

THE SIGNS OF AN APOSTLE

by Ray C. Stedman

There is a famous and often quoted remark of Mark Twain's in which he said, "When I was a boy of fourteen I thought my father was the most ignorant man in the world, but when I was twenty-four I was amazed at how much the old man had learned in ten years."

That is somewhat analogous to the situation here in Corinth. Paul founded this church. He was the Corinthians' spiritual father, having taught them how to live as Christians. But, after he had left there, some itinerant teachers came in and began to teach them other things. These teachers were so smooth, so flowery, and so impressive that, after a bit, the Corinthians began to look on Paul as an ignorant rustic who not only did not know very much, but could not even say very well what he did know. Paul was forced, as we have been noticing, to compare his record with that of these false apostles, and in every way he outshone these phonies.

The apostle now concludes this section in Chapter 12, beginning with Verse 11, with what I like to designate as, "The Marks of a True Apostle," that we might compare them. We have many false apostles around us today. They are on television and in print. They are getting a following everywhere. In this passage we will see four marks by which we can identify a true apostle of Christ. (I suggest you clip these and put them up on your refrigerator and compare them with what you see on television or read of in books today.)

Second Corinthians 12, Verse 11:

I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I am not at all inferior to these superlative apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong! {2 Cor 12:11-13 RSV}

In this brief paragraph, Paul indicates that there are certain signs of a true apostle which he had performed before these people in Corinth. He expresses surprise that they did not defend him when these phony apostles showed up. After all, they had seen the marks of a true apostle, so they should have recognized them and come to his defense. Because they did not, because they were so easily deluded and deceived, Paul has found it necessary, in a very embarrassed way, to defend himself.

This raises the question, what are the signs of a true apostle?

The Apostle Paul calls them here "signs," i.e., they have symbolic meaning; they signify something; they represent something. And they are called "wonders," i.e., they are amazing demonstrations of the power of God. They make people's eyes open up. They are also called "mighty works." It is evident that only God could do them. Man cannot act in this realm. Now what are these signs? Well, Paul has made amazingly slim reference to any signs in his ministry. He does not talk about any of the miracles that occurred. (The book of Acts refers to several of them, but you do not see Paul talking about them.) Nevertheless, they were there, and it is my personal belief that these link up with the signs we find referred to in the 16th chapter of Mark's Gospel.

In this somewhat debated passage, Jesus said that certain signs would follow those who believed. Now he is not talking about anybody who believes the gospel. Unfortunately, some people have misunderstood that passage and thought these signs were to follow everyone who believed in the gospel. But if you carefully read that passage in Mark 16, what our Lord indicates is that these signs would follow those among the apostles who believed in his resurrection. Jesus has just scolded them because they did not believe in his resurrection, even though they had ample evidence of it. Even though he himself was standing before them as a resurrected

being, still some of them had doubts. He rebuked them for it, and said that these signs would follow those who believe {cf, Mark 15:15-18}:

1. They would cast out demons;
2. They would speak in other tongues;
3. They would take up serpents and would not be harmed;
4. They would drink any deadly thing and no harm would come to them;
5. They would lay hands on the sick and the sick would recover.

Now almost all of these signs are recorded in the book of Acts as having occurred in the ministry of the Apostle Paul, therefore the signs of a true apostle had been done among the people. We must understand that passage in the light of these as authenticating signs to indicate that the original apostles were genuinely from the Lord himself. Remember, the passage in Mark closes with these words:

... they went out from there and preached the word, the Lord working with them confirming the word with signs following. {Mark 16:20 KJV}

So that these are the signs of an apostle that Paul refers to here. He had done these, evidently, at Corinth, but they still were questioning his apostleship.

There is something else here in Verse 11 that Paul does not point out, but which they could have used as an identification mark of a genuine apostle. Hidden in Verse 11 is a remarkable paradox which is possible only to those who are true servants of Christ. Notice how he puts it: "I was not at all inferior," he says; and then in the next phrase, "yet I am nothing." Now one statement is, "I am the equal of anybody; I am not inferior at all to these superlative apostles; I have everything they have and more," while at the same time he can say, "yet I am nothing." That is the mark of a true servant of Christ: the ability to say both of those things and for both of them to be equally true. When Paul says, "I am not inferior," he means, "Everything I am in Christ, everything that Christ can do through me makes me equal to anything they can do."

