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Basic Bible References

2 Corinthians

2:14–3:6

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Supplementary Bible References

Ezekiel 16:60–62

1 Corinthians 1:12–17

Word List

apocryphal

Proclamations
of Peter

covenant

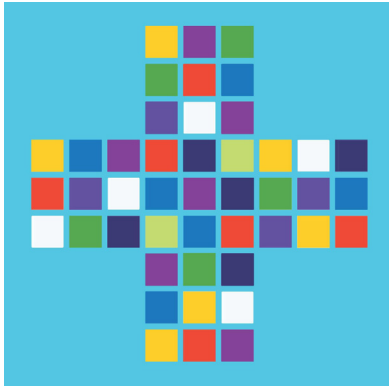
Babylonia

exile

SUMMARY

Paul’s proclamation of the gospel met repeated challenges. Titus’ effort to jumpstart the offering project brought unwelcome news. Not only was the offering project in doubt, but also there were itinerant apostles of Christ who were acting as a self-appointed truth squad. They were in Corinth, charging that Paul was unfit to be a minister of Christ. They said that his Gentile gospel was crooked, and that his motives were questionable. This negative advertising had to be answered. Rather than just asserting, “I too am fit to be an apostle of Christ; my gospel is true, and my motives are pure,” 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.

In order to appreciate the depth of these two facets of legitimacy, one can try a type of mirror reading. This means that in reading Paul’s positive statements we try to imagine the negative statements reflected by them. We look for reflections of what others may have said, what Paul’s rivals were preaching. As we think about these debates, we can also consider their connection with modern questions about credentials and signs of legitimacy as ministers.



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MINISTRY OF THE NEW COVENANT:

MARKER ONE

Trouble, Trouble, Trouble in Corinth

It is a happy fiction that, from the beginning, Paul was warmly accepted by all of the believers and leaders of the Jesus movement as a legitimate apostle of Christ. Even he knew that in some ways his claim to apostleship was weak. He had never known Jesus in the flesh; he had not been a disciple; he had never heard the earthly Jesus speak a single word. Furthermore, the bitter public exchanges he had experienced with recognized disciples like Peter and the envoys of James brought his apostolic claim into question. He recognized that he was born “out of season,” or too late to be in on the Galilean ministry of Jesus. Also, he had a bad history, having persecuted the followers of Jesus.³³ And there was bad blood between him and Peter and James. Even when under the Spirit’s power, he was by his own admission not a very good speaker or preacher. Moreover, his bodily presence was probably puny.³⁴ His promises sometimes seemed to be unkept, and his promotion of the collection, some thought, was just a pretext for a scam artist. Some wondered if he were just another wandering philosopher who breezed into town, collected a stash of money, lined his own pockets, and then fled under the cover of darkness. At times, Paul’s stated intention to lead the offering delegation and to make the presentation himself sounded a bit high-handed.³⁵

He must have wondered what evidence he could offer to authenticate his claim to be an apostle. The assertion taken by itself that Christ commissioned him as an apostle to the Gentiles in a revelation or vision offered no public proof of legitimacy.³⁶ Doubt continued to linger for

³³ 1 Corinthians 15:8

³⁴ 10:10

³⁵ See Romans 15:26

³⁶ Galatians 1:12

NON-CANONICAL

OR APOCRYPHAL: A biblical canon is a list of books considered to be authoritative scripture by a particular religious community. The Bible is a closed canon, meaning no books may be added or removed. The word “apocrypha” means “things put away” or “things hidden.” The general term is usually applied to the books that were considered by the church as useful, but not divinely inspired, have questions regarding their authorship, or are considered heretical.

over a century about people claiming visions. Much later, the non-canonical document that has been considered to be “apocryphal,” the *Proclamations of Peter*, noted that idolaters and sinners also had dreams and visions, and some claimed epiphanies that were actually wrought by demons. It is no surprise that the *Proclamations of Peter* referred to Paul’s claim to have received a divine revelation as a lie. **Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian church had, as we know, been a stormy one, which had unfortunately resulted in fierce resistance and misunderstandings. Some Corinthians who had become self-absorbed with their charismatic gifts thought they had outgrown the need for an apostle, and that they were already on the way to becoming rich, wise, and powerful.³⁷ What we will discover, however, is that it was this crucible of conflict that refined Paul’s theology and inspired his most profound insights.**

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.

In 1 Corinthians there are hints that outside rivals dogged Paul’s steps as well as inside factions that troubled the church.³⁸ In 2 Corinthians wandering apostles appear, equipped with letters of recommendation, and stir a toxic brew. In addition to the charges against and suspicions about Paul, 1 Corinthians pulls the veil aside for us to view some converts who thought they were Spirit driven and were already wise.

