



Ministry of the New Covenant

BACKGROUND FROM THE AUTHOR

A quick read, Paul's own words suggest that with a handshake the "pillar" apostles, i.e., Peter, James and John, endorsed Paul as an apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2:7–10). But closer look shows that the handshake left issues unresolved. Close attention shows how Paul claimed that Christ, not the "pillars," commissioned him. Paul was so careful to protect his claim of independence. He claimed the "pillars" recognized the authenticity of his commission to go to the Gentiles, i.e., "the others." However, Paul hastened to report a bitter public dispute he had with Peter at Antioch about rules of table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile converts (Gal 2:11–14). Elsewhere, Paul's letters offer glimpses of opponents out to correct his gospel (Phil 3:3), or to directly challenge his apostolic claim (1 Cor 9:2). Though they seem to have had a Jewish connection, we cannot assume they came from the "mother" church in Jerusalem.

Paul's critics did not quit even after his death, c. 67 CE. Late in the second century, critics challenged his apostolic claim as bogus; they described him as a false prophet who preached a false gospel; they saw him as an acolyte of the Evil One; they challenged the legitimacy of his apostolic claim as weak. He had never known Jesus in the flesh. He had not followed Jesus throughout Galilee, heard him preach beside the sea, slept on the ground with him at night, or followed him to the cross. His only claim to apostolic legitimacy was that it came through a vision. Later opponents noted, however, that even idolaters and other sinners have visions (see *Kerygmata Petrou* 19:1–7).

This early dispute should hardly surprise us. On life or death issues we want some proof of legitimacy of the person ministering to us. I am reassured if in the examining room of my

physician I see her medical school diploma framed and hanging on the wall. Lawyers, therapists, social workers, and ministers of most churches need certifiable proof that some agency judged them fit to practice their vocation. In my papers I have my college, seminary, and graduate school diplomas, the certificate of ordination to elder, etc. In Paul's day, however, there was no agency that could certify him as a legitimate apostle of Christ. Rivals of Paul had come to Corinth not with certificates but letters from other churches attesting to their apostolic legitimacy (3:1–4). Later we hear of “super-apostles” who invade Paul's congregation who challenge his claim to be an apostle of Christ (10:10; 11:5). How were the Corinthians to decide if Paul were genuine when con artists appeared regularly in the market to teach and extract money? Given these realities how would you decide if Paul were the real item?

In the history of the religion of Israel this was an old problem. Regularly we hear about contests between “true” and “false” prophets. Without a licensing agency to certify Paul's legitimacy, he had to rely on persuasion. In this session and next we hear of two proofs he offered as evidence that his claim was legitimate—one was his new covenant ministry, and the other was a ministry of reconciliation.

How do we decide the difference between the true and the false in the religious, political, or public square? This was also an issue for the Gospel writers. The certificate of the real believer that Matthew 7:16–20 proposed was that some concrete evidence of the work of the Spirit—“by their fruits shall you know them”—was necessary to authorize a claim to be God's agent. Please note how Paul eschewed simple name-calling or bold assertion which would convince no one, and chose instead to offer concrete proof of the legitimacy of his apostolic claim. Fortunately, his strategy was successful.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to accomplish the following:

1. Identify the metaphors that proclaim the Kingdom of God in the Gospels and new life in Christ in the letters of Paul.
2. Explain the significance of two of Paul's metaphors: "You are a letter of Christ" and "We are the aroma of Christ."
3. Describe the ways their discipleship has taken shape over time through challenges, struggles, and various settings.

Resources You May Need

- Pictures or objects used as metaphors in the Gospels, if not using the slides
- Aromatic props, such as fresh baked cookies, bread, a scented candle or incense
- Hymnals with "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit," or "They Will Know We Are Christians"

Leadership Strategy

It has been said that Hebrew is a language of pictures and Greek a language of ideas. If so, many preachers tend to preach in Greek while their congregation listens in Hebrew. Paul was a Hebrew yet closely linked to the Greek world. He never stopped using the language of pictures, metaphors like the two dynamic ones examined in this session. But think of his many other memorable metaphors: "We have this treasure in clay jars," "You do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat," "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ," "Put on the whole armor of God," and "Clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

It's helpful to point out the structure Dr. Roetzel has created for these next four sessions. As he states, he has divided a long section of the letter into four markers pointing to the authenticity

of Paul's apostolic ministry. The four markers are a helpful way to understand Paul's primarily pastoral approach.

Setting the Stage

▣ Project gathering slide #53, a quote to read as the group gathers together.

▣ Project opening slide #54 to signal that the session is beginning.

1. Light the Christ candle with Paul's words from 2 Corinthians 3:2–3.

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

2. Open the session with the following prayer or by offering a prayer of your own. ▣ Project the opening prayer on slide #55 or provide copies and invite everyone to pray it in unison.

Loving God, give to each one of us the gifts of a listening ear, a gentle touch, and embracing arms with the people we encounter each day. Help us to be sensitive to who they are, the concerns they have, and what it is they hope for. Open our hearts and help us to become as Christ, one sent to reach out in his love. In the strong name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

3. Just as Jesus used metaphors to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom, Paul used metaphors to express the fullness of faith in Christ. Visual images are placed in the reader's mind to help make the concept both accessible and memorable. First, look at some metaphors the reader encounters in the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of Luke. If you are not using the provided slide presentation, display as many of the objects or pictures in the list below. Challenge the group to recall the biblical metaphors associated with each.

