

2 COR. 11:7 – 13:14

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2006 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

E. Answer to Charge of Independence from Corinthians (11:7-15)

1. Traveling teachers in the first century did not normally work with their hands. The ideal was to make a good living from teaching itself. That was seen as an indication of the value of what one taught. Paul refused to accept support from the Corinthians, and the false apostles used that in their effort to persuade the Corinthians that Paul could not be much of an apostle.

2. In Acts 18:1-4 we see that Paul worked as a tentmaker to provide for his needs during his initial stay in Corinth. This was considered degrading for a philosopher or itinerant teacher. Paul had the right to be supported by his converts (1 Cor. 9:7-12a), but he asks if it was a sin for him to humble himself through manual labor in order to exalt them above their idolatry and immorality. If self-humiliation for the sake of others is wrong, then Christ must have been wrong in leaving heaven to suffer on a cross for the salvation of mankind.

3. When Paul was in Corinth, he did not take any support from them. Rather, he received support from the Macedonian churches. This is how Paul worked. When he accepted support, it was for work done somewhere other than in the church giving the support. It seems that he chose to preach the gospel free of charge (1 Cor. 9:15-18) to help proclaim the grace of God. The supporting churches would learn the responsibility to all men which grace had put them under.

4. In the Corinthians' case, however, Paul says that he will not accept any help from them whatsoever (though he was willing to do so at one point - 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; 2 Cor. 1:16). This unique treatment of the Corinthians was probably due in part to their pagan view of remuneration. As long as they used "pay" to evaluate Paul and his message, he would refuse to accept anything from them so as not to reinforce their approach. The other reason is explicitly stated in 11:12.

5. Far from apologizing for or reversing his policy of not accepting money from the Corinthians, Paul "boasts" in it because it exemplifies the Christian principle of self-sacrifice. As with self-humiliation, if it is wrong to sacrifice for the benefit of others, then Christ must have been wrong.

6. Far from being an indication that he does not love the Corinthians, as his enemies suggested, his humility and self-sacrifice were prompted by his intense love for them.

7. In v. 12 Paul explicitly states a reason for his refusal to change his financial policy toward the Corinthians: it distinguishes him from the false apostles who are opposing him and thus should help to expose them.

a. His opponents apparently claimed to be all that Paul was and then some, but they were unwilling to do as he did in the matter of accepting money. So, with the help of their culture, they tried to turn Paul's noble conduct into a negative.

b. Paul, however, rejects that worldly analysis and provides the correct perspective on his conduct. It is really a point in his favor, and he will not surrender it because he knows that his opponents will not follow him in it (no doubt suggesting they loved money), and thus it will stand as testimony against them.

8. The reason the opponents will not follow him in self-humiliation and sacrifice for the Corinthians is that they are "false apostles, deceitful workmen, [those] disguising themselves as apostles of Christ." They disguised themselves as Christians, as sheep, but inwardly they were ravenous wolves. They were leaders who worked against the gospel in the name of the gospel. They cleverly took the focus off Christ and his work and put it on human triumph and achievement.

a. The Corinthians were vulnerable to this either because they lacked the spiritual maturity necessary to spot the twisting of the gospel or they lacked the courage to denounce it. Both of these are perennial dangers to the church.

b. Regarding the danger of spiritual immaturity, Carson writes:

The point is that the archenemy is an archdeceiver. Unless we understand this, we will be pathetically gullible, sucked into various sins and blown this way and that way in our doctrine. The only certain antidote is the kind of humble walk with God that is characterized by a growing and mature knowledge of the Scriptures (Carson, 103).

c. Regarding the courage to denounce error, Carson writes:

The appeal to limitless toleration -- not just toleration of the other chap's right to be wrong, but toleration pushed so far one can never say that anyone or anything is wrong -- presupposes the greatest evil is to hold a strong conviction that certain things are true and their contraries are false. Worse, this presupposition operates because of an antecedent presupposition: confident knowledge in religious matters is impossible. But if we hold that God has revealed himself to men, supremely in the person of his Son, but also in the words and propositions of Scripture, then however many interpretative difficulties may still afflict us, we have no right to treat as optional anything God has said. Indeed, never to say any opinion is wrong presupposes one opinion is right -- viz., the one saying no opinion is wrong. Either this is illogical, or the proponent of this view really means the one certainly correct opinion is that no *other* opinion should ever be dismissed as wrong. But how has he or she attained such certain knowledge? Few opinions are less liberal and tolerant than the form of liberalism fiercely intolerant of everything but itself (Carson, 101).