This is the attitude that every Christian ought to come to about himself: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," {cf, Phil 4:13 KJV}. "If God tells me to do something I can do it. I can obey his word. I can follow his precepts I can do what he asks. " There is a ringing note of confidence because you are not relying on yourself, but on Christ. At the same time the apostle could add, "Relying on myself I am nothing. All my abilities, my gifts, my natural talents won't get me anywhere in God's sight. They are impressive to other people, and I could fool a lot of people this way, but they are not at all impressive in the eyes of God."

I wish I could get a lot more Christians talking this way today, willing to say, "If Christ tells me something to do or something to be, then there is no limit to my ability to do it because he will provide the power. But in myself, trying to do anything depending on my gifts, I will accomplish nothing of any value in God's sight."

Now that is the mark of a true servant of Christ!

One of the ways you can test the false apostles of our day is to listen carefully to what they say about themselves. Do they claim anything is coming from them? Do they claim to be remarkable people of remarkable ability, or are they talking about the power coming from Christ? That is the big difference. By this, Paul should have been recognized by these Corinthians. Now, he does add this verse: "Did you reject all this only because I failed to let you support me? I'm sorry," he says, "I should have let you do that. Forgive me that wrong." That is a reference, of course, to all the emphasis they had put upon the fact that he supported himself when he was with them instead of living, like these apostles, off the fat of the congregation. Well, that is the first mark of a true apostle: there are certain authenticating signs.

Now I personally believe that there are no successors to the apostles in the fullest sense of that term, the reason being because there is a sense in which these men are still with us. You and I have been listening to the Apostle Paul for months, teaching us here every Sunday morning. We can turn to John, Peter, James, and other apostles too. They laid the foundations way back at the beginning of the Christian era, but they are still speaking to us through their letters and through their words. Therefore there is no need for other apostles to

come.

As you hear voices around today claiming to be new apostles, to have new revelations of the mind of God beyond Scripture, ask yourself, where are the authenticating signs? The signs of a true apostle have to appear or there is no reason to accept him.

In the next paragraph we have a second mark of true apostleship,

Here for the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be a burden, for I seek not what is yours but you; for children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less? {2 Cor 12:14-15 RSV}

An important principle is stated very plainly there. Paul gives himself in selfless love because he is the parent and they are the children; he had led them to Christ. It is the responsibility of parents to provide for the children, not to expect the children, while they are yet children, to support their parents.

Many of you are new parents, and some of you already are laying aside money to be used for your children's education years down the road. That is because your parent heart desires to provide for the welfare and the future of your children, because God has made it that way.

One of the great marks of a true servant of Christ, a true apostle, is that he gives himself without restraint to those to whom he is ministering. He does not ask for anything back from them. What a contrast that is with false apostles. How upset they get if you do not minister in return to them and give them love in return for their ministry.

But notice what Paul's attitude is. He says, "I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?" That is, these Corinthians were not responding with love. The normal response of a child to his parents' care is to love them. But even if the Corinthians do not, Paul says, "I am still going to pour out everything for you."

And he indicates that his love is an unqualified form of love.

I remember years ago reading a story of a mother who went down to breakfast one morning and found a bill from her son lying beside her plate. He had written it out for her.

Mowing the lawn -- \$2.00
Drying the dishes -- \$1.00
Raking leaves ----- \$3.00
Cleaning garage --- \$4.00
Total ----- \$10.00 owed

She did not say anything, but went about her work. When the boy came home from school for lunch that day he found a bill lying beside his plate. It said:

Ironing clothes --- nothing
Mending socks --- nothing
Cooking meals --- nothing
Bandaging cuts -- nothing
Baking cookies -- nothing
Love, Mother

That is the apostle's attitude, isn't it? He does not expect and does not demand anything in return. It would be nice if he got it back, but even if he does not, that is not going to stop him. That kind of selfless, unqualified love is the mark of a true servant of Christ.

You can use it to test the claims of many voices today as to whether they are the servants of Christ or not, because it is the invariable mark of those who genuinely love that they love without demanding something in return. This is the second mark of the genuine apostle here.

They are so suspicious of him, however (though it is hard to believe), they actually press this even further. In Verse 16 he says,

But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by guile. {2 Cor 12:16 RSV}

This is what some of them were saying. They could not find fault with what he did, so they said, "Well, he is only doing it because he wants to allay our suspicions. When he gets us eating out of his hand, then he is going to take advantage of us." Paul goes on to say, "Just name one time when I did that."

Verse 17:

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with Him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? {2 Cor 12:17-18 RSV}

What a beautiful, selfless attitude the apostle demonstrates here. He challenges them to name even one time when he took advantage of his relationship, expecting them to give something back to him for what he had been pouring out to them. I am sure this effectively silenced the opposition in Corinth in that regard.

