

## *Ministry for the 21st Century*

Osterhout Bible Church, Tunkhannock, Pennsylvania  
Pastor Victor W. Decker  
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*Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians*  
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### **1. *The Joy of Christian Ministry, 2 Cor. 1:12–2:4***

Fifty years of ministry as a church—50 years that span the entire second half of the 20th century. There have been an enormous number of changes in that 50 years. At one time there was a dirt road out back and a dirt parking lot. There was also an outhouse just across that dirt road in the corner of Josiah's pasture. 50 years ago you had a bachelor for a pastor (only for a few months, to be sure, but a bachelor nonetheless!). Today that same pastor has 13 grandchildren and will celebrate a golden wedding anniversary in just two months. In January of 1949 there were 18 people at the first meeting. Last Sunday there were over 100.

50 years ago this was a relatively rural neighborhood. Today it is a much more densely populated community. Then Clarence Overpeck had a farm and a gravel pit just up the road. Today those areas are occupied by River Crest, Highfields, and a trailer park. Back then this building sat on a corner of the Josiah Shupp farm. Later that became the Fred Shupp farm. Today it is the third generation Dale Shupp farm. 50 years ago Tunkhannock had no significant major industry. Today I'd guess that a significant portion of the community as well as the church family are employed at or already retired from P&G. Then almost everyone had a party line telephone. Today if you hear a different ring it doesn't mean that you can listen to your neighbor's conversation, but that one of your teenagers has a call on their own number.

This church was organized during the birth of the baby boomers following World War II. Today those baby boomers are the mainstay of the church and have in turn produced the baby busters—Generation X—the Nitendo Generation. We have moved from an era of public morality built on the consensus of a Judeo-Christian ethic, even among non-Christians, to post-modernity—an age in which there is no right and wrong, in which truth does not exist (either in the White House or in the community), in which decisions are based, not on any form of absolute, but on public opinion polls. And so we judge our president “not guilty” of perjury because more than 50% of Americans think that he shouldn't be impeached. We judge the ethics of abortion and euthanasia the same way. A jury convicts Kevorkian of murder, yet the public opinion polls would acquit him—and I suspect that an appeals court will follow suit.

What do all these changes suggest for the ministry of the Osterhout Bible Church in the *next* 50 years? You are, in a very real sense, at a crossroads. For the first time in 50 years some of you will have a change of pastors. Pastor Williams will be different than Pastor Decker. He won't do things the same way. He won't preach the same way. And that's a scary thought for some of you. Change is never easy despite the fact that it is inevitable.

It *seems* as though everything changes. From the leaves that change color and drop to the ground in the fall, to the new computer that you had to buy because the one you bought two years ago isn't fast enough any more, to the inevitable changes of birth, aging, and death.

The membership of this church has changed. Of the original forty-five charter members in October 1950, only eight are still living. The others have changed—they have been promoted to glory. And the rest of their number will follow their friends before too many years are past.

Some of you have been born, saved, and baptized in this church. You have married your spouse here and buried your parents and grandparents here—and some of you have buried spouses and children here. Others of you have found your way here from other churches—sometimes from distant places, others from closer to home.

But on the other hand, despite the fact that *everything* seems to be in flux, there *are* some things that have not changed—things that won't change just because we turn the page on the calendar in eight months and discover that there are three zeros in the number of the new year. Let me list for you a few things that have not—and will not—change.

- There is still a sovereign, immutable, personal God governing this universe and guiding it to his providentially-intended goal.
- Jesus Christ is still the same, yesterday, today, forever.
- There are still finite, sinful people living in our world—people who have problems in their family and at work.
- There is still a message of forgiveness that can provide peace with God for people who accept God's gracious gift by faith.
- There are still thousands of local churches scattered across the world—churches that God is using to proclaim the gospel to a needy world. And despite some dire predictions to the contrary, God has not changed his purpose to work through the church to reach the citizens of the 21st century. You will remember that Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."
- There is still a Book that tells us what we need to know about all these things—both about the things that change and those which remain the same.

We need to remember that "you have been born again, not of corruptible seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For all men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever. And this is the word that was preached to you" (1 Peter 1:23–25).<sup>1</sup>

With all these factors in view, I would suggest to you that if you as a church want to learn what is necessary for ministry in the 21st century, that the first place you should turn is not to the newspaper, or to the television, or to the web, but to the Word of God. From these other sources you can—and should—learn a lot about the world in which you live and in which you must minister, but first and foremost you must know what God has to say about ministry. What you learn there will not be out of date in a year or two like the computer that you just bought. Here you will find truth and wisdom that was relevant 2,000 years ago—wisdom that will provide direction for your church in the opening decades of the 21st century—and which will provide guidance for Randy Howell's great-great grandchildren when they face the challenges of Christian ministry at the beginning of the 22d century (if the Lord tarries), just as it was in the days of my Great-Great-Great-Great Grandfather, Henry Decker (who was born in the middle of the 18th century [1761]).

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture citations are from the NIV.

For our time together this weekend, then, I'd like to direct your attention to a crucial passage of Scripture that defines for us what Christian ministry is all about: 2 Corinthians 1–4.

In this first message from 2 Corinthians, I would like to focus on the *Joy of Christian Ministry*. Some people and some churches act as if Christian ministry was a drudgery or a chore instead of a joy. I would like to suggest to you that the example of Paul's ministry in Corinth delineates Christian ministry as a *joy*. There are four elements necessary if Christian ministry *is* going to be a joy and not a chore. The first is that Christian ministry must be conducted with godly sincerity.

<sup>1:12</sup>Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace. <sup>13</sup>For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, <sup>14</sup>as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.

<sup>15</sup>Because I was confident of this, I planned to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. <sup>16</sup>I planned to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. <sup>17</sup>When I planned this, did I do it lightly? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say, "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?

<sup>18</sup>But as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." <sup>19</sup>For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by me and Silas and Timothy, was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." <sup>20</sup>For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. <sup>21</sup>Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, <sup>22</sup>set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

<sup>23</sup>I call God as my witness that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. <sup>24</sup>Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm. <sup>2:1</sup>So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup>For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? <sup>3</sup>I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup>For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you (2 Cor. 1:12–2:4).

Paul speaks of Christian ministry in verse 12 in terms of "holiness and sincerity that are from God"—or what I would summarize as "godly sincerity." What Paul means by that is that everything that we do in ministry must have a pure motive—pure as God views it. This is not our normal, human way to do things. Our fallen, sinful nature is duplicitous—deceptive. But Christian ministry cannot be based on our abilities or propensities.

If we are ministering to unbelievers—whether directly in personal conversation, or in a service where they might be present, or indirectly—say, a newspaper or TV advertisement, our motives must be pure. Too often churches tend to use deception—to trick the unbeliever into listening to the gospel. But is it right to deceive people so that they will listen to a message about truth? Some evangelistic strategies do just that. No, our ministry must be totally honest and above board.

