**Worker approved by God** 27/3/22 dkm

Read: Jeremiah 9:17-26, 2Corinthians 10

Text: 2Corinthians 10:12-18

Psalms: 34:1-9, 1, 44:1-8, 72old

Some years ago my brother-in-law, who was principal of a Bible college at the time, commented on how theologians reference one another rather than the Bible as they seek to establish a point of doctrine. This is especially common when the doctrine they are establishing is not actually in the Bible! I have been criticised for not agreeing with a theologian who wrote a hundred and fifty years ago; the critic held that everything this man wrote was true. The only book that is true in every word is the Bible, the canon of Scripture.

Those who disagree with the clear truth of the Bible do their best to undermine this truth. One way they do this is to by referring to like-minded men or women, especially those famous in the academic world; but sometimes the reference politicians, or even celebrities who know nothing about the Bible. ‘They compare themselves among themselves’ as the apostle Paul writes (10:12).

The apostle Paul, who had planted the church in Corinth, continues defending his personal integrity, and the gospel he preached, in the face of attacks from false teachers who had infiltrated this church. He was engaged in spiritual warfare, in a battle for the hearts and the faith of brothers and sisters at Corinth. But he was not going to take up the weapons they were using, namely carnal weapons. Paul was fighting a spiritual battle and he would use spiritual weapons (10:4). With God’s strength, he would demolish their worldly arguments.

Just as they boasted, so he could boast, but in his weakness not in some personal attribute applauded by the world. Paul was writing to the church, urging the faithful members not to listen to these false teachers, and to take action against them. In the passage before us today he exposes flaws in the boasting of these false teaches, and accuses them of being ‘sheep stealers’.

**1. Seek commendation from the Lord**

As Paul writes to the church, condemning the false teachers in their midst, he often resorts to irony and sarcasm; verse 12 is a case in point. With ‘tongue in cheek’ as we say, he says in effect, ‘I dare not compare myself with these eminent teachers; I do not even belong in their class!’ But in reality, their commendations were self- commendations; they were praising themselves. And their standards were totally subjective because they were measuring themselves against each one another. Just because 95% or 99% of the ‘experts’ agree that something is true does not necessarily make it true. In the Bible we have truth from God- one Lord and one truth.

These false teachers were Hebrews who had come from Jerusalem, most likely. They probably wrote letters of commendation for each other (3:1). It is unlikely that true apostles like Peter and John sent them to Corinth after agreeing that Paul and Barnabas go to the Gentiles and they to the uncircumcised (Gal 2:9). Besides, these false teachers were undermining the gospel that they, like Paul were preaching. These false teachers were, in fact, self-appointed men carrying dodgy documents. Their main ‘claim to fame’ was eloquence in public speaking; when men preach a false gospel can we call it preaching?

How could the apostle Paul compare himself with men who were preaching ‘another Jesus’ and ‘a different gospel’? (11:4). What measure could he use? They had departed from Scripture, so the only measure they had was worldly or carnal. They were not like the Bereans, who tested whatever Paul and Silas preached by ‘searching the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so’ (Acts 17:11).

Paul concludes that by, ‘measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves’ these men were not wise (10:12). Actually, they were being foolish. Such behaviour was not fitting in the church. Too often those in the church forget that Christ is the head of the church. Highly educated or otherwise qualified people are welcome in the church, but they must have wisdom from above and not start acting with worldly wisdom (James 3:13-17). Paul is content to be called an ‘untrained speaker’, but he reminds the Corinthians he is on no way deficient in knowledge (11:6).

Paul had no letter of commendation because he did not need one; the church itself was sufficient authentication of his ministry (3:2-3). These false teachers seem to have boasted of ecstatic gifts also (12:12), an all-too-common claim to fame among church leaders today. Paul performed many signs and wonders (Rom 15:19), but it is interesting that he does not use these to authenticate his ministry in Corinth, or anywhere else.

While Paul referred to the church at Corinth as his letter of commendation, he did not boast in the number who believed or the number he baptised (1Cor 1:17). It is a great temptation for preachers or evangelists or missionaries to boast about such numbers. The pastor of a small, struggling church is often compared unfavourably with the pastor of a huge, growing church. When both are working hard and faithfully preaching the gospel, why are such comparisons made; and why does the pastor of the huge church get paid more? The apostle Paul, who preached the gospel free of charge at Corinth, would be horrified by practices in the church today.

While the apostle begins verse 12 with sarcasm, he ends on a serious note saying, they ‘are not wise’. And he concludes this matter of commendation or self-praise in verse 18 by saying, ‘For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends’. A pastor who depends upon the people for affirmation or praise will not remain for long. Although elected and appointed by the church, a pastor is ultimately responsible to the Lord. He seeks to be faithful to the Lord’s calling upon his life and in his ministry. The apostle Paul was one hundred percent clear about his calling to be an apostle, and he worked selflessly in fulfilling this high calling. He would later say, ‘I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith’ (2Tim 4:7).

