

14. True and Counterfeit Gospel-work

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 28 July 2013

Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible reading for this morning, and we're back in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians at chapter 10. If you have one of our church visitors' Bibles, I think that's page 968.

Page 968. And we're going to read again the whole of 2 Corinthians chapter 10, although Edward today is looking at the second part of this passage.

2 Corinthians chapter 10 at verse 1.

Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

[3 : 08] For it's not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends. Amen. May God bless to us this is word.

Good morning, friends.

Let's turn together to 2 Corinthians chapter 10 to the passage that was read earlier. Page 968, 969 in our big hardback Bibles.

For those of you who are visitors, perhaps strangers to us, we always like to open up the Bible because the preacher's task is not so much to bring his own thoughts and opinions out into the open.

Because they, I guess, wouldn't be worth too much. But rather to concentrate on a Bible passage and to seek to bring out its meaning and the implications of it. So that's why we ask you to turn up the passage.

[4 : 17] Now, my title for this morning is True and Counterfeit Gospel Work. And the passage we're looking at is particularly chapter 10, verses 7 to 18.

Paul's, the Apostle Paul's central purpose in writing this second letter to the Corinthians is to educate the Corinthian Christians to distinguish true gospel work from its counterfeit.

And this purpose really comes to its head. It runs right the way through the epistle, but it comes to its head in the final four chapters. And you may remember that Paul was writing this letter from Macedonia up in northern Greece, a long way from Corinth.

But he knew that a group of influential people had come into the church at Corinth from outside.

And Paul knew that these people, strong and influential, had an agenda which was not the agenda of the true gospel.

And they were calling themselves not only Christians, but apostles of Christ. If you look across to chapter 11, verse 13, you'll see just how Paul understands them and characterizes them.

[5 : 26] 11, 13. Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And he goes on to say that that's no wonder because even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.

And these people really are his servants. Now, Paul is deeply concerned that these false leaders who've come into Corinth are going to lead the Corinthian Christians astray and ruin the church.

Look what he says in chapter 11, verse 2. I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband. Paul pictures himself as a kind of matchmaker.

I betrothed you to one husband to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I'm afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

For if someone, someone else, comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.

[6 : 33] Why should they put up readily enough with some different gospel? Because they hadn't yet learned to distinguish this different heterodox gospel from the real gospel that they heard from

Paul.

So Paul is saying you must leave naivety behind and learn to distinguish the true from the false. And our passage from chapter 10 today is all part of Paul's education program for the Corinthians, as he helps them to see why these false teachers are false and how their methods of work and leadership are counterfeit.

Now I think we can immediately see how important all this kind of thing is for our churches today. In our own congregation, just think back over the last two or three or four years, we have had to ask some very serious questions about what is true and what is false.

And we have had to take some far-reaching and painful, difficult action. But it's not just a question for our church. All churches are confronted with this kind of question in every generation.

Because the serpent of chapter 11, verse 3, is always at work seeking to deceive congregations and to lead them astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

[7 : 47] And when you first become a Christian, it's easy, and I guess natural and understandable, to assume that all churches are really very much the same.

You might think, I'm conscious there are small differences, superficial differences between churches, but surely they're like the differences between a Ford Fiesta and a Fiat Punto. Very slight differences, but the same basic underlying reality surely is there.

But then time goes on, and your knowledge of the Bible grows, and your experience of the Christian life grows as well, and you begin to see that not all churches are coming from the same direction at all.

But in fact, there are big differences, some of the differences so big as to be incompatible and irreconcilable. And then you might think, oh dear, dear, I'm beginning to see the wood from the trees here.

This is so painful. They can't all be right because these differences run so deep. And yet, wouldn't it be charitable just to bumble along and say that, well, we just hope that everyone's going to get to the right place in the end.

[8 : 53] I mean, wouldn't it be rather harsh and judgmental to say that one group have got it right and another have got it wrong? Isn't it rather unloving to draw sharp lines between one position and another?

Now, the whole of two Corinthians is Paul drawing sharp lines between what is true and what is false, between what is right and what is wrong.

And what the Corinthian Christians needed and what every church needs was to grow mature and discerning, so as to be able to distinguish the true gospel from its counterfeits and true gospel work from its false imitations.

If this church at Corinth were to prove in the end unwilling to distinguish the true from the false, Paul knew that it would be ruined beyond repair.

And one reason, surely, why many congregations today remain immature and naive is that they're not willing to take responsibility for distinguishing the true from the false.

[9 : 56] They throw their hands up and say, who are we to say that one way is right and another is wrong? Now, in many parts of the Bible, the distinctions between the true and the false are clear and easy to understand.