F. Final Preface to Foolish Boasting (11:16-21a)

1. Paul says that no one should take him as a fool because of the boasting in which he is about to engage. That is not the real Paul; he is simply answering a fool according to his folly. It is the Corinthians' own gullibility, their acceptance of the intruders' triumphalist criteria, that is forcing Paul to adopt this approach if he is to protect them. But if they do judge him a fool for boasting, then he asks that they receive him as they have received the other fools (i.e., the intruders) and put up with a little of his boasting.

2. Paul injects a parenthetical comment in vv. 17-18 to make clear that in bragging about his experiences and achievements he, at least on the surface (just considering the act of bragging itself), is acting like his worldly opponents and not like Christ. Christ was not a braggart, but Paul must temporarily act like one to gain a hearing so as to prevent the Corinthians' defection. On another level, of course, he *is* acting like Christ (inspired by his Spirit) because his "boasting" is done to bless others, not to impress them.

3. Paul then stings the Corinthians in v. 19, saying, "For you gladly put up with fools, being wise yourselves!" They viewed themselves as "wise," but the result of their great wisdom was that they tolerated fools. In other words, they had a warped wisdom, a worldly wisdom, that kept them from recognizing fools.

4. In fact, their brand of "wisdom" not only tolerated the false apostles but granted them positions of influence and leadership. The intruders had become tyrants, intimidating, abusing, and exploiting the Corinthian congregation. The Corinthians had accepted the intruders' triumphalist criteria of apostolic authenticity and leadership and were in turn being trampled by it.

5. Paul in no way wants to be compared to these power-hungry exploiters. He says, "To my shame, I admit that we were too weak for that!" Paul and his companions conducted themselves with the meekness and gentleness of Christ, and the Corinthians dismissed them as "unimpressive" and "weak." On the other hand, they kowtowed to the harsh aggressiveness and abuse of authority exercised by servants of Satan masquerading as apostles.

G. Apostolic Boasting (11:21b-33)

1. Paul begins his boasting with a declaration that he is in no way inferior to any conceivable rival. Whatever they can boast about, he can also. But this is so painful for him, he again adds, "I am speaking as a fool."

2. Referring to the false apostles, Paul writes, "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants, so am I."

a. Paul wants it clear from the start that when it comes to Jewishness, he takes a back seat to no one. His opponents can gain no spiritual edge over him by appealing to their pedigree as the O.T. people of God.

b. Of course, Paul did not consider his Jewish pedigree to be significant in light of Christ (see, Phil. 3:4b-8), but he presents it here to remind the Corinthians he is not inferior on that score.

3. Paul asks, "Are they servants of Christ?" but then once again feels compelled to inject, "I am speaking as though out of my mind." He then answers the question, "I [am] more [of one]."

a. Paul is asking whether these false apostles are *considered* servants of Christ by the Corinthians (which, of course, they were). He is not altering his assessment of them as servants of Satan.

b. After saying he is more of a servant of Christ, Paul should go on to show in what ways he is a superior servant. As Carson notes, given that "brag-sheets" were common in the Greco-Roman world, we might expect Paul to list his exploits and victories. We could imagine Paul saying something like:

I have established more churches; I have preached the gospel in more lands and to more ethnic groups; I have traveled more miles; I have won more converts; I have written more books; I have raised more money; I have dominated more councils; I have walked with God more fervently and seen more visions; I have commanded the greatest crowds and performed the most spectacular miracles.

c. But instead, Paul details his sufferings, loss, shame, and defeats. It's as if the primary criterion of true apostleship is massive suffering in the service of Christ, something diametrically opposed to his opponents system of values. In listing these kinds of things in his "brag-sheet," Paul is not so subtly ridiculing or parodying the bragging of the false apostles.