Some even believed they had been admitted into the company of angels³⁹ and were quite superior to the apostles.⁴⁰ In addition, 2 Corinthians 3 offers a picture of roving, charismatically driven believers. As a self-appointed truth squad, they had arrived in Corinth to publicly question Paul’s fitness for ministry and the truthfulness of the gospel he preached.⁴¹

In a later correspondence⁴² we are allowed to overhear these competitors publicly scorn Paul’s untrained speech and mock his unmanly physical appearance. We overhear their scathing

³⁷ See 1 Corinthians 4

³⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:12–17; 3:4; 16:12

³⁹ See 1 Corinthians 2–3

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 4

⁴¹ See 3:1–3

⁴² 10:2, 10

sarcasm denouncing him as an apostle. They said that although he could write strong letters from a safe distance, he was a total cipher when present. These wandering orators, claiming to be inspired interpreters of scripture, apparently looked impressive. They boasted a visible spiritual radiance and an imposing physique. Their mighty works, ecstatic speech, glorious visions and apostolic status prompted some people to desert Paul. Others were so intimidated by these “god-men” that they passively tolerated them and stolidly sat still, unwilling or unable to rise to Paul’s defense.

Please recall from our study of chapter 8 that Paul had earlier dispatched a delegation led by Titus to promote the offering in Corinth. News from that venture was sobering and discouraging. Many of Corinth’s desperately poor were understandably lukewarm about the offering. Collections lagged and questions multiplied. Doubts deepened, and the efforts of Titus and the “brothers” failed. The report Titus brought to Paul in Ephesus was quite alarming. Not only was the offering project lagging but questions about Paul’s motives, his apostleship, his trustworthiness, and his gospel had arisen. External attacks on his fitness for ministry tempted some to abandon the project altogether. The future of Paul’s Gentile mission was in question. His gospel faced replacement by a more exciting, less radical, more individualistic, “feel good” message. As a result, Paul had to defend himself even before he had any direct contact with the itinerant “super-apostles.” Though he had only hearsay reports, he had enough information to write the defense that we now have in 2 Corinthians 2:14–7:4.

Paul realized that a simple appeal to God’s seal of approval was inadequate. After all, his rivals doubtless made similar appeals. When claim met counterclaim, how was one to judge? Paul was pragmatic: “by their fruits,” he claimed, one could judge the true from the false. For example, a claim of Spirit possession in Corinth had earlier inspired a divisive religious puffery. The antidote Paul offered made love the supreme spiritual gift.⁴³ It also emphasized the importance of spiritual gifts that were up-building. The following chapters note four marks of authenticity or “fitness” (Gk, *hikanos*) for ministry that Paul put on display. As he developed his case, the fruits of authenticity that Paul offered were open for inspection and evaluation.

TITUS: We know Titus as one of Paul’s faithful traveling companions. As Timothy was given responsibility for Macedonian churches, Paul entrusted Titus with the care of the churches in Crete.



The entry archway over the Via Ignatia in Thessalonica, the road Paul trod from Philippi to Thessalonica. — Photo by Calvin Roetzel

New Covenant Ministry

Read 2 Corinthians 2:14–3:6. As Paul began this discussion, he reminded the readers that God’s power in Christ has a vast historical framework and that victory is one of its hallmarks. Thus, Paul’s discussion opened with a grand assertion. He more or less inserted himself into God’s end-time victory parade. This glorious scene echoed the Roman victory processions led by conquerors returning home in triumph. Similar to the tickertape parades at the end of World War II, Roman crowds lined the streets, cheered the marching troops, waved to the commanders, burned incense, gorged themselves with free food, gloated over floats displaying battle trophies, and joined the hordes to celebrate the gruesome execution of the foe’s leader to end the spectacle.

The victory Paul trumpeted, however, was more interesting and more compelling. He announced, of all things, an execution as victory. The execution he announced was that of a condemned felon called Jesus of Nazareth, and the victory he announced was no less than God’s own victory revealed in the resurrection of Jesus. (To the casual eye this would surely look more like a defeat.) Therefore, some powerful and convincing revelation was required to see in such a gruesome end the beginning of something strikingly different: the invasion of God’s own final rule, the arrival of an entirely new kind of kingdom, and the paradoxical defeat of the dark, satanic forces that were believed to contest the Creator’s right to the entire creation.

The symbolic meaning of that imagined victory parade for our modern world should never be underestimated. Its comprehensive force is simply breathtaking. Consider all this: It declared no less than all wrong set right, the healing of the afflicted, the renewal of the creation, the defeat of sinister powers, the forgiveness of sin, the reconciliation of an alienated world, and justice for the defenseless.

The Christian claim is not a small one. We can, therefore, almost see opponents smirking at and ridiculing such grand convictions. To make it seem all the more impossible, it was presented by this physically weak, frail, unimposing, and unmanly Paul, who was paradoxically posing as an agent of God at the head of the great procession. There was nothing that was culturally accommodating in this. Paul’s metaphor carried the alarming power to provoke thought, but it did not automatically compel assent.

Then Paul added more. He applied the familiar experience of incense hovering over the crowds during a victory parade. Remarkably, he turned it into a sign of his own ministry. “We are the aroma of Christ,” he wrote. To those “being saved” (note the concept of a process) the aroma was a “fragrance from life to life.” To those “perishing”—i.e., critics judging Paul unfit for ministry—it was a “fragrance from death to death.” To one it was a sweet, delicious odor; to the other it reeked of the stench of carrion.