So just to give one or two examples, it's clear right the way through the Bible that worshipping idols is wrong and worshipping the one true only God is right. It's clear that stealing is wrong and that respecting other people's property is right.

It's clear that coveting is wrong and learning to be content with what we have is right. And there are many other issues where the distinctions are equally clear. But here in 2 Corinthians, the apostle Paul had a much more difficult task because the true and the false, in this case, were all bound up with personalities.

What Paul is laboring to get the Corinthians to recognize is that he, Paul, is the true apostle and true teacher of the gospel, whereas these incomers and their influence are threatening to ruin the church.

So as he draws the distinctions between the true gospel and counterfeit gospel work, he is having to compare and contrast himself and his style of work with these false apostles and their way of working.

[11:16] And that, to Paul, is excruciatingly embarrassing because Paul was such a humble and gentle person and he hated having to draw attention to himself. His whole message was, look at Jesus Christ.

As he said back in chapter 4, verse 5 of this very letter, what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord. And yet later in the letter, he's having to make the Corinthians see how false their false apostles are, and he's got to contrast them and their arrogant ways with himself and his true and faithful methods.

And it's this sense of embarrassment that lies behind his frequent use of the word boasting in this letter. You may have noticed he used it six times between verse 13 and verse 18 in chapter 10. And it runs on right the way through chapter 11 and chapter 12, which we'll get to in a few weeks' time, this theme of boasting. What Paul actually believes about boasting, he expresses in chapter 10, verse 17.

Just have a look with me there, 10, 17, where he's quoting straight from the prophet Jeremiah. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. That is the only appropriate boasting, he's saying, to boast and rejoice and exult and glory in the Lord.

[12:33] But Paul is having to say to his wayward and beloved Corinthians, you're forcing me against my will to turn the spotlight on myself. I don't want to.

My boast is in Jesus Christ. But you're forcing me to set forth my credentials and justify my methods. Because only by doing so am I going to persuade you that my gospel work is true and trustworthy and the manner and lifestyle of these false apostles is corrupt.

But I'm having to commend myself to you. I wish it were not necessary. It makes me feel as if I'm boasting about myself, when the only one I want to boast about is the Savior.

But if I don't write like this, all is going to be lost at Corinth. So do you see something of the bind that Paul finds himself in? It's a kind of catch-22 situation.

He hates having to commend himself and his work to the Corinthians. And part of the reason why he hates doing it is that these false apostles are constantly commending themselves and each other to the Corinthians.

[13:37] We're going to see that in a moment from verse 12. Self-commendation is horrible to Paul. Just look at how he writes in verse 18 of our chapter. For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, approved by the Lord, but rather the one whom the Lord commends.

Now, Paul believes verse 18 and verse 17 with all his heart, and yet he's forced to commend himself to the Corinthians so as to help them to grow up and take responsibility, to help them to distinguish the true from the counterfeit.

All right, friends, are you still with me? Is it warm in here? Take a deep breath. I'm just going to take a little draft of Billy Bradford's bellicose brew.

There we go. Thank you. All right, now, with all that by way of introduction, with all that in mind, we're going to look now at verses 7 to 18, where Paul begins to draw this contrast between himself and the false apostles.

And the big point that he's making throughout these verses is that the false leaders are spoiled and corrupted by their arrogance and their sense of spiritual one-upmanship.

[14:50] In their view, they are vastly superior to Paul, and Paul is vastly inferior to them. Now, let's notice how Paul begins. Verse 7.

Now, that's quite a gentle beginning, but it's really quite a challenge. What he's saying is, open your eyes, look around you, look at every aspect of your situation, and begin to draw your conclusions. I guess the modern equivalent would be, wake up and smell the coffee. Have you lost your power of analyzing what is going on in your church? Look at what is before your eyes. Look under your noses.

And now Paul helps them to see the smugness and sense of superiority of these corrupt leaders. And we'll notice three particular ways in which he does this. First, in verse 7, he points out that they're claiming to belong to Christ in some special way.

So, verse 7. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. Now, the anyone of that verse is obviously one of the false apostles.

[16:04] And this false apostle, perhaps all the false apostles, have clearly been claiming that they belong to some kind of elite rank within the church of Christ.

We needn't necessarily think they've been saying that Paul is not a Christian at all. But this verse only makes sense if they've been saying that they are elite Christians, whereas Paul belongs to the plebs of the church.

That's why Paul says in verse 7, we too, that is Timothy and I and our companions, we also belong to Christ. So, Paul won't allow that there is an elite club of Christians within the church and that everybody else is a kind of second best lot who tag along miles behind.