(1) with more labors - probably a reference to manual labor while preaching the gospel, something the false apostles considered degrading.

(2) more imprisonments - not the kind of thing the false apostles would put high on their resume.

(3) beatings beyond measure - not more beatings than his opponents, as though they had been beaten. This is fleshed out in vv. 24-25a: "Five times I received from the Jews forty [lashes] minus one; three times I was beaten with rods."

(4) frequent deaths - a general reference to many types of situations in which Paul faced mortal danger.

(5) once I was stoned - no doubt a reference to his horrifying experience in Lystra (Acts 14:19).

(6) three times I was shipwrecked - one of which was far enough out that he spent a night and day in the sea, perhaps clinging to wreckage until rescue arrived. Note this is before the shipwreck in Acts 27 in route to Rome.

(7) In his constant movement, he faced a multitude of dangers, not the least of which would be crossing rivers and being robbed.

(8) He was persecuted by Jews, attacked by Gentiles, and faced danger in all types of places (city, country, sea).

(9) in danger from false brothers - This is those who claim to be fellow-Christians but are not. This is a reference back to "false apostles" (11:13). Most such false brothers in Paul's day would be Judaizers who denied the *exclusive sufficiency* of Christ and hounded Paul.

(10) [I have lived] with labor and toil [and] many sleepless nights - Paul's ministry was one of exhausting labor, pressure, and too much to do in too little time. It was scarcely characterized by luxury, comfort, and reflective ease.

(11) [I have lived] with hunger and thirst, many fastings, cold and nakedness - Paul experienced hunger and thirst associated with awkward travel arrangements and with an empty pocketbook. Cold and nakedness (insufficient clothing) might have been forced on him by prison life or financial destitution. As Carson comments:

While the Corinthians were being taught that truly great teachers earned huge fees and commanded multiplying assets, the apostle Paul frequently lived so far below the poverty line he would have needed substantial sums to reach it. For this he suffered doubly: the privations themselves, and then the condescending scorn of immature triumphalists who married pagan greed with over-realized eschatology to argue that financial prosperity was the reward of the just and the right sons of God, conveniently forgetting the cross.

(12) And apart from other things he could mention, he daily has the pressure of his concern for all the churches - This is not the self-centered worry that Jesus forbid in Mat. 6 but a healthy concern for the participation of others in the kingdom (as Jesus showed in weeping over Jerusalem). When saints are weak, Paul (unlike the triumphalists who despise all signs of weakness) empathizes with their weakness. When saints are led into sin, Paul burns with indignation against the behavior of those who caused it.

4. Paul's parody of the self-praise people wrote in their own honor culminates in vv. 30-33. According to Carson, "In these last few verses, Paul parodies the type of self-eulogy that singles out one detail and describes it graphically as a kind of paradigm of what might be expected from such a man." He then quotes E. A. Judge:

He will boast, if he must, of his weaknesses. But if it is realized that everyone in antiquity would have known that the finest military award for valour was the *corona muralis*, for the man who was first up the wall in the face of the enemy, Paul's point is devastatingly plain: he was the first down.

Carson concludes:

The triumphalists are so very proud of their accomplishments, such as they are. But while everyone is showing off his war medals, including the odd Congressional Medal of Honor, Paul tells how he ran away in the face of the enemy. He is determined to boast of the things that will show his weakness.

H. Boasting About Visions (12:1-10)

1. The false apostles not only claimed superiority in such things as rhetoric, ability to command fees, and leadership style but also claimed spiritual superiority. They enhanced their standing by bragging about the visions and revelations they claimed to receive from God, whereas Paul was reluctant to talk about such experiences.

2. Paul again notes that boasting is not beneficial (meaning under normal circumstances), but because of the situation he goes on to speak about his visions and revelations. Yet, Paul finds this boasting so embarrassing that he can only bring himself to do it in the third person. (Paul may be saying that boasting about visions and revelations is not beneficial in the sense that such unverifiable claims are no basis for one's reputation -- see vv. 6-7.)