The world doesn't sense any need to operate in that fashion. Note Paul's reference to "worldly wisdom" at the end of verse 12. One of the world's equivalents for "ministry" is sales and marketing. The goal of all advertising is to persuade you to buy something—whether you need it or not. If they must use deception to get you to open the box, no big deal. The only thing that counts is the result—that you buy it. Madison Ave. and the telemarketing crowd are not bound by the biblical ethic of godly sincerity. But Christians are.

The second element of joyful Christian ministry relates to the content of Christian ministry. Paul addresses that in verses 13–14. "We do not write anything to you that you cannot read or understand." The content of Christian ministry must be simple enough to understand. Paul's ministry in Corinth consisted of two visits there (the first of which nearly lasted two years), as well as several letters which he had

written to them. At the time Paul wrote *this* letter to the believers in Corinth he had already sent them at least two previous letters and perhaps three. One of them we know as 1 Corinthians. The other is unknown—it is not part of our New Testament. What can we learn from Paul’s statement in verse 13? Let me suggest two principles.

First, since two of Paul’s letters were inspired and therefore part of Scripture, we can conclude that Scripture is understandable. It is not an esoteric, mystical message, or a secretly-coded message, or a technical, philosophical message. It is written in plain language that any reader can understand. That does not mean that all Scripture is easy to understand—that it takes no study or effort. Peter commented that some of Paul’s writings were hard to understand (2 Peter 3:15–16)—but even then they *can* be understood. Although a teacher may be helpful, there is no need to leave such matters to an oligarchy of sacerdotal interpreters. You can read your Bible and you can understand what God wants you to know.

Second, and this is a corollary to the first principle—actually its application to Christian ministry—the content of our ministry must be simple enough for people to understand. We sometimes use so much Christian jargon that unbelievers have no idea what we are talking about—and a lot of Christians don’t either, but they are often afraid to admit it. *Eschatology, imputation, sanctification, millennium*—even some Bible words like *propitiation* and *justification*—all the big theological words that are part of our traditional Christian vocabulary sometimes get in the way of clearly communicating the Word of God.

That may not have been as great a problem 50 years ago, but then you could pretty much assume that most people had grown up in church and had heard these words often enough so that they had some idea of what they meant. Nowadays that is no longer true. We now live—and minister—in a biblically illiterate culture.

Not only do people not know the big words, but they don’t even know the basic framework of the Bible. The average non-Christian today doesn’t even know that the Bible has two Testaments, that Moses was a real person who lived 3,400 years ago. Nor do they know anything about Adam or Abraham, David or Isaiah. “Peter, Paul, and Mary”? Why, that’s a music group! You would think that they would at least know who Jesus is, but one of my colleagues recently talked to a junior high girl in Scranton who was amazed to find out that Jesus is a real person. She thought it was just a word that her mother used when she got upset. I suspect that there are people like that in Tunkhannock as well. Remember that when you teach a Sunday School lesson and when you talk to your neighbors. And remember that the content of Christian ministry must be simple enough to understand,

And perhaps I should be so bold as to suggest another traditional element of our Christian heritage that we ought to re-think in light of the biblical mandate for a clear, simple message in our ministry and the fact that we live in a biblically illiterate culture. That is the matter of Bible translations. Most of us grew up on a King James Bible—usually a Scofield edition. We read it. Memorized it. Listened to it. Taught our Sunday School classes from it. Preached from it. But as much as we love the familiar cadences of its beautiful language, we need to stop and think about how well it communicates to younger folks—or even to older folks who haven’t grown up in church. If we were willing to be very honest, we might even want to ask how much of it some of us understand. I wonder if we ought not to seriously think about the advantages of using one of the good, accurate, contemporary translations of the Bible for public ministry? I don’t have time to talk to you about all the implications of such a decision or the options that are available, but I would urge you to talk about it sometime in the future.

But look with me one more time at verses 13–14. There is a second principle here that balances the first. Having said that our message should be clear and simple, don’t assume that the content of our message should be *simplistic*. Our message must be not only simple but also profound enough to contemplate

forever. In verse 14 Paul talks about the Corinthians “coming to understand fully.” He was talking about the Corinthian’s understanding the letters that he had written to them, but it is true of all Scripture. As long as you live you will always be able to understand more of the Bible. Although in one sense its message is a very simple one, in another sense there is enough for a lifetime of study and meditation. Don’t ever let your ministry deteriorate to platitudes and familiar stories. Plan for and administer a well-rounded, balanced program of Christian education that spans the entire spectrum of kids from Christian homes and kids from pagan homes, all the way to adults who know nothing about the Bible to those who have spent a lifetime studying it with care. Remember that the content of Christian ministry must be simple enough to understand, yet profound enough to contemplate forever.

But now look with me at the next paragraph in 2 Corinthians 1. The point of verses 15–22 is that the confidence necessary for Christian ministry must not be the pluralism of a non-Christian, secular worldview, but the Christian affirmation of a biblical worldview in which “yes” means “yes” and “no” means “no.”

To understand this paragraph you need to know a bit about Paul and the church at Corinth. Paul had visited the city of Corinth in the fall of the year AD 50 on what we call his second missionary journey. There may have been some Christians already in Corinth, but no church had yet been organized. Priscilla and Aquilla were already there, having just moved from Rome. It seems likely that they were already Christians since the text of Acts 18 (where these details are recorded) says nothing about their response to Paul’s gospel message. Rather we learn that Paul stayed with them while preaching. He stayed altogether about a year and a half. Many people trusted Jesus Christ as their Savior when they heard Paul’s message and a vigorous local church came into existence.

Following this year and a half of ministry in Corinth, Paul left the city in the summer of AD 52, made a brief visit to Ephesus, and then sailed back to Palestine. He landed at Caesarea, perhaps visited the church in Jerusalem, but eventually ended up far to the north at Antioch. It was this Syrian church which had originally commissioned Paul’s missionary work, and so it is to them that he reports what God has done. We do not know how long Paul stayed in Antioch, but it was probably several months. In any event, later that year, either in the fall of 52 or winter of 53, he set out on his third missionary journey, traveling by land through Galatia and Phrygia (what is today the country of Turkey) to minister to churches that he had founded on his two earlier missionary journeys. It was in the summer of AD 53 that Paul arrives back in Ephesus where he spent three years.

During this lengthy ministry in Ephesus several important things happened back in Corinth. First, Apollos visited Corinth. We don’t know a lot about this man, but he was apparently a very powerful preacher—one of those few men in any generation who have the rhetorical ability to communicate the Word of God in a very effective manner. He was the Spurgeon or Swindoll of his day. Although none of us would think of questioning Paul’s ability as a preacher, he was not the pulpiteer that Apollos was. Some people in Corinth became so enamored with the rhetoric of Apollos that they began to wonder if Paul was so special.