Paul's way is always to honor every person who belongs to Christ. Now, certainly, Paul teaches in his letters that different Christians have different roles to play, have different gifts and abilities to bring to the life of the church.

He recognizes there are varying levels of maturity and understanding, but he will never allow that there are first-class Christians and second-class Christians. Why? Because Paul could never forget that every Christian is a wretched, rebellious sinner rescued only by grace.

[17:23] And that puts us all on exactly the same level. I know we think of the Apostle Paul as a great Christian leader, but think of the way he describes himself. 1 Timothy chapter 1.

Now, friends, if you and I could truly sing, truthfully sing, Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound, That Saved a Worthy and Excellent Specimen of Humanity Like Me.

If we could truthfully sing those words, we might then be able to place ourselves in an elite class in the Christian church. But none of us can sing those words. We're all saved wretches who have been rebels against the loving lordship of Christ.

If any of us ever start to think of ourselves as being superior Christians, either because of the length of our Christian service or the quality of our gifts or the keen devotion of our hearts, that we're so much keener and more devoted than that wretch sitting next to us in church, then we need to take ourselves on one side and administer a sharp rebuke to our pride.

We'd be beginning to become like the false apostles of Corinth, thinking of ourselves like that. The truth is that each of us is a sinner saved by mercy, and that mercy is undeserved.

[18:48] Perhaps we folk in the Tron church face a particular pitfall at the moment. Having left the Church of Scotland a year or so ago for very good and thoroughly justifiable reasons, having done that, we might be tempted to think that we're rather superior Christians, superior to those Bible-believing Christians who are still in the Church of Scotland.

But we're not superior. Even the most mature, hard-working Christians in our congregation are at best wretched sinners who have been rescued by undeserved mercy.

So there's the first thing. Paul is teaching the Corinthians that the elitism of the false apostles is a damaging attitude. Now secondly, we'll take verses 8 to 11.

In those verses, Paul is teaching the Corinthians that the false apostles are very wrong in their attempt to denigrate Paul. Now this is a similar point to the last one, but it actually goes a step further.

It's one thing to claim to belong to an elite group, but these wretched leaders are going much further. They're not simply saying we are superior. They're also saying Paul is inferior.

[20:02] I think verses 8 to 11 hang together as a unit of thought. And in these four verses, they're quite difficult verses, but I think Paul is saying this. I'm not inferior.

I do have a proper authority given to me by the Lord Jesus himself. Now let me just try and offer a paraphrase of verses 8 to 11 to bring out the flavor of them.

Paul is saying it may be that I am having to boast of my authority more than I wish the authority given to me by the Lord. But that authority is a good authority because it has been given to me so as to build you up and not to pull you down.

So I'm not ashamed to assert my authority if I have to. My critics, these false leaders, they charge me with being tough when I write letters and I'm at a safe distance, but weak when I'm physically present.

But they're wrong, and they'd better understand that my toughness by letter will be matched by my toughness in person when I come to Corinth and discipline them.

[21:08] Now these verses show that Paul is being denigrated really in two ways. First of all, there's this charge of inconsistency. He's tough and threatening when he's miles away and safe, but he's weak and he's a pathetic speaker as well when you actually meet him.

So he's an inconsistent leader, and he's not one who is worth following. But that's not the only charge. They're also charging him with being really and truly weak.

Let me try and draw a simple parallel. They're really saying that Paul is like the lion who goes to the fancy dress party looking like a lion and roaring like a lion. But underneath, when you take the fancy dress off him, he's just an old tabby cat.

He's toothless and clawless. They're saying at the end of verse 10, Paul is a man with no presence and no personal charisma. And when he speaks in public, he is really rather pathetic.

So when you read these forceful letters of his, you realize that it's a phony boldness. He's not really bold at all. He's a little man, and therefore he should be disregarded.

[22 : 17] Now, it doesn't need much imagination on our part to see what kind of effect this drip, drip of criticism against Paul would have done to the congregation at Corinth.

A good number of the Corinthians were beginning to move away from Paul and even to despise him. His proper authority and proper role of leadership were being seriously undermined, and the result could only be that the strength and godliness of the church was being eroded.

So we have, first of all, elitism. Second, a denigration of Paul. And then Paul's third exposure of the falseness of these false apostles begins in verse 12.

And that is that they are constantly commending themselves and each other to the Corinthians.

Look at verse 12. Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves, but when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

So Paul is saying we, that's Timothy and I, and there's a strong irony here. He's saying we wouldn't dare to put ourselves in the same class as these self-commenders.

[23 : 34] Now, friends, let's try and picture the scene on a Sunday morning at church in Corinth. It's 11 o'clock at Corinth, Sunday morning in 56 AD, and the church has got together for its regular Sunday morning worship.

