
Powerful Warnings in Ministry Fakes

2 Corinthians 11:1-15¹²

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Charlatans and fakes have been fascinating part of human life since the beginning.

People practicing medicine or pretending to be nurses without the formal training or credentials...

Magicians using trickery and illusions...

Scientists using fake or manipulated data to support and presupposed conclusion...

The prevalence and warnings in the Old Testament about false prophets...

The warnings in the New Testament about false teachers...

The long, sad history of charlatans, fakes, miracle workers in Christendom...

No surprise then that Paul faced such in the early church. From Paul's writings and some of the history in the book of Acts, here is a sketch of these fakes passing themselves off as apostles.

There was a group in the church at Jerusalem who believed the Gentiles need to become "Jews" to be fully spiritual. The emphasis was on being circumcised.

As Gentile churches were being formed by the missionary efforts of Paul, Barnabas and his teams, this group, sent by James, began to travel around teaching their error to these churches.

Over time, some of these "missionaries" began to call themselves Apostles. They elevated themselves from being "ones sent by the church" to "Called to be an Apostle". They verified their status by doing or claiming to do supernatural miracles that were commonly only done by the Apostles.

In order to be able to counter Paul's teaching, they soon adapted a "super-apostle" status. These were a few who claimed visions, miracles, ability to heal on command. They pretended to have a more spiritual word, a more powerful ministry and a higher status than Paul and his band.

This group regularly followed Paul around and were the ministers of Satan and thorns in Paul's side. They lied about Paul. They wrote fake letters pretending to be from Paul. They wrote scandalous and libelous accusations against Paul's character, conduct and teaching.

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This band of fake apostles finally had such a damaging effect in the churches in Corinth and Galatia that Paul had to dismantle their authority, deconstruct their errors and destroy them personally. While we may cringe at this, Paul was first and foremost a lover of God and His truth. These Satanic scheisters were seducing the church into error and sin. He had no patience with them. Now, he addresses the church to deal with them directly. If they are still there when he gets there, then woe on them.

Let's listen as Paul levels powerful warnings in the presence of ministry fakes.

Paul's Relationship to the Church (v. 1-4)

Using the analogy of a matchmaker, Paul highlights his relationship to the church.

¹ I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! ² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough

Paul loves these analogies. One writer has captured this:

Earlier he depicted himself as the slave of a conquering general (2:14), as the 'aroma of Christ' (2:13), as the 'postman' of Christ (3:3), as an 'ambassador' of Christ (5:20), and as a fortress-conqueror (10:4-5). Now he depicts himself as a 'matchmaker' who has introduced the Corinthians to Christ as his fiancée. As the good friend of the groom-to-be, he is keeping watch over the bride-to-be until the groom comes to consummate the marriage (verse 2). (Barnett, p. 162)

His Feelings for Them (v. 1-2)

What he is about to say is going to sound a bit foolish to them. But he wants them to "bear with him", to accept it for just a moment. They are willing to "bear with" all manner of false teachers so they need to bear with him for an emotional appeal.

He has a godly jealousy over them. He was the one who was present and the means by which they came to know Christ. He was involved in their being engaged to Jesus. He cares for them. But he cares more for the future groom. Above all, he desires to present the church as a pure virgin bride to Christ.

His Concerns for Them (v. 3)

He is concerned lest Satan deceive the Corinthian church as he once deceived Eve. Paul has gone back to the Genesis account several times in dealing with the Corinthians. He demonstrates a careful and consistent use of the Old Testament. The aim here is for us to go back to that story and see what dangers the Corinthians are in as Satan is seeking to deceive them.

The Word of God is at the heart of the issue. For Eve, the church at Corinth and us – will we hear and heed the Word of God without adding to it or taking away from it?

A lady, a wife, is being tempted to challenge her husband, to misuse the Scripture and to disobey the Lord. Will we simply obey the Lord and submit to the authorities the Lord has placed over our lives? This “authority” question is still the main issue that Paul is wrestling with vis-à-vis the Corinthians.

Satan is present in the form of another, the serpent or dragon, to deceive her. The false apostles are the Satan used means of deceiving the church. Whose voice, whose counsel, whose whispered questions and outright denials are tempting you to mishandle the Word of God and subvert the authority you are under?

The purity of the people, the integrity of the garden/church and the maintenance of the relationship all are at stake. This is not a simple or unimportant issue. The stakes were and still are, high.

Now, make no mistake. Paul sees the false teachers, these super-apostles as being the agents of Satan. Satan is seeking to deceive them. But he is using the snake to speak for him.