It is also possible that Peter visited Corinth during this time—though we are not told that directly. If he did, another question may have arisen—Peter was one of the original disciples and had learned directly from Jesus, but Paul wasn’t. Perhaps Paul doesn’t really have the apostolic authority that we had thought. Neither Apollos nor Peter opposed Paul or his teaching. It was simply a matter of personalities. People—and preachers—are different. Pastor Williams will be different than Pastor Decker—don’t make the Corinthian mistake of pitting one against the other or comparing their ministries. The fact that they are different doesn’t make either one better than the other.

But back to Corinth. The most significant development in Corinth, probably later in this three-year period, was the arrival in Corinth of a group of teachers who professed to be apostles authorized and commissioned by the church in Jerusalem—the “Mother Church.” They made much of their authority and unlike Apollos and Peter, directly challenged Paul’s authority. They denied that Paul was a legitimate apostle and accused *him* of being a false teacher. In reality, these teachers were the false apostles, not Paul, but as so often happens, heresy usually finds people willing to believe it. Paul deals with this problem quite directly later in 2 Corinthians.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. <sup>4</sup>For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. <sup>5</sup>But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those “super-apostles.” <sup>6</sup>I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way....

<sup>13</sup>For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup>And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup>It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve (2 Cor. 11:3–6, 13–15).

One of the accusations made against Paul by these false teachers was that he was fickle. “You can’t depend on Paul. He promises one thing and does another. He says that he is going to come, then goes someplace else.” Now it is true that Paul’s plans *had* changed several times over the past several years, but it was not because Paul was fickle or that he didn’t care for the Corinthians. Paul did not say, “I am coming” when he had no intentions of doing so. And that is quite different than saying “yes” when you really mean “no.” Paul changed his travel plans with *their* benefit in view. Re-read 2 Corinthians 1:15–2:4 with that background in mind. [See text above.]

What is Paul’s point? To put it in general terms, Christian ministry must be based on confidence. People must have confidence in their leaders and leaders must have confidence in their people. Or to put it another way, whose to whom God gives responsibility as leaders in a local church must minister in such a way that the people can have absolute confidence that the leader’s “yes” means “yes” and his “no” means “no.” Those who cannot be trusted to fulfill their commitments will be frustrated in ministry because people will soon learn that they can’t be trusted. That is true of pastors, of deacons—really of any leadership position.

And remember that it works two ways. It is not just the pastor and deacons who must be dependable. How effective would you expect leaders to be if the people can’t be trusted to fulfill that to which they have committed themselves?

Unbelievers have no moral reason to maintain such a standard. In the world of politics, for example, it is exceedingly rare to find a politician for whom “yes” always means “yes” and “no” always means “no.” For them, it all depends on how you define “is.” To one person they say “yes.” To another they say “no.” “I am committed to this position” (at least for today when I’m speaking to this particular group). But “I am *not* committed to this position” or “I have serious reservations about this position” (at least tomorrow when I’m speaking to this other group—especially if I stand to gain political or financial advantage by doing so).

Beware lest you do the same. Never have one opinion about your church’s ministry, or about the sermon, or about your brother or sister in Christ, never say one thing about these matters to one person and the opposite to someone else because you know that they have differing views on the matter. Our non-Christian, pluralistic, secular society has no other recourse because they have no standards by which to judge right and wrong. Although many of our political leaders may be committed to the simultaneous *yes*

and *no* of postmodernity, our standard must be that “as surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’”

There is a fourth element that contributes to the joy of Christian ministry, and that is the cooperation of Christian ministry. Too often ministry is viewed as the role of the professional. Does the church need a boost? Are things going poorly? Is attendance down? Are the offerings declining? The solution in many churches is to hire a professional. Fire the pastor and get a new manager with better credentials and more sophisticated marketing skills. Or perhaps it is the pastor in some churches who hires the professional—who brings in some high profile speaker or seminar that will solve all the problems. But is that what Christian ministry is all about?

I’m not suggesting that churches should conduct a sloppy, careless, second-rate ministry. I think that everything we do should be done well. It is no credit to Jesus Christ if no one cares that things are done right. From the sign out front to the cleanliness of the nursery and bathrooms to the printed material that we distribute, everything should reflect positively on our Lord. What I *would* suggest is that there ought not to be a professional clericalism in ministry. You can’t *buy* ministry. Instead, as Paul’s example show, there must be a joyful, cooperative effort by *everyone* in the church.

Note the negative first: “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm” (v. 24). Even though Paul was an *apostle*, he did not minister in a dictatorial way. Despite his God-given apostolic authority, he did not “lord it over” the Corinthians. He did not view himself as more important than they. He did not act as if he had a more spiritual position just because he was an apostle. Rather he emphasizes that he was a *fellow worker*: “we work with you for your joy” he says in verse 24. No cleric here! No apostle on a pedestal who thundered out imperatives from a privileged position immune from and impervious to attack and criticism. Oh, Paul could teach with great authority—and he surely did that. But that merely reflects the role that God had given him. But his role is complementary to that of the other believers. It takes a variety of people working together to enable joyful ministry. One person cannot do it alone, even if they stand in the pulpit week after week as perhaps the most visible member of the church. Without everyone doing their part, carrying their share of the load, there will be little or no real ministry and surely no joyful ministry. Instead all there will be is a tired, overloaded pastor who has no joy.

Even though Paul was in a very difficult position in his relationship with the Corinthians at the time he wrote this letter, he was still concerned to focus on this joint ministry that was so vital to a joyful ministry. He had been challenged and accused unjustly by a group of false apostles seeking to destroy the work at Corinth. Yet even then Paul does not retreat to an authoritarian stance. To have done so would have been more harmful and hurtful to the church at Corinth. He deliberately postpones another visit to Corinth lest it be another painful visit. “So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you. <sup>2</sup>For if I grieve you, who is left to make me glad but you whom I have grieved? <sup>3</sup>I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup>For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2 Cor. 2:1–4).

His goal is for joy and continued ministry. He loves them too much to say nothing. He *must* address the problems and answer these false apostles, but even when a church goes through such struggles it is only a loving, cooperative effort by everyone involved that will result in the joy and rejoicing for which Paul pleads so fervently here.

All these things are just as true of the Osterhout Bible Church today as the church of Corinth in the first century. You stand on the brink of a new century. You reflect back over a half century of ministry. A half century with one pastor—a rather incredible accomplishment to be sure.

- There would never have been such a ministry in this community if there had not been a ministry conducted—by pastor and people alike—with godly sincerity.
- This church’s ministry would not have had the impact that it has if there were not a concern to focus on a simple message—the message of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness he offers.
- If there had not been the consistent confidence of a biblical view in which the standards of truth were affirmed, you would not have survived 50 years.
- If there had not been a joyful, cooperative effort, you would not have had the same pastor for all this time, and if the pattern of far too many other churches were true, there would likely have been divisions and major problems along the way.

But God has been good to you and he will continue to pour out his blessing on you in the 21st century if you continue the same spirit of joyful cooperation under the leadership of Pastor Williams. You can’t look forward to the same pastor for the next 50 years, but that’s only because Brian is a bit older than your first pastor when he began his ministry here at the age of 23. But if the Lord tarries, I would hope that you could celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Osterhout Bible Church under Pastor Williams’ ministry and still have the same commitment to joyful ministry that you have now.

