

WHO IS AN 'AMBASSADOR' IN SECOND CORINTHIANS 5:20?

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul says something which has caused us no end of trouble. He says words which can be translated into English along these lines: 'On behalf of Christ then we act as ambassadors, as if God were making his appeal to you through us; standing in for Christ then we pray you to be reconciled to God.' Most readers will recognise this verse in the shorter form 'We are ambassadors for Christ' and it is this short and seemingly simple form which has become so full of problems for us.

It is a widespread tradition in modern western Evangelical circles for a preacher to stand in front of a congregation, repeat the words 'We are ambassadors for Christ,' add some words of congratulation or encouragement to the people and tell them to get out there and start ambassadoring! (My Spellcheck is having a fit with that one.) The vast majority of my Evangelical friends believe they are ambassadors for Christ because "it's in the Bible" and because they have been told so many times it is true – but – what if it's **not** true? People get very very hurt when someone tries to tell them they may not be ambassadors for Christ after all – they take it as a personal slur on themselves and think that someone else is calling into question their worth as Christians – but that tradition has no basis in what Paul is actually saying in this text, as I will try to show.

Problem one – Selecting one verse only.

The problem is that this entire letter in the NT has been treated like a cookie jar or box of chocolates, so readers can reach in and pull out just one verse and ignore all the rest – they have got the one they want and they don't need the others. But no part of the Bible is a mere barrel of separate bits and pieces – all the parts of a text are alive and all are in some way or another connected into a living whole. Every verse has a context which gives it its meaning and without that context it can mean anything – or nothing.

When we put some time and effort into studying 2 Corinthians we see that the whole letter is very complex and difficult, so much so that many preachers choose to ignore the letter as a whole rather than struggle with it. It is so much easier to pick one or two attractive and easy looking verses from it, preach on those every 18 months or so, and let it go at that. The text itself is complex because it reflects the difficult and complex and constantly changing nature of the Church at Corinth and their relationship with the Apostle Paul who is writing to them. I hope you are beginning to see the problems which will follow when we rush in to such a letter, grab one or two likely looking verses, and rush out again. We won't have a clue what Paul was doing or what we should be doing.

The First letter to the Corinthians shows us the importance of this church in Corinth –

its leadership among the local churches, its special relationship to Paul who founded it and became its 'father,' its many problems between the brothers, and with their earthly father Paul, and the headaches and heartaches they caused him. Second Corinthians was written later and shows that things had if anything become worse between the church and Paul, and a lot of the text of 2 Corinthians is Paul's own personal defence and explanations of his work and status as an Apostle of Christ, in the face of attacks and accusations which had been directed against him by members and factions in the church. Our key verse 5:20 is part of this personal defence in the face of these serious and destructive accusations made against him, and the whole question is discussed in almost legal terms, and we know the Corinthians themselves were familiar with this sort of language because they took each other to the corrupt secular courts to try to get some sort of redress for very serious offences against each other. Now ask yourself: 'What sort of Christians were these people? Could Paul possibly be telling them **they** were ambassadors for Jesus Christ, and if he is not doing so what would that say about us and our use of his words?' What we are reading in this letter are some very painful but **private** disputes between Paul and the Corinthians, embarrassingly dragged out into the light of day, and it is not very wise of us to rush in, drag a few choice pieces of their dirty washing off the clothesline and run off with them – but that is what we regularly do! 2 Cor 5:20 in particular is one of the favourite launching pads in the NT for the notorious 'Great Evangelical Leap' from the remote past to the glorious present.

Problem two – The key word 'Ambassadors.'

Paul does not use the noun 'ambassadors' but says something like: 'It is *as if we were* acting in the role of ambassadors.' The verb he uses is *presbeuo* which was widely used in Greek history, but here it has a very special formal meaning; it meant being chosen by some greater authority such as a king or a city, given letters of accreditation and introduction (the sort of thing we now call diplomas, so these people were 'diplomats'), given money and transport and often a bodyguard for safety, and given responsibility and authority to negotiate on behalf of the greater power who sent them. In Ephesians 6:20 Paul calls himself an 'ambassador in chains,' pointing to the fact that while he represents the greatest king of all, Jesus Christ, the people of this world have insulted that king by putting his envoy, his ambassador Paul, in chains. You just cannot dishonour a king in that way and not expect the most severe reprisals.

The basic idea of the word *presbeuo* means 'to be an old man,' which means one with wisdom and experience and 'runs on the board,' so these were important people with important work to do. Today of course, like almost everything else in life, the idea has been cheapened and diluted, so that now every teenager with a slogan printed on their T-shirt can be called an 'ambassador' for something or other, and the Evangelical movement in the West has followed this trend by saying that we are all ambassadors for Christ and using 2 Cor 5:20 to prove it. But Paul simply cannot be saying that – in this passage he is standing on his own dignity – not giving it away!!

Another word that could be used in ancient Greek and which Paul could have used here instead of *presbeuo*, was *apostolos*, and here at least we will all recognise the word. The two words are interchangeable so if you really do want to call yourself a *presbus* or ambassador of Christ then you are at the same time claiming that you are an *apostle* of Christ. Given that there were very few Apostles of Christ in the NT, that they all saw him face-to-face and were personally called by name and hand-picked by him and empowered by him, and had to be prepared to suffer greatly for him, that they were not replaced at death and that Paul clearly and deliberately says that he was the last of them, do you still want to make that claim about yourself? Certainly you cannot base that claim on 2 Cor 5:20!