And one of these false leaders stands up to get the meeting going, and he says something like this. Good morning, everybody. Good morning and a warm, warm welcome to all to our dynamic fellowship.

I have a very special treat for you this morning. We all know what blessings have come to our fellowship since I became one of your senior leaders here some time ago. Well, sitting over here on my right, we have a man after my own heart, a chip very much off my own block, you might say.

Let me introduce to you Baruch, who has come all the way by sea to us from Judea. His reputation, of course, precedes him, so you'll already know what a very wonderful man he is.

He's a man of authority and perceptiveness and great personal power. And as for his ability as a speaker, what needs to be said? As you know, I've been circulating manuscripts of his recent sermons for some weeks, and you'll be aware of how silver his tongue is.

[24 : 46] But Baruch has condescended to spend six months with us, preaching and teaching every Sunday and every Wednesday. So our church has a golden future with leadership so unlike that of the bad old days when...

I won't mention him by name, of course, that would be invidious, would it not? But I refer to the bad old days when somebody else was teaching the congregation. Baruch, let's give him a warm welcome because he comes in the blessing of God, doesn't he?

Now, friends, I'm exaggerating, of course. But something rather like that must have been going on, Corinth, for Paul to say what he says in verse 12.

And isn't that final phrase of verse 12 devastating? When they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are, here's the devastating remark, without understanding.

They're behaving foolishly and absurdly. They've lost touch with reality. Friends, I need hardly say if that kind of thing were ever to creep into our church, I hope you would stamp on it immediately.

[25 : 56] Now, looking back into the passage, I think this paragraph, the paragraph break, really ought to come before verse 12 rather than after verse 12. In other words, verse 12 really belongs to the final paragraph of the chapter and not to the middle paragraph.

I say that because verses 13 to 18 are Paul's reply to verse 12. The section is all about how to measure the worth of somebody's work.

So in verse 12, these absurd false apostles are simply measuring the worth of their work by themselves and by each other. They're setting their own kind of standard. They're saying, my work is wonderful and so is my friend's work because his work is just like mine, now we're chips off the

same block.

But in verse 13, Paul counters by saying, you can't measure the value of a man's work by your own self-created standard. You've got to measure it by an objective external standard.

Let me draw a simple parallel. This is the time of year when school pupils are awaiting exam results, aren't they? Imagine two school pupils who've just sat there, their Scottish hires.

[27 : 05] And imagine one says to the other, we won't send our examination papers off to the examination board. Let's avoid that trap. Let's mark each other's papers. So the two students mark each other's papers and surprise, surprise, they give each other a grade A.

Now, what is that grade A worth? Nothing. Those papers have got to go to the external examination board to be properly judged against an objective standard.

Now, that's the situation here in Corinth. These corrupt leaders are measuring each other's work by their own self-grading system. Paul is saying it's worthless. But, verse 13, if I can again paraphrase, we will not make any claims about our work without proper standards.

We will only measure our work against the standard of God's commission to us, which extends to you at Corinth. And what Paul has in mind there is surely his God's original commission and call to him, which he'd received many years before at his conversion.

The Lord Jesus said this about Paul at his conversion. He didn't say it directly to him. He said it to Ananias, who went to visit Paul just after he was converted.

[28 : 20] Here are the Lord Jesus' words. This man, Paul, is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and the children of Israel. Now, those words would have been burned into Paul's heart.

They shaped the rest of his life. He knew that the Lord Jesus had called him and commissioned him to take the gospel to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. So when he came to Corinth, a great Gentile city, and he planted a church there, he knew that he was working within the terms of his commission.

And therefore, his work was in line with the measure or standard that God had given him. God had assigned him an area of influence, as he puts it in verse 13.

And that is why, verse 14, he was not overextending himself or going beyond his proper limits. And then you'll see in both verse 15 and verse 16, he's saying that it would be improper for him to point to success in his work if he was just piggybacking on the success of others.

That's what the false apostles are doing. They were muscling in on Paul's work and trying to take it over and claim huge credit for it, even though actually they're destroying it. What Paul has been building up, they're doing their best to pull down, and they're awarding themselves grade A's and diplomas of merit in the process.

[29 : 44] That attitude, says Paul, is completely illegitimate. Commending yourself is off limits. The one who is truly approved, verse 18, is not the one who commends himself like these charlatans, but the one who, like Paul, is commended by the Lord.

Now, what this is going to mean for people like us is that we can't devise our own standards of gospel work. These false leaders at Corinth were doing their own thing in their own way, and it wasn't God's way.