He is concerned that they will be led away from their pure devotion to Christ. They will be tempted devote their heart and being to someone who is not Christ. The false apostles are selling them a Jesus who is not the Lord Jesus at all. If I tell you about Esther who is tall, blonde and has blue eyes then I am not talking about the Esther who is my wife. They may have the same name. But they are not the same person. In a crude way this illustrates what was happening. They had never met Jesus in the flesh. All they know about Jesus is what Paul and others have told them. But the Jesus they are now embracing is not the true Jesus. What they are being told is deceit and a lie. Believing those lies is pointing their affections toward a false-Christ.

His Explanation to Them (v. 4)

Why is he concerned for them? Because they are so gullible. They are so ready to believe anything they hear about Jesus and the gospel. They are not innocent as Eve. They are gullible. They are easily deceived. They are not on the alert for heart enticing errors that would draw them away. They are dazzled and drawn to a different Jesus and a different Spirit. They will not bear with true (v. 1) but are quick to bear with the false (v. 4).

Barnett summarizes these so well for us:

In these verses Paul gives three reasons why the Corinthians should ‘put up with him’, each introduced in the Greek by ‘for’ First, as apostle and evangelist he feels divine jealousy for the Corinthians at this time of spiritual danger for them (verses 2–3). Secondly, the Corinthians are vulnerable to departing [sic...] from Christ through their interest in an untrue gospel (verse 4). Thirdly, Paul states that he is in no way inferior to these ‘super-apostles’ (verse 5). (Barnett, p. 164)

Paul's Ministry to the Church (v. 5-11)

Paul reminds them of his history with them and his ministry to them.

⁵ Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶ Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things.

⁷ Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. ¹⁰ As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. ¹¹ And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!
[ESV]

His Apostleship over the Church (v. 5-6)

Paul is not a "super" apostle. But he is not inferior to them. He is not less than them. He has already shown that he is an Apostle by God's calling. That is all the qualifications he needs. Just because he does not meet their criteria for being an Apostle, he knows what he is talking about. He may not be the best public speaker, but he does know the gospel and all that it means. It is hard to imagine that someone who wrote so eloquently under the inspiration of the Spirit would not be an engaging speaker. But this is simply what the Corinthian church observed and objected to. He just didn't measure up. He did not have the latest dream or vision. He did not have special words of prophecy. He was not able to pull off miracles and healing on demand. Then, to make matters worse, he simply was not the kind of public speaker the super-apostles were. Therefore, the people in the church opposed him and disregarded his teaching. They listened and "learned" from these ultra-ministers. Paul's response was simple and succinct. He knew what he was talking about. What he said had weight, not because it was rolling off his tongue and eloquent speech, but because **it was simply true**. The true apostle spoke. He spoke the truth. They were to hear and to heed.

One writer notices Paul's use of a prefix that he adds to several words that we would translate as *hyper* or *ultra* or *supra*. Further, he writes:

Paul has chosen (or invented) his word 'superlative' (*hyperlian*) with care. Within chapters 10-13, where he particularly interacts with his opponents, there are a number of compound words formed of hyper, 'above', 'beyond'. Paul writes of their missionary imperialism 'going too far', as 'overextending' themselves (10:14; *hyperekteinein* into 'regions beyond' (10:16; *ta hyperekeina*). They boast of 'surpassingly great revelations' (12:7; *te hyperbole ton apocalypseon*) and the resultant 'superelation' or 'conceit' (*hyperairesthai*). To expose their boastfulness Paul boasts of being 'more' a servant of Christ (11:23: hyper), by which he means one who has suffered greater ignominy. Truly Paul's opponents are hyper-men, aptly described as

'very superior', *hyperlian*. It was their belief, apparently, that God's power would come upon their power, making them men of hyper-power. In their eyes Paul had no power of his own and therefore none from God; he was quite power-less, 'weak' and lacking in 'competence' (cf. 3:5-6; 11:21) (Barnett, p. 166).

His Support from other Churches (v. 7-8)

Today in the academic and business and political worlds speaking fees are determined by your status. Certain people, like ex-presidents and star CEOs, can garner as much as \$100,000 for a single speaking engagement. The practice is as old as Greece and Rome. And the church has not escaped. Christian speakers' fees have reached scandalous levels—sometimes \$30,000 for a single event. They will not appear unless the venue is large enough and there will be a guaranteed audience. What insults would Paul rain down on the church today? Adapted from (Hughes, p. 196)

Why does he talk about not accepting support from Corinth? It is important to understand that in that part of the Graeco-Roman world, it was common for traveling philosophers and religious priests to be supported by rich patrons. It was an honor to be able to support one. It was a poke to offer and be turned down. This partially was hospitality but more had to do with the idea of patronage.