3. Paul says that 14 years before he was caught up or transported to the third heaven, which in 12:4 he refers to as Paradise.

a. The reference to the "third heaven" is in line with the threefold division of heaven in the O.T. (see, Neh. 9:6; 1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chron. 2:6, 6:18; Ps. 148:4). There is the atmospheric heaven, a stellar heaven (or firmament), and the limitless, or spiritual, heaven where God is located. The third heaven is the highest and best -- *that's* what Paul entered.

b. The vision was such that Paul is not sure whether he was transported bodily or simply in spirit.

c. During this extraordinary vision, Paul heard things which were inexpressible in that they could only be described to those with a similar experience (like describing sight to a person born blind), and Paul was not permitted to reveal what he heard by using analogies

and metaphorical language. These things were not given to Paul to pass them on to the church but were for his own special benefit.

4. When viewing his experience objectively, in the third person, Paul admits that it is an extraordinary blessing of God which would justify boasting. But from a subjective perspective, when writing in first person, he can only boast of his weaknesses. He adds, however, that if he did make such a claim himself, his claim would not be foolishness but would be true. So he let's the cat out of the bag -- he was indeed the one who received these surpassingly great revelations.

5. The reason he refrains from such (direct) boasting about his visionary experience, which he could do if he chose to, is that he fears others will give it undue importance.

a. Paul does not want his converts to assess him on the basis of some private and unverifiable experience but on the basis of his behavior (his conduct and speech).

b. He does not want to become the focus of attention but insists that people focus on the gospel and the Savior.

6. This revelation was so awesome that Paul was given a "thorn in the flesh" to prevent him from being conceited.

a. We don't know what this was, but it was probably some type of significant physical ailment, perhaps something that also was embarrassing.

b. Paul sees this thorn as simultaneously the work of Satan and the work of God. The thorn was sent by Satan to limit or defeat the apostle, but God permitted it in order to bless Paul through it (to keep him from becoming conceited). God is able to make even the evil actions of Satan serve his purpose.

(1) The eleven brothers sold Joseph into slavery, an evil action, but years later Joseph could say to his brothers "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).

(2) Consider the cross of Christ. Darkness reigned when Christ was murdered through a wicked conspiracy, and all responsible for it are culpable. Yet at the same time, all these events came about as a result of what God's power and will had decided should happen.

c. As Fausset comments, "How dangerous must self-exaltation be, when even the apostle required so much restraint."

d. Three times Paul pleaded with the Lord (article suggests that "Lord" refers to Christ) to relieve this hardship, but the Lord's answer was "My grace is sufficient for you; for [my] power is perfected in weakness." In other words, the thorn would not be removed, but Paul would be supplied with the grace necessary to cope with it.

(1) The full scope and strength of Christ's power are found in human weakness. Divine grace is supplied to meet weakness; weakness and need are the contexts in which it is poured out. The greater one's weakness or need -- when one is poor, sick, humiliated, despised, unloved, and scorned -- the more grace one receives from God to endure and thrive. The powerful and strong are less fit vessels for God's enabling grace, so to brag about one's strength and abilities, as the triumphalists did, is to brag about one's lack of divine grace.

(2) This is the point of Rom. 8:37: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Christians are more than conquerors in the context of trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, and sword, and in the sense that despite all these things God will empower us to remain faithful.

(3) There is no lower point, no greater situation of human weakness than the cross, but it is here that God's strength was supremely manifested in Christ.

e. This perspective on weakness is why Paul boasts in the suffering and hardships he endured in his ministry. Wherever he is weak, there is the greatest opportunity for God's power to manifest itself with full vigor.

f. In our suffering, we need to pray for relief, but as long as the Lord permits us to remain in that state, he is saying to us "My grace is sufficient for you." He will give us the strength to cope with our troubles. Until he removes our thorn, we should see it as an opportunity for the manifestation of his power and thus a means to his glorification. (Of course, if we received a final "No" regarding relief, as did Paul, then we would cease to pray for its removal.)

I. Epilogue to "Fool's Speech" (12:11-13)

1. Paul again says that he was compelled to boast because the Corinthians had failed to defend him as they should have. Since they did not speak up, he was forced to in order to protect them.

