

Appendix 4

2 Corinthians 13:5

On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For 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 to serve you. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test. Now we pray to God that you will not do anything wrong. Not that people will see that we have stood the test but that you will do what is right even though we may seem to have failed (2 Cor. 13:2-7).

The relevant portion is, of course: 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves'. But, as always, the context is vital, and that is why I have supplied it.

When Paul told the Corinthians: 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves', he was not calling them to harrowing self-doubt about the reality of their faith. This is usually assumed, but it's quite foreign to the passage.

For a start, Paul was not addressing the believers at Corinth as individuals. The context tells us that the apostle was under attack over his apostleship and his ministry; and by the context I mean not only the immediate verses, but the entire letter. The Judaisers were infiltrating and subverting the church at Corinth. And they were putting Paul and his ministry under the microscope, using the Corinthians as a cat's-paw. Paul responded. Having fought it out with the Judaisers in the earlier part of his letter (from 2 Cor. 2:14 and on) – just as he did with the Judaisers at Philippi (Phil. 3:2-11, and on) – as he comes to the end of his letter, the apostle swings the spotlight onto the Corinthians. Not that he was paying them back in kind, giving them as good as he got! Paul was no small-minded bigot! No! He was fighting (spiritually) tooth and nail for the gospel against the law mongers: 'You took the side of the Judaisers, and tested me', he thundered. 'Right! Now take your own medicine.'

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Take your diaries out and jog your memory as to how you got where you are!’ Just as he addressed them in 2 Corinthians 3, so he does here. Let me remind you of what he said in the earlier passage:

Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 2:14 – 3:6).

And now the present passage:

On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you. For 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 to serve you. Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realise that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test? And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test (2 Cor. 13:2-6).

The apostle’s meaning is patent. Addressing the believers at Corinth as a whole – not the individual believer – addressing the Corinthian church as a church, and calling on the church to speak up, in effect he was saying: ‘Take a good look at your experience! I am talking to you Corinthians as a body! Did you at Corinth receive Christ through the Judaisers and their law preaching? Of course you didn’t! It was through my ministry that you heard of Christ, it was though my new-covenant ministry that you came to Christ, and thus

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received all the benefits stored up in Christ! Speak up! Own it for the truth that it is! Unless, of course, you are reprobates!’ As he reminded them, clearly with the Judaisers in mind, and with irony: ‘Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel’ (1 Cor. 4:15).

I think we ought to refresh our memory of all that had gone on at Corinth. Here’s Luke’s record of those events:

Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks. When Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia, Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. But when the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them: ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’. Then Paul left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a worshipper of God. Crispus, the synagogue ruler, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptised. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city’. So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God (Acts 18:1-11).

And we know what Paul preached – and it wasn’t law. As he told the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified... Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!... Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... This is what we preach, and this is what you believed (1 Cor. 2:2; 1:23; 9:16; 15:1-11).

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Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts! Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold... Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God... We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God... made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 3:7 – 4:6).

In short, Paul is not calling the Corinthians to rake over their souls to see if they were genuine believers. Rather, because they were genuine believers, he is calling on them to ask themselves how they became such. Was it by the law preachers, or by his ministry of the gospel in the power and demonstration of the Spirit? Did he not preach Christ – not law – and was it not Christ who brought them to where they are now? Not only must the Corinthians not forget their history, they must speak up, throw over the Judaisers and their law teaching, and stand with the apostle for Christ and under Christ!

Do not miss the apostle's use of irony – not to say sarcasm – in all this: 'I trust you will find that you are real Christians! I trust you will find I am!' And this takes me to what might be considered the clinching point in this exegesis. If the 'usual' view is right, and Paul is commanding believers – in the first instance, the Corinthians – to probe themselves to try to get assurance, then we end up with the distinct possibility that his first readers might do as he commands, and not only test themselves, but put the apostle himself and Timothy through it! And they should do this to see whether or not the pair were true believers! What is more, he hopes

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that they will find that he and Timothy do indeed have enough evidence to pass muster! Worse – even if the Corinthians discover that he and Timothy are *not* true believers, he hopes that the Corinthians themselves will still go on to the end! An exegesis conceived in cloud cuckoo land, surely!

The notion that Paul here drives every individual believer into self-doubt is far removed from this passage. The context is entirely corporate – not the individual believer, but the whole church at Corinth. And that church must own up and confess that it was Paul's ministry of Christ and his gospel, and not the Judaisers with their law mongering, that had brought them into blessing. 'Examine yourselves', Paul demanded. 'You received Christ through my ministry, didn't you!'

Of course, I am not saying that the passage has nothing to say to us today, and say to us individually – both believer and unbeliever – but we must not miss the main thrust of the apostle's words. What is more, 2 Corinthians could hardly be more relevant, faced as we are with so many law preachers. Contemporary law preachers have a great deal more in common with the Judaisers than they like to recognise.