Problem three – Paul's use of the plural 'WE'.

In many places in 2 Corinthians Paul uses the plural 'we' when we might have expected him to use the singular 'I' because he is clearly talking about himself alone. The reason for his choice of the plural is unclear but he can hardly be blamed for the unfortunate results it has had among modern Evangelical readers who are drawn to the words 'we' and 'us' as moths are drawn to a candle, or as a fish is drawn to a worm on a hook. We have been taught to 'apply' every Bible verse to ourselves, and to find ourselves wherever possible in any Bible text, so when we see these beloved words 'we' and 'us' we simply close our eyes and jump into the welcoming waters. But Paul's words in 2 Corinthians contain hidden traps and hidden dangers for us which did not exist for the original Greek readers of this Greek letter.

It is an odd thing that when Paul refers to himself in the plural in Romans 1:5 it doesn't fool anybody but when he does the same thing in 2 Corinthians it causes no end of confusion. If you want to see yourself clear of the difficulties of the use of the plural in this letter the simplest way to do it would be to read chapters 1 through 8 in the singular, mentally changing each 'We' to 'I.' It is a safe thing to do because Paul is certainly talking about himself each time so you will not miss anything important. I think his use of the plural is stylistic, chosen because of the very peculiar demands of this very unusual letter; it has been called an 'editorial' plural, or it could be called a letter-writing or 'epistolary' plural, but even though it is unusual it should not have caused the problems it has. So what is Paul actually saying to the Corinthians – the people he was actually writing to?

Problem four – What is Paul actually saying in 5:20?

Paul is speaking to the Corinthians as the personal representative of the Great King – the Greatest King – Jesus Christ the eternal king who infinitely outranks any temporary Caesar in Rome. If Caesar sent a letter or an envoy to Corinth they would take the greatest notice and exercise the greatest care in how they responded, but what is Paul going on about? The situation is fairly simple: the Corinthians have been part of the Kingdom of the Great King but have recently been in rebellion

against him by being in rebellion against his envoy – Paul. How has the Great King responded? Has he determined to wipe out these rebels the way he is certainly entitled to do? No, not at all. He sends Paul as a *presbus* or envoy with a message of gentleness and peace and forgiveness and reconciliation. We can see this both in 5:20 and in later verses: 'So I am an ambassador for Christ, God making his appeal through me: I beseech you (Corinthians) on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God' (5:20). 'I entreat you (Corinthians) not to accept the grace of God in vain' (6:1). 'My mouth is open to you, Corinthians, my heart is wide. You are not restricted by me but you are restricted in your own affections. In return – I speak as to my own children – widen your hearts also' (6:11-13). 'Open your hearts to me' (7:2). Paul regarded himself as their spiritual father in the sense that he had been specially sent by Jesus Christ himself to find and collect the Lord's people and to found and build the church in Corinth, and as a hard-working father he expected an appropriate return from his children. He was not getting it and the resulting letter is soaked in his tears – and mine. His letter is heartbreaking – if you can read it without tears you have not understood it.

Problem five – Can Paul be saying one thing to them and the opposite to us?

Clearly Paul is not saying the Corinthians are ambassadors for Christ – quite the opposite in fact – they are the ones who need the peace offering being brought by Paul as Christ's ambassador. They are in danger of dropping out of the kingdom so how could they possibly be thought of as ambassadors for that kingdom? But then again how should we read the passage; could Paul want us to read his words to them with an opposite message for us, so that we could still be ambassadors for Christ even when this passage implies the Corinthians were not? In a way this is a weird question but many people will desperately want to hang on to some possibility that this verse 5:20 can be made to refer to them. The simple answer must be No – we cannot switch things around like this and invent new meanings and applications of verses just to suit ourselves. That is not proper Bible-study practice.

Problem six – Why did the problem arise in the first place?

Now we get right down to the nub of the matter. The problem is not what Paul is doing with this verse but what we want to do with it. Many modern Western Evangelicals come to this verse with a strong presupposition that all Christians are required to engage in personal evangelism and 2 Cor 5:20, taken at face value and in the most superficial way, seems to teach that very thing. It says 'We are ambassadors for Christ' and that is all we need – our view of ourselves has been endorsed – we have been promoted to the highest rung – our self-worship has been gratified. But this has nothing to do with what Paul was actually saying and this unbelievably poor reading of his words results in a heartbreaking slur on the efforts of this good man and his fellow Apostles.

Problem seven – the 'Traditions of the Evangelical Fathers'

Many of us growing up in Evangelical circles will have simply been told what this verse means, heard it quoted, learnt it as a memory verse and heard sermons on it. It has become one of our major 'default settings.' What I have tried to do in this essay is give you the basic information necessary to question that tradition, and all traditions must always be prepared to yield before thorough questioning and the search for truth.

Closely related Essays are Essay 3 Apostles and Essay 4 Fruit of the Vine.

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