## **2. The Glory of Christian Ministry, 2 Cor. 2:14–3:18**

A joyful ministry should be the goal of all Christian ministry, but you know as well as I do that not all ministry is joyful. There are times in almost every ministry where there is disappointment and potential discouragement—times when you wonder if it is really worth it all. The apostle Paul felt that way at times. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 he refers to “fac[ing] daily the pressure of [his] concern for all the churches” (verse 28 ). You can sense some of that concern in the passage that we want to look at tonight: “Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, <sup>13</sup>I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia” (2 Cor. 2:12–13).

Last night I summarized some of the history of Paul’s relationship with the church at Corinth. You will remember that he had spent a year and a half in Corinth on his second missionary journey. It is now several years later. As Paul writes the letter which we know as 2 Corinthians, he has just spent three years in Ephesus. It was toward the end of his Ephesian ministry that the problems in Corinth had come to a head. After writing several letters to them (including 1 Corinthians) and sending several representatives to Corinth—and probably making at least one short visit there himself, he now sets out from Ephesus on his way ultimately to Corinth. He had recently sent his friend Titus to Corinth with another letter—a letter that had been rather difficult for Paul to write, and he feared that it would be even harder for the Corinthians to read. He refers to that letter at the beginning of chapter 2: “I wrote as I did so that when I came I should not be distressed by those who ought to make me rejoice. I had confidence in all of you, that you would all share my joy. <sup>4</sup>For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you” (2:3–4).

Having sent Titus with that letter, Paul was waiting for him to return from his mission to Corinth with word of the Corinthians’ response to the letter. It is in that context we read of the events described in verses 12 and 13. Paul anticipated meeting Titus in the city of Troas—that apparently had been their

agreed rendezvous. It's a bit difficult for us to understand the uncertainty of these arrangements because we are so used to getting on a plane and flying great distances to conduct business and returning the next day. Or picking up the phone and talking to someone in a distant city—and we do that now from our cell phones while driving down the highway. If we can't reach someone and it's urgent (and sometimes when it isn't!), we page them. Or we log on and check our email a dozen times a day. But Paul had none of those things. Ephesus and Corinth were only about 250 miles apart, separated by the Aegean Sea. We would hop on a plane and make the trip in a bit over an hour. Titus had to go by boat—sailboat. It would have been several days, depending on the weather. Or perhaps several weeks if he had to take the land route north around the Aegean Sea. Since it was getting late in the season, there would be some question as to whether or not he would have time to make the trip before the shipping season ended. In the fall the weather became too rough to travel by boat.

So Paul heads for Troas where he had opportunity to preach the gospel freely and apparently to very receptive hearers. But there was no sign of Titus on his return from Corinth. So Paul sails for Macedonia, perhaps on one of the last boats to sail that season, hoping to find Titus there. You can sense the anxiety that Paul felt: "I still had no peace of mind" (verse 13). Or even more explicitly in 2 Corinthians 7:5, "when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within."

It is at times like that that Paul may have asked, "Is ministry worth it? With all the problems of Corinth, the opposition from the false apostles, no news from Corinth or from Titus. Should I give it up?"

Perhaps that sounds vaguely familiar. Our circumstances are quite different, but isn't it easy to give up on ministry? All this church work is really inconvenient. I spend hours working on that Sunday School class, on the youth program, on VBS, on the music program, cleaning the building, mowing the church lawn..., and the list of the hundreds of things that are part of Christian ministry could go on and on.

Of course there are lots of other things that are more fun—a lot of them on the weekend. You can still spend a great weekend skiing in the Catskills (even this late in the season). It's only a few hours drive. It won't be long before camping season is upon us, and there are surely lots of great places to camp on the weekend. We can leave after work on Friday and be back in time to punch the clock on Monday morning—two whole days to relax forget about the pressures of life...and of ministry. If your work involves travel, a weekend trip can usually combine work and pleasure. And the tickets are often cheaper if you stay over Saturday night. There's almost always a game within driving distance. And the fishing is really great a day's drive away. So I can't make a commitment to Christian ministry in my church because I'll be away too much and tied up too many weekends.

When you look at the demands and inconveniences of ministry and compare that with the fun and freedom of all the other things you could do, doesn't Christian ministry seem less desirable? Is it really worth it all? Why not focus on my own interests and make ministry an occasional and casual activity for those times when the weather's too bad to take the boat out and ski conditions are less than ideal? And if that selfish hedonism sounds a bit too crass, you can always make it sound more spiritual by designating it as "family time"—and surely family is more important than church isn't it?

The answers to those issues comes from 2 Corinthians chapters 2 and 3. In these two chapters Paul proclaims the *glory* of Christian ministry. Yes, Christian ministry *is* inconvenient at times. It's not easy and not always fun. But if you understand what real Christian ministry is all about, there's nothing in the world that can take its place. Ministry is certainly not glorious by the world's standards, but if you see it from God's perspective, there is a glory here that nothing else can match.

Notice the change in attitude between verses 12 & 13 that we read just a few minutes ago and the next paragraph. Verse 14 begins with a *but*: despite all the struggles and uncertainties and inconveniences and disappointments, there *is* something that makes it all worthwhile:

<sup>14</sup>But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. <sup>15</sup>For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup>To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? <sup>17</sup>Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God (2 Cor. 2:14–17).

The background for verses 14–16 is the Roman Triumph. That was the name given to the great victory parades in Rome when the legions returned from a crucial, successful military campaign. There would be a great processional with the Roman emperor, the generals, and their officers riding through the streets of Rome with rank upon rank of legionnaires marching behind them in gleaming armor. It was a spectacular event and an impressive display of the military might of Rome. These were not just military or political events, but they were also *religious* ones in which the Roman gods were thanked for giving victory in battle. The Triumph included both blood sacrifices and the burning of much incense. These were not routine events that took place every year like our Independence Day parades. In the nearly 800 years of Roman history at the time of the NT<sup>2</sup> there had only been 320 such Triumphs, which points all the more to the spectacular significance of such an event when it did occur.

What is Paul's point? Why does he refer to a Roman Triumph in verse 14? Let me suggest several things to you. First, the triumphal procession *par excellencé*s not that of a Roman emperor, but the Triumph of *God*. Just as the emperor led the Roman processional, even so it is God who leads the Triumph to which Paul refers. Notice that verse 14 says that it is "God, who always leads us in triumphal procession." This is *God's* Triumph, not ours. It is not that God holds a Triumph for us as the older translation might seem to imply; he does not cause *us* to triumph. It is *his* Triumph and his alone.