**2. Sheep stealers**

The door was opened for missionaries to go to India in the early 1800’s following the pioneering work of William Carey. With the influx of missionaries, there became a need to agree on spheres or regions of work, at least among evangelical missions. Presbyterians agreed to work in certain areas, Baptists in another, and Lutherans in another; the Church of England was attached to the colonial government. Mission work was similarly divided up in other parts of the world. If a group came into an area allocated to another church they were called sheep stealers because they ‘stole’ members from other churches.

At his conversion, Paul was called by Christ to preach the gospel of Christ to ‘the Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel’ (Acts 9:15). Paul was later brought into missionary work by Barnabas. Together they went to see the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, who agreed that Paul go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised or the Jews (Gal 2:9). Two spheres of ministry were established, although there was just one church, as seen in Paul’s collection for the church in Jerusalem.

It seems that these false teachers at Corinth were telling the people that Paul should not have been ministering in their region. Yet he vehemently denies that he was ‘overextending’ himself (10:14). He was ministering ‘within the limits of the sphere God appointed for us’ (10:13), and therefore had authority as their apostle. Paul had a number of helpers of course, who ministered under his authority, but these false teachers were ministering without his authority. They were intruders, and they were sheep stealers taking credit for ministry not done by them, for their own selfish purposes. Jesus spoke of false prophets as wolves coming in sheep clothing to devour the flock (Mat 7:15). Paul writes of these false teachers at Corinth as ‘deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ’ (11:13).

When Paul spoke of the Christians at Corinth as being effectively his letter of commendation, it could not be said that his boasting was beyond measure or out of order (10:15). He was the one who brought the gospel to this city. He was not working in another missionary’s territory, and he was not guilty of sheep stealing. Paul was proud of the Christians at Corinth, people whom he had betrothed to Christ (11:2), but he gave all glory to God. He was delighted to see their faith increasing, and hoped they would reach out to others in their city.

Paul spent only one and a half years in this city planting this church. There is no indication that he appointed elders in Corinth, as he did on other churches (Acts 14:23), but he was confident the church could manage on its own after this length of time. Missionaries or preachers today are not confident to leave a church to itself after ten years or more, let alone a year and a half! New converts are not accepted until they are actually old. Is it any wonder the church is not growing as it should be? ‘But look at what happened at Corinth’, you might say. Certainly, Paul had to intervene with regard to immorality in the church and with regard to false teachers who entered it, but he does so by urging the church itself to exercise discipline, and shows no regret for leaving this church when he did- after just eighteen months, as we are told (Acts 18:11).

Years ago there was a missionary organisation called RBMU, Regions Beyond Missionary Union. They took their name from this verse in 2Corinthans 10: ‘To preach the gospel in regions beyond you’ (10:16). Paul was a pioneer missionary; he aimed to preach the gospel in areas where it had not yet been taken within the sphere of his ministry to the Gentiles. He was not called to build on another man’s foundation (Rom 15:20), or to steal sheep as these intruders were doing at Corinth. In writing to the Romans not long after writing 2Corinthians, Paul spoke of going to Spain (Rom 15:24). The church was already established in Rome- hence his letter to them. He hoped they would assist him as he went to regions beyond to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

**3. Glory in the Lord**

The apostle Paul refused to fight the false teachers on their terms, their worldly or carnal terms (10: 4). Their claims were false, their methods deceitful, and their commending of themselves was foolish. Paul may have looked weak by their standards, but he was strong in the strength of the Lord. Paul was seeking the approval of the Lord not men.

Paul closes by again referring to words from the prophet Jeremiah (10:17, cf. 1:31). When Paul first wrote to this church, they were arguing about which apostle they were following. He condemned this division in the church saying, ‘Is Christ divided?’ (1Cor 1:12-13). Paul was not competing against Apollos: ‘I planted, Apollos watered and God gave the increase’ he wrote (1Cor 3:6). Therefore, ‘Let him who glories, glory in the Lord’ (1Cor 1:31).

The division being caused by the false teachers came later and was quite different. They were not building on the foundation established by Paul but destroying this foundation, which is Jesus Christ. Paul had to tackle these deceitful workers head on. He does so with the truth, with sarcasm, and with boasting in his weaknesses and his suffering for the gospel rather than in his own strengths. And in the end, Scripture remains his greatest weapon. He again quotes the prophet Jeremiah, who faced some of the same challenges that Paul was facing. Jeremiah warned the wise against taking glory in their wisdom, the mighty against taking glory in their might, and the rich taking glory in their riches, declaring, in Paul’s words, ‘Let him who glories, glory in the Lord’.