



## Affirmation

### 2 Cor 5:11-15

I remember when I was a young man that me and my friends used to go to what were known as the Cardiff Christian Rallies which were held in a variety of Gospel Halls in Cardiff on a Saturday night. It was an opportunity for teenagers to do something useful on a Saturday and it was not unusual to get 100-200 of us. Afterwards it was an opportunity for then to hit the town. My mother bought a white polo necked pullover for me. It was bright white acrylic which she assiduously cleaned for me and produced every Saturday. She loved it, I hated it but I didn't dare tell her. She said to me that you'll be known as the boy with the scruffy clothes if I didn't wear it. I knew that I was known as the boy with the dorky jumper! I'd take it off at the first opportunity and stuff it under my seat. It took me a long time to realise that all it needed was an indelible stain to finish it off!

Affirmation, positive or negative is very important to us. It helps us feel better – or alternatively, can be something that crushes us. All good teaching practice these days builds up a child's belief in himself or herself. Likewise our reputation is built up by what others say about us to others. Positively, we may get the reputation of being a nice person, or perhaps better, someone who reflects Jesus, and is Jesus to others. On the other hand, we may get a reputation for our shortcomings – good fuel for gossips. There's nothing worse though than picking up a reputation for doing something that just isn't true.

At MRBC we have been exploring a few themes from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Paul was being challenged as to his motives and legitimacy for carrying out his ministry. Now Paul found that annoying because what people said about him and his motives and legitimacy to preach just wasn't true. Up to now Paul has dealt with the issue of motive – even though he didn't feel particularly obliged to as most of the Corinthians had come to Christ because of his ministry anyway. But those people were being troubled by the gossip of others about him which he felt he needed to address very forcefully. Last week we looked how he reminded them of his motives for doing what he did:

We have experienced Christ's rescue 1:6-11

We have the presence of the Holy Spirit 1:21-22, 5:5

God led him 2:12-14

He operated in God's strength 3:5, 12

He reflected God's glory 3:18

Life is short but eternity is forever 4:15-18

We live by faith, not by sight 5:7

We always seek to please the Lord 5:9

Last time we dealt with the particular aspect of responsibility and accountability as we looked at the judgement seat of Christ. Paul's approach was one of testimony – he was called of God and was accountable to Him. Therefore he boldly says in verse 11: *What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience.*

He shouldn't have needed to spend what are four and a half chapters on why he did what he did – it should have been obvious and he knew it should have been to most of them.

There is nothing worse in a church situation for great men of God to have their ministry doubted by a minority – or what turns out to be a minority. It is distracting to those who are benefiting from the ministry and destructive to the church. As with Paul, that doesn't mean necessarily that the work of God is halted – quite the reverse sometimes. It just means that some people don't get the blessing because of the stupidity of a

minority.

In connection with this I thought of some of the greats of the past who were disparaged by some. Take both George Whitfield and John Wesley. Both were dismissed as “enthusiasts” by many in the church, yet God used them to bring many to Christ and eventually to revitalise the church.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Billy Graham had and still had his detractors. Just about every part of his ministry has been picked apart by someone. I recall that he was challenged as to the effectiveness of crusade evangelism as many who came forward at rallies often fell away subsequently. His response was *“if that's the case, I'm only doing imperfectly what most other Christians don't do at all.”*

Its par for the course for most people in Christian ministry, whether in formal accredited ministry, or whether just serving in church in whatever capacity (which is most of us), to encounter those who criticise what we do in general or us personally. In one sense that should never be a surprise because after all we are only human beings and infallible. It can become a huge discouragement to the person involved and within a church can lead to dissent and even splits. How do we deal with this?

What we learn from Paul is that we examine our motives. Paul knew that God had called him and it was on that basis he took risks and endured hardships. He was convinced. He knew his weaknesses and we are to explore these in future sessions. I always find it a great help when I'm going through a difficult time personally or spiritually, that I know that God has called me into ministry. That was Paul's conviction and it's reflected in that sentence we had: what we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. It's quite loaded phrase. Paul isn't saying it wasn't clear to him but it was plain to God. By inference, those who opposed him opposed God.

There's one other thing that comes out of this for those being ministered to by Paul. Here it is in verse 12: *we are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart.*

Paul told them all this so they might take pride in his ministry and affirm that to others. We are not particularly good at affirmation sometimes. We can be quicker to criticise than affirm. Or just say nothing.

I have heard some say that we should not seek affirmation and they quote Matthew 6:5 *“And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full.”* The tendency is therefore to play down affirmation. After all, our reward should be in heaven.

Actually if you look at what Paul says, he's not interested in their affirmation personally. Look again at the end of verse 12: so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. Actually, he's making the same kind of point Jesus was making in Matthew 6. The people on the street corners were drawing attention to themselves, not God.

What was Paul doing things for; look at verses 13-15: *If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. 15 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.*

Paul was about doing things for the sake of God which actually had the reverse affect to self-affirmation – he was being accused of being crazy – now how many times have God's people over the years been accused of that one! Paul's ministry was aimed at them – reaching them, encouraging them. It was outward ministry – not for his sake, but for their sake. So it wasn't self-affirming- it was driven by the love of Christ. It's interesting that he doesn't use the word me or us in the latter end of verse 14 and verse 15. He was compelled by Christ's love to tell others that Christ died for them and that they should live for Him alone.

So where does this get us on the issue of affirmation. Firstly don't be afraid to affirm and be proud of those who serve -as ministers, as missionaries or as part of the ministry of the church. I can't deny it doesn't make me feel good when someone thanks me for something I've done, but in truth, if God has moved you through my ministry, the less on of this passage is tell others – affirm it to other people.

If you like to work of the Seafarers Centre, then I'm sure the Chaplains are always grateful for complements – but they feel that their ministry and the ministry of the centre is called and lead by God, so they'd prefer you'd go away and tell others about it and encourage others to support the work here.

It's the same in church. Sometimes we are quicker to criticise church and those who lead or are responsible for ministries than it is to affirm them. It says in some shops: *if you did not like the service, tell us, if you did, tell others*. We are like this about church in respect of disliking something aren't we? But if we like what's happening and see God at work in the church, then we should tell one another about it and for that matter everyone else! If you like the sermon, by all means tell me if you want to, but even more importantly, tell someone else about the way God has challenged you through worship, or preaching or whatever. It does help me and others in the leadership team if you tell us about something good or bad – because we know it's something that has or hasn't connected. But more importantly, if we're good, encourage others to be a part of it, and better still, ask God where I can help things become more effective. Being church is about serving and building up one another.

Let me close by reading verse 12 again: *We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart*. Actually other translations use the word “boast”. Taking pride and boasting are not words we like to use in connection with being a Christian do we? Pride and boasting are only a problem when we focus them on ourselves and seek to build our own egos through them. But if God is good, then take pride in Him, boast about Him. Tell people how fantastic He is and that everything He promises people can be theirs. If church is good, tell people about it. Take pride in what God is doing through the ministry of God's people. There's nothing wrong in doing that – in fact it's an essential part of mission. The NT is full of stories about people who discovered Jesus and then told someone else about it. Things haven't changed. Let's be encouraged to be excited about Jesus and let each other and everyone else know about it!

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