Second, Christians are those who are *led* in the Triumph: verse 14 says that "God, always leads *us* in triumphal procession." Even if the "us" primarily refers to Paul and the apostles, there is certainly legitimate application to all believers. But here is where the imagery gets really interesting. Who is it that was "*led* in Triumph" in the Roman procession? While it is true in one sense that the Roman emperor led the entire procession comprised of officers, soldiers, priests, and prisoners, the technical word that Paul uses here is *only* used in a Roman context to refer to the *prisoners* who were part of the procession—never to the emperor's generals or his soldiers or to the priests. The illustration which Paul uses, therefore, draws the analogy between Christians and the prisoners of war. That in itself isn't very flattering is it?

But ask yourself another question: *Why* were these prisoners led in procession? It was to demonstrate the glory and power of the Roman emperor who had defeated them in battle. If our being led in procession brings glory to God, we ought to rejoice whether we are flattered by the comparison or not. But we also ought to ask what became of these prisoners. Were they led to the city square and then released? Were they shipped back to their homeland? No, these prisoners were being *led to their death!* As captives of Rome they were *executed* as part of the celebration. So where does that leave us in Paul's illustration?

The third observation that I would make is that Christians are those who were formerly enemies of God, engaged in active opposition to his authority and refusing to submit to his lordship. But we have now been conquered. We have now submitted to him. As the vanquished, we are now part of God's Triumph—the procession that places us on display as God's trophies.

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<sup>2</sup>From the founding of Rome in 753 BC to Vespasian, ca. AD 70.

Does that mean that we are being led to execution? Certainly we are worthy of death, but is that the way God treats those who submit to him? In one sense, many who become Christians do, indeed, die for their faith. But that is not, I think, Paul's point here. Rather we should think of it in terms of One who died in our place. Paul makes that point in 2 Corinthians 5:14–15: "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again." It is also worth noting that on occasion in a Roman Triumph the emperor would grant life to some of those being led to their death. That is what God has done for us. Worthy of death? Yes. But there is One who took our place and we have been released from the penalty of death by the work of our substitute.

That does not suggest that we break ranks and attempt to get out of the procession! We ought to gratefully remain in those ranks as trophies of God's grace. As we do, we will serve a specific purpose. In Paul's own words, we will spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ: "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2 Cor. 2:14). That picks up the imagery of the incense and the smells of the sacrifices that would be part of the Roman triumph. But that smell carries two different messages. It is a smell that to some heralds the grace and forgiveness of life, but to others the very same smell savors of death and condemnation. Read Paul's own description: "<sup>14</sup>But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. <sup>15</sup>For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. <sup>16</sup>To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?" (2 Cor. 2:14b–16). What makes the difference? The smell is the same. But that smell—the gospel message—has one appeal to those who believe and are being saved and quite a different appeal to those who are perishing.

Paul's point here is to point us toward the glory of Christian ministry. His picture of a Roman Triumph was an appeal to what may have been the greatest event of the first century Roman world. It was a grand and glorious time of celebrating the greatness of the emperor and giving thanks to Jupiter. To be honored with a Triumph was the greatest honor that a Roman citizen could receive—and only emperors and some Roman generals were ever feted in this way. But Paul would have us understand that *we* can participate in such a Triumph *every day* as we are involved in Christian ministry—as we "spread everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ." This is indeed one of the means by which we can worship and glorify God.

Perhaps that seems a bit grandiose—thinking that we can participate in a Triumph and bring glory to God. Indeed, Paul raises that question himself at the end of verse 16: "Who is able for such a task?" The rhetorical answer implied is that none of us is able in our own strength. Paul's immediate point is probably that those false apostles who had come to Corinth were loudly trumpeting *their* qualifications—boasting to the Corinthians of *their* worth, all the while denigrating Paul's authority. There was quite a difference between the "ministry" of these "apostles" and the ministry of Paul. He implies in verse 17 that these false teachers who had come to Corinth were involved in ministry for financial gain, not for God's glory: "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." Paul's opponents were like the hucksters who may have plied their wares and their trade to dupe the gullible along the route of the Triumph—taking advantage of those who were focusing their attention on the great spectacle and not keeping a tight hold of either common sense or their wallets. By contrast, Paul was part of the Triumph—part of that great procession, involved in genuine Christian ministry: "speaking before God with sincerity, like men sent from God."

There is no lack of similarities in our own day. Genuine Christian ministry for the glory of God is a commodity more scarce than one would like to think. There are good ministries scattered all across our globe, but unfortunately it seems to be the other kind that gets most of the attention. Just as the false teachers were the ones who drew attention and caused problems for churches in the first century, likewise there are many who peddle the Word of God for profit in our own age.

I attended a large seminar in the midwest a number of years ago. It was advertised as a seminar specializing in church finances and tax law. Our church treasurer and one of the deacons attended with me. It was a pretty fancy seminar with all the trimmings and perks of large corporate seminars. It did not take me long, however, to figure out that we had been “had.” The “expert” who conducted this seminar was indeed an expert, not so much about church tax laws as he claimed, but an expert in getting churches to pay registration fees to come listen to him harangue church treasurers and deacons about paying their pastor more— at least \$70,000.00 a year he said, even for smaller churches. Those with large churches should get considerably more.

Since we had paid our money, I determined to at least get my lunch out of the deal, so I hunkered down and endured his prattle for the morning, but by afternoon I realized that I had gotten all that I was going to get (and that was my lunch). As this expert was concluding one of his “lectures” he made a big mistake. After exhorting us all as to how much money we as pastors ought to be getting paid, he made the mistake of asking a question. He probably intended it to be a rhetorical question and he never dreamed that someone would answer it, let alone that someone would respond publicly with a negative answer. Having just finished telling us that we all ought to get at least \$70,000.00 a year, he asked, “You all believe that don’t you?”

About that time I had lost what little self-restraint that I had left—and in front of several hundred people sitting in that auditorium, I shouted out NO! The room got very, very quiet and I suddenly realized that I was in a rather defenseless position since he had a microphone and I didn’t. I’m not sure what the treasurer and deacon sitting beside me were thinking at that point, but everybody in the room, myself included, were holding our breath waiting to see what our expert would do or say when he regained his composure. To this day I’m glad that he didn’t have a wireless mic. He came down my aisle as far as his mic cord would let him and growled, “Who said that?” When he had me in his sights he demanded to know why I had said that. In a somewhat more nervous voice than my first explosion, I told him that some of us were not in ministry for the money. I wished afterwards that I could have thought fast enough to have turned to 1 Timothy 6 and read to him:

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, <sup>4</sup>he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions <sup>5</sup>and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.

<sup>6</sup>But godliness with contentment is great gain. <sup>7</sup>For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. <sup>8</sup>But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. <sup>9</sup>People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. <sup>10</sup>For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

<sup>11</sup>But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness (1 Tim. 6:3–11a).

But I was a young pastor then and my public speech was shorter than it could have been. He fumed for awhile about some people who thought that they were going to get their reward “up there”—but he wanted his now and thought that we ought to get ours the same way. Nothing wrong with being rich.