Corinth had desired to be a patron supporter of Paul. But, seemingly because Paul recognized the control that was going to come with their money, and, because he did not want to do things like the world did, he refused their support. That was bad enough. But then, to add insult to injury, he took support (and in their view, patronage) from these poor churches in Macedonia who really could not afford it. Corinth was incensed. Their money wasn't good enough for him but the poor, miserable offerings of Macedonia were?

Paul refused their money when they wanted and were obligated to support him. Therefore, he robbed them of their honor and their standing as Paul's patrons. This was an important aspect of their culture. They were going to lose face. But Paul clearly was willing to flaunt cultural convention because it gave and left the wrong impression.

He accepted money from churches that he was not immediately serving. Therefore, they accused him of robbing those churches since he took their money but served elsewhere. Since he took their money and thus their "patronage", maybe all these accusations and commands he was giving were coming because he was beholden to them.

It was said that Paul was taking an offering that he "pretended" was for the church in Jerusalem but was "actually" for himself. They accused him of misappropriation of funds - of taking the offering that he had all intentions to use for himself.

Paul addresses that with his biting irony. He "robbed" other churches, receiving their support so he could minister in Corinth at no cost. Paul saw no problem with not honoring the culture in this case. He saw all kinds of possible dangers and difficulties if he accepted their money. To do so gave a tacit approval to their leadership. To do

so could possible defang the bite of his reproof. It was not “robbery” to accept money from one ministry in order to serve another ministry whose culture and worldliness would misunderstand and misuse the act of generosity on the part of others.

His Labor to Free the Church (v. 9-11)

Ah, but that was not enough. He not only refused their money, but right out in the open he worked a trade to earn his own keep. He earned his own living, receiving nothing from the Corinthians when he ministered there. They thought that this reflected badly on them. They seem to have felt slighted and shamed. How could they treat their founding pastor and apostle this way? What was wrong with them that this weak, broken half-blind servant had to make tents to make ends meet?

But that was not Paul’s thinking at all. He sacrificially served the church at Corinth out of love for them. This was offered as proof of his love and care for them. Who else had done such a thing? Would the super-apostles, the ultra-ministers do this? No, it was plain that they were expecting to be supported and royally at that. The seducers of the Corinthian believer’s hearts were costing them a fortune. But the genuine lover of their souls followed the example of the true Jesus. He gave willingly and sacrificially gave it all including His very life to take care of the cost of sin so the church did not have to.

Listen to these two paragraphs from the NLT in how powerfully they speak to us. Paul says:

⁵ But I don’t consider myself inferior in any way to these “super apostles” who teach such things. ⁶ I may be unskilled as a speaker, but I’m not lacking in knowledge. We have made this clear to you in every possible way.

⁷ Was I wrong when I humbled myself and honored you by preaching God’s Good News to you without expecting anything in return? ⁸ I “robbed” other churches by accepting their contributions so I could serve you at no cost. ⁹ And when I was with you and didn’t have enough to live on, I did not become a financial burden to anyone. For the brothers who came from Macedonia brought me all that I needed. I have never been a burden to you, and I never will be. ¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, no one in all of Greece will ever stop me from boasting about this. ¹¹ Why? Because I don’t love you? God knows that I do. [NLT]

How much stronger can he say it? God knows that he loves them.

Paul's Warning to the Church (v. 12-15)

True love warns the loved about dangers. Paul has shown that he loved them because he sacrificed for them. Now he exercises that love by warning them about their enemies. He describes their enemies – namely, the Judaizers.

¹² And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, dis-

guising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

Let me remind you that what feels like harsh language to us are the ways and words of a giver and guardian of truth. For sinners, and sufferers and strugglers there is long mercy, deep counsel, godly patience. For those who seek to deceive and destroy Christians by false teaching and fake claims, there is nothing but powerful and pointed condemnation.

The Continued Ministry (v. 12)

Paul will continue to do ministry just as he has done in the past. This includes not taking anything for himself from Corinth. He does this in order to undermine the super-apostles' false charges against Paul and spurious claims about themselves

The Exposed Fakes (v. 13)

The Judaizers deceive the church into accepting them as true apostles of Christ.