Then, beginning with Verse 19, we have still a third mark of a true apostle of Christ, for the apostle says:

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding beloved. For I fear that perhaps I may come and find you not what I wish, and that you may find me not what you wish; that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned before And have not repented of the impurity, immorality, and licentiousness which they have practiced. {2 Cor 12:19-21 RSV}

The first verse of Chapter 13 belongs here.

This is the third time I am coming to you. Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses. {2 Cor 13:1 RSV}

What Paul clearly is saying here is that a true apostle is answerable only to God, not to the congregation. A true servant of Christ does not need to always justify himself before the people to whom he ministers. It is nice to have their approval, but it is not necessary, as long as he had God's approval; and, because he does not require their approval, he will not fail to do what is necessary when he comes among them again, is his argument. He will deal with the reality of what he finds, what is actually going on in the congregation.

Evidently that is not a pleasant picture. There were certain wrong attitudes which he anticipates he will find, i.e., "quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder." Dr. William Barclay calls those, "marks of an unchristian church."

I wish I could tell you that very few churches are like this, but I have to admit, unfortunately, that, as I travel about, I find these conditions very common in many, many churches. It is always a shameful thing that churches should be divided, quarreling, filled with jealousy, anger, and selfishness. I find the reason behind this is a failure to want to obey what Scripture tells us to do with regard to one another. One reason many Christians are having to go to psychologists and secular counselors for help with their problems is because they have neglected what the Scripture says to do to one another. Instead of going to someone and telling him his fault between you and him alone, they start gossiping to others about it, complaining, and feeling bitter,

and refusing to talk to someone. These are kinds of things that destroy the witness and testimony of a congregation.

Paul says, "When I come I will deal with these because I do not require your approval of me, therefore I can deal honestly with what I see to be there."

Not only were there wrong attitudes, but there was very wrong conduct there. Paul speaks of "impurity," "immorality," and "licentiousness." These are sexual attitudes that have to do with the whole realm of sexuality and its purposes. I am impressed by these Corinthians letters. How faithfully the apostle dealt with these matters of sexual impurity in a place and time where they were widely accepted as being normal. (We are coming to these conditions rapidly in our own day.) The apostle persists in this. He does not give up. He dealt with these conditions over a period of months, even years. He sent people to them. He himself went. He wrote four letters to them, all to try to help them in these areas, to deal honestly and openly and courageously with the things that are wrong in public life, and to refuse to go along with the trend of the times, and to yield to what everybody is doing -- that argument that has destroyed so many through the course of the ages. If there is anything a Christian is called on to do it is not to do what everybody else is doing. It is to be different, because Christ has made the difference in our lives. The apostle deals with this and says that he will come again and deal honestly with it. He is free to do so because as a true apostle he is answerable only to God and not to the congregation.

Well, what is he going to do? He says he is going to handle it in an orderly way. Any charge must be sustained by the evidence of two or three witnesses. But things are going to be opened up; nothing is going to be hidden after he arrives; all is going to be brought out into the open. And then what?

How will it be handled? That is what the next paragraph brings before us, and it constitutes the fourth mark of a true apostle. Verse 2:

I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them -- since you desire proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful in you. For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God. {2 Cor 13:2-4 RSV}

Twice in that paragraph Paul speaks of the "power of God." That is what a true servant of Christ relies upon.

I find that many of the commentators in dealing with this section picture the apostle as going back to Corinth and sitting as a judge. He brings all these cases before him, and as a kind of bishop over the whole church he pronounces judgments and then mobilizes the congregation to put economic and social pressure upon the dissenting individuals to boycott them or excommunicate them.

But I do not find anything like that in Scripture. These are men's ideas that are brought in. What the Apostle Paul is talking about is not some kind of social pressure that is brought to bear to bring an evildoer to heel. He is talking about the ability of God to act inside people's conscience and heart and change them by pressure and by trouble, even, maybe disaster, whatever God's judgment may allow. But Paul's reliance is not on the congregation to execute this judgment, but on God, on Christ, and that is quite different than what we often think of in this regard.

Paul is probably referring to the fact that he would take the last step that is mentioned in Matthew 18:15-20, in the discipline of a church and church members:

1. Discipline begins with you going to someone and quietly telling him his fault, between you and him alone.
2. Then if he will not hear you, take one or two more and tell them and talk it over among yourselves.
3. But if he will not hear them, then there comes a time when it is to be told to the church.