That was the first time that I ever came face-to-face with those who peddled the Word of God for profit. It is called the “Gospel of Prosperity.” There are many more like him who make a pretty good living

at the expense of God's people. They flood the airwaves and now the Internet with their siren call: "if you want God's blessing, you have to obey God." And that's true enough in principle, but they always define "blessing" in terms of money and all too often their explanation of "obeying God" seems to require that you send *them* a check! If you watch much so-called "Christian television" (and I hope that you don't), you have seen far more of it than I have. I don't know who the current names are on the "prosperity circuit," but it doesn't take a great deal of perception to figure out who needs you to send God's money to them.

The glory of Christian ministry is not reflected in the offering plate. It is rather reflected in a genuine, sincere ministry that is concerned to teach the simple message of the gospel: "in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God" (v. 17b).

"Sent from God." Sent with a message to proclaim—a message that can become the fragrance of life for a lost world. Sounds like a major task doesn't it? As Paul asked in verse 16: "who is equal to such a task? His answer to that question comes in chapter 3. Paul begins to explain his confidence in attempting such a glorious ministry in verses 4 through 6: "Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. <sup>6</sup>He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:4–6).

We are only competent to attempt such a glorious ministry because God has enabled us to serve him. In the OT only certain people were allowed to minister at the altar. There was a priesthood restricted to one tribe of Israel, and not even everyone in that tribe. Ministry under OT Mosaic Law was quite different. But today we do not serve under the jurisdiction of the old covenant. Rather, says Paul, we are ministers of a new covenant. Not ministers of the letter, but by the Spirit—the Spirit who gives life.

Most of 2 Corinthians 3 is concerned to show the contrasts between these two covenants: between the old covenant—the Law, and the new covenant. They describe two different ways of relating to God, one before Jesus died and one after. Prior to the cross people who desired to obey and please God did so by following the dictates of the old covenant. They offered the sacrifices and conformed their life to the specific stipulations that God set forth in the Mosaic covenant. They ate certain foods and not others. They dressed a certain way. They farmed their land in the prescribed manner. They offered the ritual sacrifices on a regular schedule. They governed their country by the political sections of the code. This old covenant was a comprehensive description of how people were to live and worship.

And it was a *good* arrangement. Never speak poorly of the Mosaic law. Paul didn't. He describes it as a *glorious* covenant: verse 7, it came with glory, it had glory; verse 9, its ministry is glorious; verse 10, what was glorious; verse 11, it came with glory. Even though we do not today live under that covenant, it was indeed a good and gracious gift from God to his people Israel.

But in the plan and purpose of God things changed. The coming of Jesus Christ to our world, his sinless life and public ministry, and especially his sacrificial death on Calvary has made some new things possible. Some elements of the old covenant were necessary because Jesus had not yet died. The limitations of the OT priesthood and the sacrifices of the earthly tabernacle were necessary because Jesus' death had not yet provided the once-for-all sacrifice for sins that opens the way for all believers to enter the presence of God.

Jesus' death inaugurated a new covenant. It fulfilled all the promises of the Law and replaced it with a new arrangement of things. Things that are far *more glorious* than the old covenant which it replaces. Notice Paul's description of this new covenant:

<sup>7</sup>Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, <sup>8</sup>will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? <sup>9</sup>If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! <sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup>And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" (2 Cor. 3:7–11).

Think of it in terms of ice cream. Vanilla ice cream is good—glorious if you will. (It may not be good *for* you if you have high cholesterol, but it tastes good none-the-less!) But there is a more glorious version. Actually with ice cream there are several more glorious versions—and they all have some combination of chocolate, nuts, and peanut butter added!

The old covenant is vanilla ice cream. But the new covenant is Triple Fudge Deluxe ice cream! Who, once having tasted Triple Fudge Deluxe, would ever want to go back to vanilla? I realize that the illustration breaks down since we *do* have a choice with ice cream and we *can* eat vanilla if we like (or we can substitute maple walnut or cherry, etc.), but in terms of the covenantal basis by which we relate to God, there is no going back. The old covenant is no more. We now have a new covenant that provides life and righteousness and a relationship with God that is far more glorious. "How much greater," "how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness"—"the glory of that which lasts!" In Paul's own words: "<sup>10</sup>For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory. <sup>11</sup>And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!" It is this new relationship with God that provides the basis for confidence in Christian ministry.

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. <sup>13</sup>We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. <sup>14</sup>But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup>Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. <sup>16</sup>But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. <sup>17</sup>Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup>And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 4:12–18).

"Since we have such a hope, we are very bold" (v. 12)! Paul intends that we understand this new covenant to be the basis of ministry, notice how he begins chapter 4: "*therefore*, since through God's mercy we have this ministry..." His *therefore* makes the connection between chapters 3 and 4 very explicit. Tomorrow morning we will look at chapter 4 and focus on the privilege of Christian ministry.

### **3. The Privilege of Christian Ministry, 2 Cor. 4:1–18**

50 years. Those 50 years have included some historic events. One year Agnes even got so riled up that she devastated the church—flooded the basement. For those of you who weren't here then, it was not tears but river water and it was not the pastor's wife but Hurricane Agnes that brought the Susquehanna into our laps and almost into our auditorium. And there was the year of the great fire. The year that the White House burned. I refer not to the war of 1812 when the British invaded and burned Washington DC, but the year that the church annex burned—the annex across the road in Josiah's pasture, that is. The only ones who were upset about that fire were the wasps that lived in the roof of that outhouse.

These 50 years have also included some major sociological changes as this community has grown and developed and as various people have come and gone from this church. Perhaps a sociological event (it certainly had "social/interpersonal implications"!) of note were the many beans that were burned in the early years. Some of those were even fed to a certain pastor—while he was blindfolded! If you were not here to witness that event, you can ask Ruth Shupp for details. But the most important events of those 50 years are those related to the Christian ministry that this church has conducted in this community. There have been many, many people involved in that ministry. People who have done everything from teaching

Sunday School, to building floats for the Memorial Day parade, to cleaning the bathroom, to visiting those in need, to washing dishes in the church kitchen, to working with the teens or the children, to parking cars for drive-in services, running the sound system, helping with various missionary projects, and even building, repairing, or renovating various parts of this building.

God has given me the privilege of seeing and being involved in many of those events in one way or another almost from the very beginning. I missed the first 4 years, but I've observed all the rest, either from a crib in the nursery, from being involved "hands-on," or in more recent years as an annual visitor from Michigan or Missouri. I can remember holding the silver tray on which the mortgage for the first addition to the building was burned. And I can also remember that silver conducts heat extremely well. If it were not for that big burly guy that was standing beside me, there would have been ashes all over the floor, but Fred bailed me out with his massive, callused farmer's hands that didn't seem to mind the heat.