2. He was in no way inferior to the "super-apostles," but he is quick to add, "even though I am nothing." Paul sensed his debt to God's grace in everything.

3. Ralph Martin translates v. 12: "The marks of a [true] apostle were displayed [by God] among you in all persistence, [along with] signs, and wonders, and mighty works."

a. Paul says that the hallmarks of an apostle, which for Paul primarily involved his life-changing ministry and his Christlike life but which included miracles, were worked [by God] among the Corinthians in all endurance (i.e., in the face of rejection, ridicule, and slander). In other words, he showed himself to be a true apostle in every way, including miraculous works. They were in no way shortchanged or inferior by virtue of Paul's apostleship.

b. Paul does not make the performance of miracles the acid test of apostleship (as NIV might suggest). Rather, they are part of the package.

4. In v. 13 Paul asks "For in what respect were you treated worse than the other churches," the point of which is that they were in no way shortchanged by his apostleship. The only thing he did not "do for them" is be a financial burden on them by taking their support. He ironically comments, "Forgive me this wrong!"

J. The Planned Third Visit (12:14 - 13:10)

1. His refusal to accept support (vv. 14-18)

a. When he makes his third visit, he will not change his policy of refusing to accept support. The reason is that he does not want their money (implying that the false apostles do) but them, i.e., their continued allegiance to Christ and their reciprocated love.

b. After all, he is their father in the faith, and the obligation of provision generally flows from parents to children, not the other way around. Children do, of course, have an obligation to support parents who need it (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:8), and apostles have a right to be supported by their spiritual children (1 Cor. 9:3-14), but foregoing that right cannot automatically be deemed hostile in light of the general parent-child relationship.

c. Like a loving father, Paul will most gladly expend his own resources (property and energy) on their behalf, to bless them spiritually. In v. 15b he asks whether his loving them more, by pouring his life out for them, will result in their loving him less. In other words, will they misinterpret his love and actually resent it.

d. In vv. 16-18 Paul responds to a slanderous accusation that was rooted in his fiscal policy toward them. Though it was acknowledged that Paul did not accept support from them, some apparently claimed he sent his agents to dupe them out of their money under the pretext of collecting for the poor saints in Judea. In rebuttal, Paul simply denies they can produce any evidence of fraud on the part of Titus, his agent, and then asserts his own integrity (which they should have known) in defense of Titus.

2. Fears about the unrepentant (vv. 19-21)

a. Paul repudiates the idea that he had all along been trying to win the approval of human judges in Corinth. Paul was ultimately accountable to God (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 4:3-5; 2 Cor. 5:10), not to the Corinthians, so self-defense before mere men was never his primary concern. Rather, as one who is acutely aware that everything he does is laid bare before God, his aim in all his relations with the Corinthians -- especially his correspondence -- was not personal vindication but edification.

b. Paul was partly motivated to build up the Corinthians because he feared that he might be disappointed in them when he arrived, that he might be humiliated by their poor spiritual condition. Specifically:

(1) He feared he might find sins of the spirit: discord, jealousy, angry outbursts, rivalries, [and cases of] evil speech, gossip, arrogance, [and] disorder. Rather than finding the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Paul feared he would find disunity and warring factions.

(2) He feared he might find sins of the flesh: impurity and fornication and licentiousness. Such immorality is more likely in a congregation characterized by the above-mentioned sins of the spirit not only because unrestraint in one part of life invites unrestraint in others but also because a fractured church cannot effectively exercise wise, firm, and loving discipline.

c. If this happened, the Corinthians would not find Paul the way they wanted him to be. Instead, he will be administering the discipline of the Lord.