What Paul so strongly objects to and what underlies his strong language is that these *workmen* were *deceitful* (verse 13). Their 'deceit' is that they were *masquerading as apostles of Christ* and *servants of righteousness* (verses 13, 15). This reference to '*masquerade*' may refer to the ecstatic speech (5:13), the visions and revelations (12:1, 7) and the miracles (12:12) with which they clothed themselves in coming to Corinth.

In reality, however, they are *servants of Satan* (verses 14–15). The statement that *Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light* (verse 14) may refer to certain Jewish legends which told of Satan coming to and deceiving Eve in the disguise of an angel. Their interest in *righteousness*, that is, to law-keeping, gave the appearance of morality and *light* (verse 14); but it is only an appearance, a disguise. The truth is that so far from being *apostles of Christ*, honest *workmen*, *servants of Christ*, they are *false apostles*, *deceitful workmen*, *servants of Satan*. (Barnett, p. 169)

Paul who is a man of the truth is deeply offended and righteously angry, not only at their deceit, but that the Corinthians were taken in by them.

The Spiritual Deceits (v. 14-15a)

Jesus said that Satan was the father of lies. He is the Great Deceiver. He roams around seeking whom he may devour by his lies and deceits.

The Pattern of Satan (v. 14)

Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. Now we have to think about this. In what way is this a masquerade? I believe that it is in both aspects. He is a fallen cherub, not an angel. He was the anointed cherub that covered the throne of God. His task was to serve God. But he grew dark in his heart. He fed himself and one-third of the heavenly angels lies and was thrown out of heaven for his rebellion.

So he is neither an angel nor of the light. He pretends to be a messenger bringing light. He is in fact, a fallen, sniveling, shrunken cherub sneaking around in the darkness of lies and error and enticing the darkness of people's hearts.

The Problem of his Servants (v. 15a)

Satan's servants follow their master in deceitful disguises and deeds. They disguise themselves in cloaks of righteousness. The only problem is that it is legal righteousness of the Law which is of no count in heaven's court. So they appear to be something and someone they are not.

Today the world and the church is filled with such. There are religious clubs pretending to be churches, religious societies pretending to be ministries, religious speakers and teachers and leaders pretending to be Christians, preachers and even apostles. They draw people aside from Jesus by offering them a Jesus and a Christian life without a cross, without sacrifice, without suffering and eventually without eternal life, either. They use the same sneaky deceits that the ultra-men, the super-apostles did. Miracles, secret words, special knowledge, personal revelations, miracles, dreams, visions and supernatural ability to heal on demand. But they are fakes. Be warned.

The Sure Defeat (v. 15b)

Paul says, "Their end will correspond to their deeds. " Their "end"... has two ideas. As a result of what they are like and what they do the "end" is...

The Product of their Works

If they carry out the work, it will be deceitful and destructive just as they are. People and churches that listen and like their dazzling deceits will simply become like them. It happened at Corinth. It has happened down through the ages. It is happening now.

The Punishment for their Works

They will eventually suffer the same damnation and destruction in hell as the master they serve. Paul is may be severe in his denunciation. But it is clear that at least in the case of these false apostles, they were unbelieving and unsaved.

Kent Hughes writes:

The "super-apostles" were not Christians at all. They were of the devil – and diabolically wrong. And a special wrath awaited them. Paul has been so hard-hitting, but at the same time gracious. Just as [another] message, if heeded, would have led to grace, so much more Paul's. In reality, Paul was making a last run at the false apostles' souls. His withering dissection of their deceitful hearts could be the beginning of grace. What a fearful indictment! But what grace could follow! (Hughes, p. 199)

Reflect and Respond

Be warned. The wolves in the church that devour sheep do not howl and bare their teeth. They come in sheep's clothing, smiling, reciting Scripture, full of understanding, promising something more than Christ.

D. A. Carson applies the text:

From the time of the Fall to the present day, men and women have frequently succumbed to the deceptive devices of the devil. Christians are especially open to the kind of cunning deceit that combines the language of faith and religion with the content of self-interest and flattery. We like to be told how special we are, how wise, how blessed.... We like to have our Christianity shaped less by the cross than by triumphalism or rules or charismatic leaders or subjective experience. And if this shaping can be coated with assurances of orthodoxy, complete with cliché, we may not detect the presence of the arch-deceiver, nor see that we are being weaned away from "sincere and pure devotion to Christ" to a "different gospel." (Carson, p. 86)

May we receive grace to continue on in truth, and thus our genuine and pure devotion to Jesus.