I would have to confess that there were times when I sat in these pews without observing much by way of ministry, but that was not because there wasn't any ministry going on. My most vivid memory from almost 40 years ago was sitting in the back pew with Jerry during a morning service. I really have no idea what ministry was taking place at the time, mostly because Jerry and I were having far too much fun in our own little corner and we had pretty much tuned out everything else. The thing that brought me back to reality was a rather odd sensation. It seemed like gravity had suddenly quite working, for all of a sudden I was floating about 2 feet above the pew. And it was getting more difficult to breath in the thin air that high up. When I figured out what had happened, I realized that someone had me by the collar. If you can imagine this, the pastor had actually come down off the platform during the service and he gave me a free ride all the way down front to these really expensive seats in the front of the auditorium. If you look closely, you might notice that Jerry has one ear lobe that is longer than the other. That dates to this same event, because when my aerial performance attracted her attention, Ethel realized that Jerry's ear was just too short, and he was towed down the other aisle.

But despite such events (which, unfortunately, were not so rare as I would like to admit—I also have memories of sitting on the platform during the service—and not because I was participating or preaching either!)—despite such events, I did, indeed, see a lot of ministry going on. I saw it from the perspective of a kid who had the privilege of growing up as a PK. I saw the privilege of Christian ministry from the inside. Ministry is certainly not limited to the pastor's house—it goes on in many of your homes as well, but I can only describe it from my own perspective. I don't ever remember hearing negative discussions regarding the church or church people at home. It may be that my memory is just poor, but I suspect that it had something to do with the fact that the attitude toward ministry that I observed growing up was generally a positive one.

I saw and heard things there that most of the rest of you never get to see or hear. And I heard some things that I wasn't suppose to hear. I can remember answering the phone one evening and a member of this church asked (or I least I thought they asked), "Is this Pastor Decker's?" Assuming that they meant, "Is this Pastor Decker's *home*?" I responded, *yes*. I never said another word, but I suddenly realized that they had asked, "Is this Pastor Decker?"! They were upset about something. I have no idea now what it was. It probably wasn't very major, but they needed to talk to their pastor about it. And they unloaded—and I couldn't get a word in edgewise to tell them that I *wasn't* Pastor Decker, and honestly I was so embarrassed by that point that I didn't know what to say. So I stood there and listened for about five minutes as this person told me their troubles. And finally they stopped and said, "Thanks, Pastor, you've been a big help." And they hung up. I'd never said a word. But I still remember that event and realizing some of what is involved in ministry. People need the friendship and encouragement of an assembly of believers. Some-

one they can talk to. And it isn't always the pastor. There is sometimes as much ministry that goes on in the conversations in this building as there is during the official service.

Those kind of relationships are important. I experienced it long before I understood it. It was years before I finally figured out that *Uncle Gerald* and *Aunt Ellen* weren't related to me. But that's part of a church family that grows together, helps one another raise their children. Or Sayre was a great help to my folks in raising me after he and Dot came to Osterhout. As a matter of fact, I spent less time sitting on the platform after that. Instead of sitting in the back pew while my mother taught junior church, Andy and Jerry and I sat up here in the front next to Dot and Or. I have a permanent bruise on my left thigh where Or would take his big fingers and snap my leg when I had lost track of what was going on and where I was.

But those are just the reflections of a PK. Don't think from that that ministry is limited to the pastor. Ministry is a church-wide project. We are *all* involved in Christian ministry. As Paul explains in Ephesians 4:16, "the whole body [referring to the church] joined and held together by *every* supporting ligament, grows, and builds itself in love, as *each part* does its work." Paul develops that analogy in much more detail in 1 Corinthians 12 as he compares the church to the anatomy of the human body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12, 14, 18–20, 24b–26).

When we come, then, to 2 Corinthians and talk about Christian ministry, we need to remember that it is not just the pastor that we are talking about. Christian ministry is the *privilege* of every member of this church. And it is, indeed, a privilege, not a burden. Not one of us deserves that privilege. We're all sinful human beings. I sometimes think that if I were God (and you can be glad that I'm not!), I would be inclined to use angels to do the work of ministry. They are far more powerful beings. They don't sin. They always get along with one another. There don't have misunderstandings and hurt feelings. But God didn't do it that way. He deliberately chose to use *us!*

That privilege must be exercised, however, in the right way. There are right ways and wrong ways to do things. I have heard of a man who attempted to trim his hedge—with a lawn mower. A gas lawn mower. He picked it up by the deck and held it sideways. The saddest part of that story is that he sued the manufacturer of the lawn mower for the burns and injuries that he sustained from his stupidity—and he won his suit!

Let's not make similar mistakes when it comes to Christian ministry. Christian ministry is a privilege that must be exercised according to God's instructions. You will not be able to file a lawsuit against God if you try to use a lawn mower to trim the hedge of Christian ministry because he has provided detailed instructions on how to do and not to do Christian ministry. Look at some of those instructions in 2 Corinthians 4.

First, Christian ministry is a privilege that must be exercised *confidently*: "Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart" (2 Cor. 4:1). This is one of Paul's main themes in chapter 4. You will notice that he concludes the chapter on the same note: "therefore, we do not lose heart" (4:16a). If you remember that Paul's circumstances and his relationships with the Corinthians at the time he wrote this letter, you will realize that from a human perspective Paul had quite a few reasons to be discouraged. One of the churches that he had helped to organize—people who were very close to his heart—were having second thoughts about Paul and his ministry. There was a group of false teachers who had invaded that church and were directly challenging Paul's authority as well as what Paul taught. Paul had written several letters and made at least one visit to Corinth in an attempt to resolve these problems, but thus far his attempts at reconciliation had not been successful. Now he was waiting for word from Titus who had carried the most recent letter to Corinth. But Titus was late. He didn't arrive in Troas

where he and Paul had planned to meet. So there were a lot of question marks in the air. Plenty of potential for discouragement in Christian ministry.

But Paul was not discouraged. He has just finished a section of his letter (ch. 3) in which he talked about the new covenant ministry which we enjoy. That is what prompts the *therefore* at the beginning of verse 1. It is God's mercy which has provided the new covenant based on Jesus' work on the cross—and this new covenant relationship with God is what enables Christian ministry. Despite all the potential discouragements, Paul affirms his confidence in God's direction in his life and ministry—we do not lose heart.

Christian ministry is a privilege that must be exercised confidently and also honestly. Look at verse 2: "Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God." It is likely that Paul is referring to the activities of the false teachers in this description. It is they who have worked secretly to undermine Paul's ministry. That is what you would expect of them based on the description of chapter 11: "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. <sup>14</sup>And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. <sup>15</sup>It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (2 Cor. 11:13–15). Their secret, deceptive ways were shameful and resulted in distorting the Word of God. From what little we know about these false teachers, it seems probable that their primary "distortions" related to the OT. They taught that Christians must still follow the law—they must live under the old covenant. That contrasted sharply with Paul's new covenant message and ministry. These Judaizers show up several times in the NT. They represent people who cannot accept the fact that God's program changes at the cross. They insist on an OT ethic.

