

There are some parts of Scripture that were clearly very important to the original readers, but which seem, at first blush, irrelevant to the modern reader. This is one of those texts. Paul had outlined travel plans in 1 Corinthians 16:1–8, which included a visit to Corinth. He had not been able to keep to these plans, and the Corinthians were using his failure to do so as a way to criticise him. They used it to accuse, not only his integrity, but also the authenticity of his ministry, for surely one guided by God should be able to foresee events that would force an alteration in plans. Paul writes, therefore, to explain the change in plans and to defend his integrity and ministry. There are lessons here to be learned.

TO THINK ABOUT

There are times when the best thing to do in the face of criticism is to commit the situation to the Lord and get on with the task of making disciples. There are other times when it may be necessary to verbalise a defence against the criticisms. How do you determine the best approach in any given situation?

Paul’s Conscience (1:12–14)

There is no doubt that the use of the word “boast” in these verses grabbed the Corinthians’ attention. Paul was critical of boasting (see 1 Corinthians 1:29; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6), and so it must have seemed strange that he was willing to do so here. However, we should note that his boasting was not arrogantly self-interested; instead, he was “boasting” in order to face his accusers and objectively reject their accusations against him. Furthermore, he clearly roots his integrity in God’s grace, rather than in himself.

For Paul, clarity of conscience was essential to ministry (see 1 Timothy 1:5; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3; Acts 23:1; 24:16; Romans 9:1). As in the aforementioned references, Paul’s conscience cleared him of the charges that were brought against him.

Part of the reason that his conscience was clear is that he had clearly communicated to them. What he was writing to them now was perfectly consistent with what he had written to them previously. He was therefore confident that they would be brought to fully understand his explanation to them.

TO THINK ABOUT

Proper, open communication between leaders and church members is crucial to an effective ministry. We’ve heard and spoken much in recent weeks about communication. Are there SPECIFIC, CONCRETE ways in which you can suggest better communication from the church? Are there ways in which you, as a member, can do better in receiving and responding to communication sent? Remember, communication is a two-way street!

Paul’s Plans (1:15–17)

Paul was “sure” of his clear communication, and yet he found himself criticised for a change of plans. It was necessary, therefore, that he defend his integrity in altering plans. It may be helpful, as we seek to come to grips with this accusation, to outline what plans Paul had originally made and how they had been altered. His original plan, according to 1 Corinthians 16:1–8, was to leave Ephesus, go to Macedonia, then to Corinth, and on to Jerusalem. We gather, however, that after Timothy delivered 1 Corinthians to Corinth and then reported back to Paul on the state of the church there, the apostle made an emergency visit straight from Ephesus to Corinth. During that “painful visit” (2:1), he told them that he would return before going to Macedonia. Instead, he wrote another letter (which is lost to us) from Ephesus (1:23; 2:4) and then went directly to Macedonia. The Corinthians seem to have taken offence to this change of plans and were accusing him of not keeping to his word.

Paul explains here that this was a deliberate change in plans. The lost letter bore some fruit of repentance (7:5–16), and his altered plan actually involved a dual visit to Corinth. This dual visit would afford them an opportunity for “a second experience of grace.”

Since Paul uses the language of “grace” in chapters 8–9, it seems likely that he is speaking of them having opportunity to give twice to the Jerusalem collection if he came twice. This deliberate, grace-driven change in plans would give them opportunity to see on two separate occasions God’s provision for them

and his gracious working in their lives to incline them to give to suffering saints. Paul was not, therefore, “vacillating” when making this decision; it was a very deliberate move on his part.

TO THINK ABOUT

Do you think that Paul was skirting the issue in his answer to the Corinthians? Was he justified in declaring his intentions and then changing his mind, seemingly without informing them? To what degree does God expect us to keep to commitments we make? When, if ever, is it okay to change plans that we have made and informed others of?

Paul’s Integrity (1:18–22)

Having claimed that there was nothing untoward in his change of plans, Paul makes goes on to make a radical claim. It is so radical, says Geoffrey Grogan, “that, if he were not telling the truth, his words would be irreverent to the point of blasphemy.”

The gist of the claim in these verses is that he had not lied to them. In fact, he WOULD not lie to them, for his word was always his bond. He would not claim something and then try to deliberately mislead anyone. He did not speak out of both sides of his mouth. And he roots this claim in the integrity of Christ himself. His truth ethic flowed from the person of Christ, whom he preached to them. To accuse him of lying was, in essence, to accuse the Christ whom he preached of lying.

Integrity necessarily flows from a biblical view of Christ. This integrity is what God expects of his people (see Matthew 5:33–37). It is crucial to our witness for Christ, particularly when such consistent truthfulness is lacking in our culture.

TO THINK ABOUT

How important is truth-telling in the Christian’s life and ministry? Why is it so important? What are the negative results if Christians are seen to fudge on the truth?

Incredibly, though they had so wronged and maligned him, Paul was happy to identify with the Corinthians. He recognised that the same Spirit who was at work in him was at work in them (vv. 21–22): anointing, sealing, and guaranteeing full and final salvation.

Paul’s Explanation (1:23–2:4)

As we have seen, the Corinthians were criticising Paul for writing a stern letter to them instead of coming to visit them as he had said he would. There were seemingly some that were attributing to Paul a spineless motive: He was too afraid to address them face-to-face, and so he wrote a harsh letter to them instead.

Having already claimed that his change of plan was not an act of deliberate deception, but was instead a carefully thought out approach, he now gives two major motives that drove him to change his plans.

1. **Motivated by mercy (1:23–2:3).** He knew that a visit to Corinth would prove to be a painful visit. Calculating the costs, he chose to write a letter instead, which would give them time to carefully consider and weigh his words before he spoke to them in person. A visit would necessitate discipline if there was no repentance; a letter would at least grant them further opportunity to repent. He was still willing to come and enact discipline (13:2), but he longed for repentance instead—a longing which certainly bore some fruit (7:5–16).

TO THINK ABOUT

When we are wronged, it is easy for us to wish to rush to judgement and almost wish for discipline on those who have wronged us. What do you think drove Paul’s compassion and longing for restoration rather than discipline? How can we adopt Paul’s mindset?

2. **Motivated by love (2:4).** Paul longed to let the Corinthians know that he loved them, despite the grievous wrongs they had committed against him. It was overflowing love that motivated him.