This is not the only place where we find the apostle taking such a tack. Listen to the parallel in the opening of Galatians 3:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing – if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Gal. 3:1-5).

The Galatians – as so many churches in the New Testament – were also being attacked by the Judaisers with their law mongering, and Paul stood up to them through the Galatians. Note the same irony here, as in the Corinthian letter, the same demand for a 100% endorsement of the apostle's work in the ministry of the new covenant by the Spirit, and not by the law. As he went on to say to the Galatians:

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Formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you. I plead with you, brothers, become like me, for I became like you. You have done me no wrong. As you know, it was because of an illness that I first preached the gospel to you. Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good. What they want is to alienate you [from us], so that you may be zealous for them. It is fine to be zealous, provided the purpose is good, and to be so always and not just when I am with you. My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you! (Gal. 4:8-20).

In short, 2 Corinthians 13:5 is not a call for every individual believer to put himself on the rack to try to find if he is a true believer. Rather, it is a demand for endorsement – by the Corinthians – of the apostle's ministry of the Spirit as opposed to the ministry of law.

J.N.Darby:

[The apostle]... puts an end to the question about his ministry by presenting an idea which ought to confound them utterly. If Christ had not spoken by him, Christ did not dwell in them. If Christ was in them, he must have spoken by the apostle, for he had been the means of their conversion. 'Since', he says, 'you seek a proof that Christ speaks in me, examine yourselves, whether you are in the faith. Do you not know yourselves, that Christ dwells in you, unless you are reprobates?' And that they did not at all think. This was quite upsetting to them, and turning their foolish and stupid opposition, their unbecoming contempt for the apostle, to their own confusion. What folly to allow themselves to be led away by a thought which, no doubt, exalted them in their own eyes, but which, by calling in question the apostleship of Paul,

necessarily overturned, at the same time, their own experience [Darby had 'Christianity']!¹

As Calvin observed,² Paul was appealing to the church – challenging the church – to admit that everything they had received by way of spiritual benefit in Christ, they had received through his ministry. That was the thrust of his demand to examine themselves. The apostle was not telling them to probe themselves as to the reality of their faith.

Calvin:

[Paul] confirms, what he had stated previously – that Christ's power showed itself openly in his ministry. For he makes them [the Corinthians] the judges of this matter, provided they descend, as it were, into themselves, and acknowledge what they had received from him. In the first place, as there is but one Christ, it must be of necessity, that the same Christ must dwell alike in minister and people. Now, dwelling in the people, how will he deny himself in the minister? Further, he had shown his power in Paul's preaching, in such a manner that it could be no longer doubtful or obscure to the Corinthians, if they were not altogether stupid. For, whence had they faith? Whence had they Christ? Whence, *in fine*, had they everything? It is with good reason, therefore, that they are called to look into themselves, that they may discover there, what they despise as a thing unknown. Then only has a minister a true and well grounded assurance for the approbation of his doctrine, when he can appeal to the consciences of those whom he has taught, that, if they have anything of Christ, and of sincere piety, they may be constrained to acknowledge his fidelity. We are now in possession of Paul's object.

Calvin went on to argue against 'the Sorbonnic sophists' (Roman schoolmen) – who denied the possibility of assurance, leaving us believers – 'our consciences' – 'constantly in suspense, and in a state of perplexity'. Calvin immediately went on:

But what does Paul say here? He declares that all are reprobates, who doubt whether they profess Christ and are a part of his body. Let us, therefore, reckon that alone to be right [true, saving] faith, which leads us to repose in safety in the favour of God, with no wavering opinion, but with a firm and steadfast assurance.

¹ Darby pp387-388.

² In his *Commentaries*.

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Calvin saw that Paul, in 2 Corinthians 13, was not setting out to make believers anxious, but, taking their conversion as a reality, he was using that fact to vindicate his ministry of Christ by the Spirit in the face of the Judaisers and their emphasis upon law.

When Calvin said: ‘Paul... declares that all are reprobates, who doubt whether they profess Christ and are a part of his body’, he went too far. It is possible for believers to have doubt, and yet still be true believers – as I have shown from 1 John.³ Nevertheless, every believer ought to enjoy the fullest possible sense of assurance. Paul was able to appeal to it in his battle with the Judaisers. And assurance should be the norm today. It was in the New Testament. And it should be for us. That is why I have written this book. Law teachers bring believers into serious bondage. They preach and teach in such a way as to produce anxiety in believers. Amazing! Are these men gospel preachers or law preachers? 2 Corinthians 13:5 stands as a mighty challenge to all believers: Do you want law or grace?

³ See the previous Appendix.