In him, the believer in the gospel is a new creation. He is the means of reconciliation.

The Messengers of Reconciliation (5:18–20)

The first part of 5:18 (“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciles us to himself”) ties to the previous section, showing that Christ alone, by God’s grace, is the means of reconciliation between God and men. But Paul adds here that there are specific messengers appointed by God to carry out the message: “and gave to us the ministry of reconciliation.”

“Us” here is, strictly speaking, a reference to Paul and Timothy (1:1) and their fellow evangelists and missionaries. This seems clearly from the contrast between “we” and “you” in 6:1. So Paul is arguing that God had appointed him and his fellow ministers as the messengers of the new covenant.

Nevertheless, the New Testament does emphasise the responsibility of every Christian to be involved in evangelistic endeavours. While some have been vocationally given the responsibility to evangelise, every believer, in his or her own sphere of influence, has the responsibility to be faithful with the gospel as God grants opportunity.

TO THINK ABOUT

The message of reconciliation is a simple one: “that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” It is clear, straightforward, and wonderfully gracious—and yet it is a message of which we need to “persuade” others (5:11). Why does the simple gospel message require persuasion? How do we persuade others of the truth of the gospel?

It is helpful to note that Paul encapsulates this message of which we are messengers the past tense: “In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” The good news of the gospel is news about events that took place in space-time history, but which have enduring consequences. As Geoffrey Grogan puts it, it is “good news about something that God has done, something that now belongs to history but which has eternal significance.”

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul deliberately described the gospel as a message of “reconciliation” to a church whose relationship with him was strained through sin. The gospel, which reconciles us to God, also reconciles us to one another. Are there perhaps some with whom you need to seek gospel reconciliation?

The gospel of reconciliation is something of which we must “persuade” others (5:11). But it is also a truth to which we “appeal” and a message we “implore” others to believe (5:20). The fact is, some people need persuasion, while others need an appeal or an imploration. We need to be able and willing to engage different people on different levels with the same truth of the reconciling gospel.

The Message of Reconciliation (5:21–6:2)

Lastly, Paul now explicitly enumerates the message of reconciliation that God’s people are called to preach and of which we are called to persuade others: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21). This is the core of the gospel message, and it is a message that must be believed “now,” for “now is the day of salvation” (6:2).

TO THINK ABOUT

Theologians sometimes speak of Christ’s “active” and “passive” obedience. His “active” obedience was the life of perfection that he lived, actively obeying his Father on our behalf, so that his righteousness can be credited to us. His “passive” obedience was his death on the cross, by which he took our sin upon himself so that we could be forgiven. Can you clearly see these two elements of obedience in 5:21?

Lest the Corinthians think that the gospel is a message only for unbelievers, and that they ought to move on to deeper, more important matters, Paul urges them (though he was convinced of their justification) to receive the gospel afresh, and with great urgency.

TO THINK ABOUT

What does it look like for believers to appropriate the gospel? Why do we need to do this?