

Readers familiar with the writings of Paul know that he was not prone to boasting. This put him at complete odds with the super-apostles, who boasted freely of their professed pedigree and prominence. So great as their tendency to boast, in fact, that they considered Paul’s reticence to boast a disqualification from ministry (10:1, 10). For the most part, Paul was content to allow his Christlike humility to speak for itself, confident that Christ’s sheep would hear his voice and follow him.

In Corinth, however, things were different. The super-apostles were influential enough in their boasting that they had drawn some of the Corinthians away after them. Paul would not stand for such division in the church, and so, in this latter section of 2 Corinthians, he resorts to boasting of God’s work in his ministry. He feels foolish for doing so, but knows he must do so for the good of the church. Before he begins his boasting, however, he first lays out his justification for boasting. In 11:1–15, he shows that his boasting is driven by a threefold concern.

The Concern of a Father (vv. 1–6)

First, Paul felt justified in boasting in his ministry because his concern for the Corinthians was a fatherly concern—unlike that of the super-apostles.

The Corinthians had been converted under Paul’s pioneering ministry. At their conversion, they had been betrothed to Christ; at their glorification, they would be presented to Christ as his bride. Paul’s role, in a sense, was to present the bride pure and chaste to her Groom. He took this weighty responsibility very seriously, and thus was deeply burdened that anything might challenge that responsibility. He would go to any lengths—even foolish boasting—to ensure that the bride was kept pure and chaste.

Paul’s concern to present the Corinthian church as a chaste bride brought to his mind history’s first bride: Eve. Both times that Eve is mentioned in the New Testament (here and 1 Timothy 2:14), it is highlighted that she was deceived by Satan. The Corinthians were not being beaten into unwilling submission by the super-apostles but were willingly following them into deep deception.

TO THINK ABOUT

Consider, for a moment, when Eve was deceived by Satan. Satan did not appear anything out of the ordinary but took the form of a perfectly innocent creature of whom she had no cause to be afraid. He was so ordinary—so seemingly GOOD—that he quickly drew Eve in. What can we learn from this about false teachers in the church? How do they present themselves? How do we recognise them?

The false apostles had been so successful in their attempts to deceive the Corinthians that the Corinthians had come to believe that Paul was the deceitful one (see 12:16)!

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.”

(D. A. Carson)

Kent Hughes summarises it well: “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.”

The Corinthians were duped because they were impressed by the oratorical skill of the super-apostles. Paul, in comparison, was “unskilled”—not because he COULD not argue like they did, but because he WOULD not do so. He was content to pass on the “knowledge” of the true gospel without embellishment or clever argumentation.

TO THINK ABOUT

Is it possible that our insistence on presenting clever arguments and winning debates can get in the way of a clear presentation of the gospel? How so? How do we avoid falling into this trap?

A Concern for Finances (vv. 7–12)

Second, Paul felt justified in boasting because, unlike that of the super-apostles, his ministry was freely exercised. He did not distort the church as the super-apostles did.

In a day in which prosperity gospel preachers are routinely criticised for milking gullible Christians, it sounds strange that Paul would be criticised for NOT accepting payment, but that is precisely the argument that the super-apostles raised against him.

It made sense in the culture, however, where speakers and philosophers were accorded status by the fees they charged. A cheap fee implied that the message wasn't that important. While the super-apostles were charging impressively for their ministry, Paul preached free of charge, which was taken to mean that he knew the low calibre of his ministry and message, which undermined his claim to apostleship.

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul did not accept payment for his ministry. Should pastors today labour without compensation? What should be said of the attitude of a church that thinks (even if it does not say) of its pastor(s), “Lord, you keep him humble; we'll keep him poor.” Switching gears slightly, is it right for conference organisers to charge an entrance fee to hear a well-known preacher?

Ultimately, the greed of the super-apostles would come down on their own head. Whatever cultural expectations existed, it was beyond dispute that the super-apostles were a burden to the Corinthians, while Paul was not. His refusal to accept payment was not evidence of his lack of love for the church, but evidence of his deep love for them.

In v. 12, Paul gears up for an offensive thrust. The super-apostles boasted that their ministry was on the same level that he claimed, but their dubious ethics and lack of genuine love showed that they could not claim this with any real integrity. Paul would continue to show generous love to the Corinthians because that is what Christ showed.

A Concern about Falsehood (vv. 13–15)

Third, Paul felt justified in boasting because his ministry was genuine, whereas the “super-apostles” were nothing more than false apostles. In vv. 13–15 he outright rejects their claim to apostleship.

TO THINK ABOUT

In this section, Paul uses some of his strongest language. In an age that prizes toleration, words like these scrape like fingernails on a chalkboard. Was Paul justified in using this strong language? Are we ever justified in using such strong language against others? If so, how do we evaluate when it is appropriate to do so?

While the super-apostles were skilled deceivers, they were not themselves deceived. Their deceit was fully volitional. They deliberately disguised themselves as apostles in order to deceive the Corinthians. He pulls no punches when he compares their deceit to satanic deceit, and ultimately labels the super-apostles as Satan's servants, not God's.

Paul closes by warning that the deception of the super-apostles will ultimately fall upon them: “Their end will correspond to their deeds.”

TO THINK ABOUT

Paul goes to great lengths to specify the falsehood of the super-apostles and warn of what their end will be. Why do you think he did this? Was he not casting his pearl before swine? Were these words written primarily for the benefit of the super-apostles themselves, or did he have another audience in mind?