As I said last night, it is not that the old covenant was "bad." Paul calls it a glorious covenant. Rather the new covenant is so much better. There never seems to be a shortage of teachers who want to place Christians under the law. Some sectors of Christianity have swung to the opposite end of the spectrum and ignore the OT altogether, but it is the legalists who cause the most trouble in our kinds of churches. There is a well-known seminar that specializes in the "basic principles of life," which, while having some positive features, often does more harm than good because it is based on thrusting Christians back under the law. Saved by grace, yes, but then live by the dictates of the old covenant. Just leave out the sacrifices and obey the rest. Saved by grace, sanctified by law. Like the Judaizers in Corinth, that distorts the Word of God and ignores the privileges of the *new* covenant ministry brought about by the cross.

The second half of verse 2 adds another description of Christian ministry: it must be exercised *plainly*: "On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God." Your translation might say, "by the manifestation of the truth" [KJV]. What does it mean to *manifest* the truth? It simply means that we are to set forth the truth plainly and completely. No complex,oteric secrets in Paul's teaching. No preoccupation with the old covenant to the exclusion of the new revelation in Jesus Christ. The false teachers might well have been guilty of both, but not Paul. He preached a clear, simple, intelligible message. And so must we exercise the privilege of Christian ministry.

Perhaps having emphasized the clarity of the message in verse 2, we may be a bit perplexed when in the next two verses (3–4), Paul talks about the message being *hidden*. But what does he tell us about this "veiling"? What is veiled? The gospel, i.e., the message of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection that offers forgiveness of sin for those who believe. In other words, we aren't talking about Paul's ministry to the Christians in Corinth. To whom, then, *is* the gospel veiled? Paul says that it is veiled to "those who are perishing." That's the same description that he used back in 2:15. It is to unbelievers, to non-Christians that the gospel message is hidden. That sounds like a problem doesn't it? If the gospel is hidden from

unbelievers, how will they ever get saved? Yes, it is a problem. But who is it that has hidden the gospel from unbelievers? Who draped the veil over their minds? Has God hidden the good news? Verse 4 says that it is the “god of this age” who is blinding the minds of unbelievers. And it’s pretty obvious why Satan would want to do that isn’t it? As the end of verse 4 says, he is blinding their minds deliberately so that they will not understand the gospel.

We’ll come back to this problem in just a minute, but before we discover the solution, Paul spells out another principle as to how we are to exercise the privilege of Christian ministry. In verse 5 he emphasizes the need for *humility* in Christian ministry. One might not suspect it from listening to some preachers, but the point of our preaching is not ourselves. I have heard preachers who tell you a lot about themselves, but very little about God. But Paul says here that “we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake” (v. 5). The object of our preaching is to exalt Jesus Christ—the one who is *Lord*. Our role is not to shine the spotlight on ourselves—we are only servants.

It’s amazing what happens to the message if we get that emphasis reversed. It’s a bit like the church bulletin that included this announcement:

- “Don’t let worry kill you, Let the church help.”
- “For those of you who have children and don’t know it, we have a nursery downstairs.”

After the pastor had been sick for some time, the church bulletin announced that:

- “God is good: the pastor is better.”

That last one in particular makes the point rather well. If you get the emphasis backwards, it seriously affects the message. Paul reminds us that Christian ministry depends on humility: we are to exalt Jesus Christ as Lord. We are only *servants*—those who minister God’s Word to others.

That may seem like a truism in biblical terms, but why does Paul mention it here? What is his point in this context? Verse 6 explains: “For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” Do you see his point? Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers so they don’t respond to the gospel. When we minister, therefore, we dare not focus on ourselves. We *must* focus on Jesus Christ, because *he* is the only one who is able to penetrate the blindness so that unbelievers can see the light of the gospel. *We* can’t do that. So get out of the way. Take the role of a servant and let the *Lord* do *his* work of shining light into dark hearts. We have the *privilege* of being the servant who carries the light—the message—but he does the work.

Paul gives his own testimony to that effect in verses 7–12: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. <sup>8</sup>We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup>persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup>We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. <sup>11</sup>For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. <sup>12</sup>So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” Paul does not boast of his great accomplishments. He says in effect, I’m just a servant preaching Jesus Christ. I’m a jar of clay. The power to change lives does not lie within me. “This all surpassing power is from God, not from us.” That reflects the appropriate humble attitude that is so necessary if we are going to exercise the privilege of Christian ministry in a God-honoring way.

One must, of course, base this humble ministry on faith—we have probably taken that for granted, but Paul next specifies this qualification. Look at verse 13–15: “It is written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, <sup>14</sup>because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in his pres-

ence. <sup>15</sup>All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.”

“I believed, therefore I have spoken.” Paul quotes that phrase from Psalm 116, a psalm in which David expresses his faith in God—specifically his faith that God has raised him up. He had been very sick. He, and perhaps others, were afraid that he was going to die. But he recovered. The psalm is his expression of thanksgiving to God. In the psalm, he makes his declaration, “I believed,” i.e., that God has heard me, “therefore I speak,” i.e., that’s why I’m writing this psalm. Paul picks up these same words and makes them his own in 2 Corinthians 4. In Paul’s case, he affirms his confident faith that God has preserved him in the difficulties of ministry and will one day raise him from the dead just as he did the Lord Jesus. It is only this kind of faith that is adequate to sustain any of us in the privilege of Christian ministry. We must first believe what God has done and what he will do, and on that basis we can then speak. What do we speak? The same thing that Paul did:

- verse 2, the Word of God, setting forth the truth plainly
- verse 4, the gospel of the glory of Christ
- verse 5, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord

With that message—viewing ourselves as servants—we can minister to others for their benefit (as verse 15 notes), so that God’s grace may reach more and more people. It is a privilege to be involved in that kind of ministry—a joyful, glorious ministry which will cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

There is one final instruction in this chapter as it pertains to this privilege of Christian ministry. And that is that we must exercise the privilege of Christian ministry in light of eternity:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

<sup>17</sup>For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup>So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (4:16–18).

We do not lose heart. Despite Paul’s difficulties and disappointments in Christian ministry, he looked past them to the future. In light of eternity the complications and inconveniences of Christian ministry—indeed of life in general—appear to be but light and momentary troubles that are far outweighed by the glory of what lies ahead. We cannot see the future—but that is what faith is all about: “we fix our eyes on what is unseen.” Not because we believe in fairy tales. Not because of wishful thinking. But because we know that the One who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us in his presence.”

We may be tempted to quote these verses out of context and apply them to the general troubles of life—especially when we or someone we are talking to is facing death. And the principle is certainly true in that situation, but remember what Paul is talking about in this chapter. He is discussing *the privilege of Christian ministry*. And what a privilege it is to be able to serve him! Whether as a pastor, a deacon, a Sunday School teacher, a youth worker, a kitchen helper, a parking lot attendant—whatever you may do by way of serving the Lord in this church. Yes, you will encounter difficulties if for no other reason than the fact that we live in a sinful world.

But it will be worth it all when we see Jesus!  
 Life’s trials will seem so small when we see Christ.  
 One glimpse of his dear face, all sorrow will erase.  
 So bravely run the race till we see Christ.