This is what Paul is talking about here. When he comes all he will do is simply make public what he has private knowledge of now. He will tell it to the whole church and then the church will seek to try to reach this individual and bring him to repentance. If he will not hear the church, then the Lord says, let him be unto you as a publican and sinner, i.e., regard him no longer as a Christian; let him go his way. But nothing further is required, for God will begin to work. As Paul says, "He was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God. He is not weak in dealing with you, but he is powerful in you. When we come, though we are weak in him, in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God." He relies on the fact that God will bring about the result.

I want to share with you what I regard as an outstanding example of this very thing. Some of you were here five years ago when we had to take an action in this church, which was very painful at the time, with regard to a brother Christian, _____. (*) He was involved with certain acts of homosexuality which he resisted counsel on, and refused to acknowledge were wrong, and eventually we had to take this step of telling it to the church, which we did. It was a very painful and a very grievous time because we loved him deeply. A couple of weeks ago, however, I received this letter from him, and I share it with you with his full permission:

My fellow Christians,

Several years ago the congregations of PBC and South Hills Community Church took public action against me in accordance with Matthew 18:15-20. The charges against me were true.

I cannot reverse history and relive the events that led me to my downfall. I have harmed many people and brought ruin to myself. Because I was an outspoken, prominent member of the Christian community my sins have been all the more deplorable and horrendous.

After I became a Christian some 18 years ago I failed to deal thoroughly with lust, covetousness and masturbation. In time I became self-deceived, proud and arrogant. Moreover, eventually God shouted upon the housetops that which I had tried desperately to keep hidden. God finally let me go into alcoholism and sexual immorality, both of which were worse than I experienced before my conversion. Twice I went through the horror and hell of manic-depressive psychoses (as Nebuchadnezzar did) that I might learn that God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.

I am very fortunate to be alive. I came very close to suicide and should have died in ignominy and disgrace except for the scripture which says, "Dost thou work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise thee? Is thy steadfast love declared in the grave, or thy faithfulness in Abaddon?"

I am in need of your forgiveness for I have wronged you all. I earnestly desire your prayers for wholeness and complete deliverance from homosexuality. The church widely believes today that there is no cure for homosexuality beyond arrested development as a celibate. I am certain that God can do much more than he has already done for me and for countless others in this area who are afflicted with this crippling disease.

It is impossible for me to retrace my footsteps and right every wrong, however I welcome the opportunity to meet and pray with any individuals who have something against me that needs resolution. I am looking and waiting for the further grace and mercy of God in this matter. What you have bound on earth has been bound in heaven, and I now know your actions were done in love for my own good and that of the Body of Christ.

Sincerely,

*[This man's name was changed in the printed sermon to avoid unnecessary notoriety. Ed.]

A few days ago a number of us who had been closely associated with him asked him to join us in a "welcome home" dinner. We killed the fatted calf. (We had barbecued veal. This was the first time veal steaks have ever been barbecued, I think.) Then we asked him to stand up, and we welcomed him back, as one who had been dead but was alive again. We called out to bring a gold ring to put upon his finger. We bought him a new sport coat and put it on his back, and welcomed him home as the prodigal son.

He felt so welcomed, and forgiven, that he sat down afterward to tell us what God had taken him through in these intervening years, how God had dealt with him in ways that were ruthless and yet loving, and what a hell

he had gone through. He said, "I've come to know the full meaning of the words, 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God'." But it was a joyful time of restoration and of renewing our love and fellowship.

We rejoice, as I am sure the angels in heaven are rejoicing, that God has effected this discipline not by human pressures, but by the power of God at work in an individual heart in obedience to the word of the living God. This is what the apostle is talking about.

So these are the marks of a true apostle:

1. Certain authenticating signs that only the original apostles had;
2. A selfless spirit that loves and does not demand anything in return;
3. A sense of accountability to God alone and not ultimately to the congregation or to any man;
4. A reliance upon the power of God to carry out the work of God on earth.

If we base our faith on men with these qualifications we will find ourselves standing firmly, in spite of all the shaking that is going on in our day. I urge that upon you in this time.

Prayer

Gracious Father, how we thank you that you are a faithful God, faithful to your own standards and yet faithful to your unexplainable, incredible love, faithful to pursue us, to correct us, but faithful also to redeem us, to restore us and forgive us. Help us to walk softly and carefully before you in these days, to be ready to stand up and be counted, to speak out and to stand for righteousness and truth, in the midst of its decay. We ask it in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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