A few sentences intervene, and then Paul added a sentence pregnant with possibility: “Our competence [in contrast to those judging him unfit] is an entirely different kind of competence. It is from God, who has made us *ministers of the new covenant* not of letter but of the spirit.”⁴⁴ From the beginning, this was the point Paul wished to make.

What did Paul mean by a “new covenant”? **Read Jeremiah 31:31–34.** Jeremiah, the prophet who was Paul’s model for his call and ministry, provides a helpful clue. Like Paul, he wrote during a time of great historical crisis. He had witnessed the Babylonian invasion of Judah and the deportation of the cream of the population. He had watched as soldiers ushered away those who were the educated, the artisans, the politically powerful and the wealthy. The exiles included the leaders as well as entire families. Behind them lay a city in flames, a temple in ruins, and the corpses of loved ones stacked like cordwood. Ahead lay hundreds of miles of open country before reaching Babylonia, their new home in captivity. Jeremiah, however, remained behind in Judah watching weeds and brush populate the streets of the once-thriving Jerusalem. It must have seemed hopeless from the human perspective. Yet at the bleakest possible moment, he envisioned a future when Yahweh would make a new covenant with the people of Israel.

COVENANT: A biblical covenant is a solemn agreement between God and God’s people. (Old Testament examples include those made with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses). The Christian new covenant identifies a new relationship between God and humans mediated by Jesus. This new relationship is available to all people, both Jews and Gentiles.

“Covenant” was a profoundly important concept from the past. Nothing could be more important. And this anticipated new covenant would be based on forgiveness. God’s law would be written upon the heart and would enter into the critically important gap between God’s speaking and human hearing. It would intervene with our personal inevitable resistance. Injunctions to “know the Lord” would be unnecessary, for all would know the Lord. This could be accomplished only at great cost.

Paul’s allusion to Jeremiah may have meant as little to Paul’s pagan converts as it does to some of us. Nevertheless, it was and remains an important key to Paul’s self-understanding. **He had actually come to believe that he was an apostle of the anticipated end-time. To put it in our terms, this new covenant ministry would be uniquely relational. God would open our hearts and enter into them. This gift would be sustained by God’s grace. So when Paul claimed God’s commission to a new covenant ministry he was speaking of something that was very profound.**

⁴⁴ 3:6, my emphasis

He was appealing to a fundamental character of the divine-human relationship. He was announcing the communal nature of this new covenant, including its mutual obligations.

When Paul had earlier spoken of his ministry in terms of the aroma of Christ, he had also included another feature, one that he understood as an essential part of his ministry: namely, a renewed and profound trust in the faithfulness of God. This belief would be part of this new covenantal relationship. It would include deep dimensions of recognition and awareness. Those trusting and believing in God's action in the crucified Jesus would recognize the importance of this very moment. 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.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

Memorize 2 Corinthians 3:3

Reflection

1. Remember that Jeremiah's vision of the new covenant was shaped in a time of profound historical crisis and even despair (31:31–34). How do you suppose that Paul was inspired by Jeremiah as he thought about his own great historical moment? Reflect on ways that some dark periods, either historically or individually, have shaped your thinking in positive ways. If it helps, you could map the movement of your understanding visually using a flow chart. Following are directions to do so.

Mapmaking Technology: You are the mapmaker. Like the great mapmakers of the past your tools are simple: paper and pen. Any large piece of paper will do. Your map can be chronological or impressionistic. There are no rules about what your map should look like.

The lifeline should represent the path your life has taken or might take and can be expressed as a straight line, a series of steps, a spiral or any freeform design you choose. You can show the ups and downs of your life, the forks in the road (major decisions) and the roads not taken (someone you didn't marry, a job you didn't take). You can use symbols, pictures, and words to mark important events. Be sure to look for God-moments in your story.

How much time you spend on each map is up to you. Remember as you visualize your past that there is no right or wrong way to look at your life. By drawing your map, you have the chance to become more aware of your story—and to choose the storyline of your future.

2. Paul asserted that the fruit, or actions, of people (and even ministries) said more than their words or appearances. With this in mind, what standard or marker do you use to separate the true from the false, the authentic from the inauthentic in religion? Given that there are sometimes different points of view in scripture, how does one decide which viewpoint is the most helpful or compelling?

Further Research

1. Bear in mind that back when Paul's ministry unfolded, there was no accepted definition of apostle. Check a Bible dictionary on the meaning of "apostleship." What would you judge to be authentic marks of apostolicity? Read Galatians 1 and 2 Corinthians 3 for differing understandings.
2. How would you distinguish a prophetic call from an apostolic commission? Again, consult a Bible dictionary if available. Compare the calls of Amos 7:1–15 and Jeremiah 1:1–10 with that of Paul in Galatians 1:15–17.