3. Warning (13:1-4)

a. Paul is coming for a third time to Corinth, and his reference to Deut. 19:15 about matters being established by two or three witnesses is a clear indication that he intends to take disciplinary action against the impenitent. He plans to "hold court" so to speak. (He may also be pointing out that any accusations against him will also need to be credibly presented.)

b. Ample warning has been given, and on his next trip, if there is no improvement, decisive action will be taken. He "will not spare" those remaining in sin (either those warned during his second visit and in this letter or those warned only in this letter). This probably means that he, by the authority of Christ, will exclude them from the congregation (see, 1 Tim. 1:20 where Paul did this to Hymenaeus and Alexander), but it may suggest a more direct type of punishment from Christ (remember Ananias and Sapphira).

c. His promised refusal to spare them is due, at least in part, to their demand that he prove that Christ is speaking through him (i.e., that he is an authentic apostle). He's prepared to show it, but it is not going to be the kind of evidence they wanted. The living Christ, who stands behind Paul, will by no means permit the sins of this church to run forever unchecked.

d. After all, Christ was crucified in weakness, meaning he submitted himself to sinful men, but through the power of God he now lives as the resurrected Lord of all. This same pattern is evident in Paul's ministry (and should be in all apostolic ministries): a combination of weakness and divine power.

4. Exhortation (vv. 5-6)

a. The Corinthians have been bent on testing Paul, on having him prove himself as an apostle, but Paul exhorts them to test *themselves* to prove they are "in the faith." He calls them to examine their own lives to see whether they have abandoned their loyalty to Christ, to the true faith. Carson comments:

There are millions of professing believers in North America today (to say nothing of elsewhere) who at some point entered into a shallow commitment to Christianity, but who, if pushed, would be forced to admit they do not love holiness, do not pray, do not hate sin, do not walk humbly with God. They stand in the same danger as the Corinthians; and Paul's warning applies to them no less than to the Corinthian readers of this epistle.

b. Assuming they will conclude they are in the faith, Paul asks whether they do not understand that Christ is in them, meaning whether they do not understand the ethical implications of that fact (see, 1 Cor. 6:15-17). One cannot love Christ and sin at the same time. He adds, "unless, of course, you fail the test," because in that case Christ is *not* in them.

c. Again assuming they will conclude they are still "in the faith," Paul hopes they will recognize what that implies: that he and his companions have not failed the test of authentic apostleship. If the Corinthians are holding to the true faith, that is so because of what they received from the ministry of Paul and his co-workers.

5. Prayer (vv. 7-9)

a. Paul prays that they do no evil, that they will be restrained from sin. As Henry comments:

This is the most desirable thing we can ask God, both for ourselves and for our friends, that we and they may do no evil; and it is most needful, that we often pray to God for the grace to keep us, because without that we cannot keep ourselves. We are more concerned to pray that we not *do* evil, than that we may not *suffer* evil.

b. The motive for this prayer is not that their righteousness will vindicate Paul's ministry (transformed lives being a valid proof of his apostleship) but simply that they will do what is right, even if that means Paul's appearing (to the Corinthians) to have failed the test of apostleship (by obviating his display of apostolic severity and power).

c. Avoiding evil and doing what is right conforms to the truth of the gospel, it is how Christians are to live, and Paul and his companions are compelled to work solely on behalf of that truth. In other words, they cannot bring themselves to work against that truth for any reason, let alone something as petty as their personal standing.

d. Paul rejoices whenever the Corinthians are powerful in Christ and he is weak, meaning he is able to refrain from displaying his apostolic authority. He prefers to come in

"weakness" (1 Cor. 4:21). In fact, he prays precisely for the Corinthians' spiritual strength and wholeness.

6. Purpose in writing (v. 10) - Paul writes as he does so that when he arrives he will not have to display the stern power of discipline. He wants to build the church up, not blow it away, but he has the divine authority to do whichever is necessary.

K. Final Greetings (13:11-14)

1. "Goodbye" may also be rendered "rejoice." They can rejoice in God's love for them and in the fact they can remedy their current condition if they choose to do so.

2. "Aim for perfection" harks back to v. 9b. There Paul prays for their "perfection" or "restoration"; here he exhorts them to "perfect" or "restore" themselves. They need to take action.

3. "Listen to my appeal" may also be rendered "encourage one another."

4. "Be of one mind" and "live in peace." There is to be harmony in the church.

5. The God of love and peace will be with them in their struggle of faith.

6. Note that in the command to greet one another with a holy kiss, the emphasis is on the *holy*.

7. Prayer for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to be with them all.