Paul, on the other hand, as he puts it in verse 13, only tackles the task that the Lord God has assigned him. So how do we learn in our generation to do God's work in God's way?

By studying God's manual, the training manual, which is the Bible. It's the Bible that teaches us both what the gospel is, but also how to do gospel work, how to teach the gospel and spread it and build up churches.

Everything we need to know about gospel work and its counterfeits is laid out for us in the pages of Scripture. And our main teachers here are the Lord Jesus himself, the four evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the apostles, and particularly Paul, because he did so much gospel work that is recorded for us and analyzed for us in the New Testament.

[31 : 10] So the evangelistically-minded church studies evangelism in the Bible. That's not to say that we should never read good Christian books on evangelism and mission.

The best ones can be very helpful if they're taking the Bible's teaching and unpacking it and explaining it for us. But it's always the Bible that trains us because the Bible is God's own teaching to us.

So these three things, elitism, denigration of Paul, self-commendation. Do we have such things in the churches today?

Of course we have these dangers, and any church can fall into any of these traps. Elitism is always just round the corner because the human heart is naturally proud and always wants to elevate itself above other people and to say our group is superior to yours.

So that's one danger. Denigration of Paul. That has been a frequent pastime of theological writers and of ordinary congregations. But we can be sure of this, that a congregation's attitude to Paul will always be a litmus test of its attitude to Christ.

[32 : 21] And self-commendation, that will come to us as naturally as breathing. We can't guard too carefully against it. Well, Father Time is looking at his watch and preparing to take the bales off the stumps.

But before he does, let me just very briefly suggest three things now for us to think about. First, the maturing congregation and the maturing Christian become unafraid to assess the value of the gospel work that we are involved in.

Paul says here in verse 7, look at what is before your eyes. Open your eyes. Think carefully about what you see and draw your conclusions. Throughout this second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is training the Corinthians to evaluate the work of their church.

He's teaching them how to distinguish the true and good from the false and destructive. And we too, as we grow up, need to train ourselves to look at situations analytically and to discern what is really going on.

Secondly, let's not be surprised when good Christian leadership is denigrated. Think of Paul. He was heartily loved by many people, but he was heartily despised and mistrusted by many others.

[33 : 39] It's always going to be like that for wise and persevering Christian leaders because the gospel they teach and represent so deeply challenges the standards of the world.

And it's not only our Christian leaders who will be denigrated. Any Christian who stands firm on the gospel and on gospel ethics will be treated with scorn and suspicion.

But friends, we're in good company. It happened to everybody in the Bible who was a servant of the Lord. And it's a great comfort to us to know that Jesus said, Woe to you when all men speak well of you.

Because that's how they treated the false prophets. False prophets will always be praised for what they say because it will be in tune with the world's agenda. But Paul and those who follow him and follow Christ can expect pretty rough treatment at times.

If we don't want the heat, we'd better stay out of the kitchen. Third and last, let's learn from Paul to look ahead and beyond where we currently are.

[34 : 43] I didn't notice this a few moments ago, but in that final paragraph of the chapter, although Paul is dealing with the false apostles, he's also showing the Corinthians his vision for the future of his gospel work.

Look at verses 15 and 16, halfway through verse 15. But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you without boasting of work already done in somebody else's area.

Now that's a great example of what I was saying a moment ago of how the Bible serves as our manual to teach us evangelism. Here is Paul having to deal with a very difficult problem which has arisen at Corinth, and he's painstakingly showing the Corinthians how to deal with false teaching and false teachers.

But at the same time, he is champing at the bit to enlarge the work and take it into new areas where no work is being presently done. And doesn't that have a lot to say to a congregation like ours?

Yes, there's a lot of work to be done here on the ground. Consolidation, teaching, training, building up. But there are lands beyond, to use Paul's phrase in verse 16.

[36 : 00] There are so many more hearts and souls to be won for Christ. Scotland is almost like virgin territory these days. The gospel has been draining out of the heart and soul of Scotland for three or four generations now.

So these chapters are here to train us in gospel work, to train us to think like Paul. Because in learning to think like Paul, we're learning to think more and more like his master.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. Dear God, our Father, we thank you for taking this man who was a persecutor and a blasphemer, a violent man, a terrorist, and turning his life right around and

fashioning him into a man who was willing to suffer a great deal for the sake of the gospel and the sake of his master.

We do pray that you will continue to teach us through his example as well as his teaching, that you will help us to love him and to take on board what he says to the Corinthians.

And our prayer, dear Father, is that the evangelistic work that we're involved in will be greatly blessed. Because without your blessing, we can do nothing.

[37 : 20] But with your blessing, there will be blessing indeed. And we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.