OR

■ Project the 10 slides, #56 through 65. As each slide is shown ask the participants to indicate what the metaphor or visual image refers to.

- Slide #56 – Dove (Luke 3:21–22)
- Slide #57 – Speck and log in eye (Luke 6:42)
- Slide #58 – Bearing fruit (Luke 6:43)
- Slide #59 – Strong foundations (Luke 6:48–49)
- Slide #60 – Good soil and bad soil (Luke 8:5–8)
- Slide #61 – Light placed under a jar (Luke 8:16)
- Slide #62 – Fig tree (Luke 13:6–9)
- Slide #63 – Mustard seed, yeast (Luke 13:18–21)
- Slide #64 – Narrow door (Luke 13:22–24)
- Slide #65 – Lost sheep (Luke 15:1–7)

AND

Indicate that the metaphor that captures our attention in this portion of Paul's letter is "*a letter of Christ.*"

4. Introduce this session and preview the next three sessions by referring to Dr. Roetzel's understanding of the four markers. He writes in the "Summary" in the Resource Book:

Paul had to provide proofs or markers of an authentic ministry. He offers four such markers that were either plainly visible or clearly scriptural. In treating the context and content of his claim to be a minister of the new covenant, I designate the four markers by dividing the list into four equal parts.

Exploring the Scripture

1. Read 2 Corinthians 3:1–6. ■ Project slide #66. One way to read the passage would be to invite eight participants to read the eight complete sentences in the passage. Then briefly discuss all the metaphors in this passage. Ask the group:

What are the metaphors expressed in this short passage?

AND

Focus once again on the metaphor, “you are a letter of Christ.” To those demanding a “letter of recommendation” about Paul’s ministry, he suggests that the believers themselves are living proof of “the Spirit of the loving God.” In other words, they are living letters in Christ.

Ask the group:

What do you suppose may have happened in their lives that Paul now sees them as living letters in Christ?

2. Invite each participant to write a journal entry or a blog in response to any or all of these questions:

Consider your own call to faith and life of discipleship. In what ways do you seek to be a “living letter of Christ”?

Who would point to you and give thanks that you have become their very own “letter of recommendation”?

Living letters continue to be sent. In what ways are you seeking to help others be a “living letter of Christ”?

Share their entry with a partner.

3. Read aloud Dr. Roetzel’s comment from page 28 of the Resource Book:

Recent studies of Paul’s letters have shown that he did not begin his ministry with a fully formed theology. It was rather in the varying contexts in which his legitimacy was challenged, his gospel questioned, and his Gentile mission disputed that his defense was made. It was in such struggles that Paul’s own theology took shape.

None of us has begun this journey of faith with a fully formed theology either. Invite tables or small groups to discuss the following questions:

What have been some of the struggles or twists and turns in which your own theology has taken shape?

In what ways have questions about the gospel and challenges to it helped you grow in faith and understanding?

What are the settings and contexts where your faith has been shaped, formed, and nurtured?

4. Gather together as a group. Read Jeremiah 31:31–34. ■ Project slide #67. Ask the following to the group:

What is the striking metaphor expressed in this prophetic passage?

In what ways do we see the full expression of this metaphor in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

5. Share Dr. Roetzel's insight from page 32 of the Resource Book and discuss briefly:

Paul's dramatic imagery can provide a very suggestive and even provocative insight. Is he not drawing upon the most arousing concepts in his heritage in order to convey his belief that God has accomplished the greatest of all wonders in Christ? To use Paul's imagery, the great moment of eschatological surprise and redemption has been launched. In Christ it is the dawning new era for all. Paul calls upon them to see his "new covenant ministry" as an agency of that triumphant moment.

Closing

1. Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–17. ■ Project slide #68. Enter into another of Paul's metaphors, "the aroma of Christ," by asking the participants to imagine an aroma that attracts them. Then, if not mentioned, suggest the aromas below. You may introduce an aromatic prop, perhaps fresh baked cookies, etc. Be conscious of allergies to fragrances in your group.

fresh bread the ocean chocolate chip cookies
burning leaves the beginning of rain incense
lighted candles (draw their attention to the lighted Christ candle)

An aroma, which is a pleasant smell, beckons and entices us. Engage in a discussion about the ways we share "the fragrance that comes from knowing him."

What does it mean to bear the aroma of Christ?

What contrast is being made with the super-apostles?

What actions entice people closer to Christ, a distinctive "aroma" so to speak?

2. Sing or read together one of these hymns: "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian," "There's a Sweet, Sweet Spirit," or "They Will Know We Are Christians."

3. Join together in a prayer expressing gratitude, joys and concerns.

4. Extinguish the Christ candle.

Looking Ahead

Discussion in the next session will revolve around articles from the news media which focus on critical situations of human need. Gather together articles from newspapers, websites or blogs dealing with such issue as refugees, hunger, religious persecution, homelessness, mental illness, and so on.