

I. Read II Corinthians 2:12-17

A. In this passage of II Corinthians, Paul speaks of an opportunity God opened up for him. The opportunity was to preach the gospel. Opportunities of this kind may involve a *changing circumstance* or they may result from *changes in our personal relationships*. In either case, they are often a reflection of on-going conflict in the spiritual realm. They may be called *divine appointments*. Read Colossians 4:5-6 and identify what sort of *divine appointment* mentioned above is addressed.

It is a *divine appointment* resulting from *changes in personal relationships*. In the Colossians passage, the relationships believers have with others are described as “opportunities.” To meet new people, make new friends, or add to our inventory of acquaintances is to be given “opportunities” to share our faith.

Note for Leaders:

“He (Paul) intimates that the effort to evangelize the people can succeed only when the Lord blesses it. Preachers preach and listeners listen, but the effect of the spoken Word depends on the Holy Spirit to lead people into the sphere of the Lord through conversion and faith.” (Simon J. Kistemaker)

In Col. 4:6, reference is made to the manner in which the believer responds or interacts to others. What does this mean? (See also I Peter 3:15.)

It is the Christian’s witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The “defense” mentioned by Peter is a reference to a reasonable and thoughtful explanation of the gospel of Christ, offered each time the opportunity arises. At the very least, believers ought to be careful not to act in a way that impedes the effect of the gospel on others.

In Col. 4:3, reference is made to the prospect of changing circumstances (“open up to us a door”). What does the fact that Paul requests that the Colossians pray that a door be opened for them tell us?

That *divine appointments*, whether those involving *changes in circumstances* (doors opening or closing) or *opportunities in personal relationships*, are affected, even changed, through prayer.

B. In II Corinthians 2:14, reference is made to the “triumph” or victory we share as believers. What is the basis of this victory? (See Romans 8:16, 17, 37.)

The basis is the position and relationship we have been given because of Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrificial death on our behalf. The triumph is what Christ has done for us and continues to do through and with us.

How does the notion of our “triumph” mentioned in II Corinthians 2:14 differ from mere positive thinking or a determination to change one’s circumstances?

Note for Leaders:

“The context of the verse itself forces us to look closely at the wording: ‘God in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.’ [God] is the

subject and Paul is the object of the verb to lead. The verb is in the present tense and denotes not single but continued action. Moreover, the verb is strengthened by the adverb always. And last, the phrase in Christ qualifies the object us. God is the victor who continuously leads Paul as a captive, a prisoner “in Christ,” to his death...Taking verse 14a literally, we interpret it to mean that God leads Paul as a captive, a prisoner ‘in Christ,’ to his death.” (Kistemaker)

Paul is following Christ and serving Christ in the face of great hardship and suffering. Notwithstanding this, he views his ministry and life as a victory.

- C. In II Corinthians 2:15-16, it is clear that Paul expects the unbelieving world to react to the presence and faithful witness of the true believer. He uses powerful metaphorical language to describe the effect of the presence of a believer on an unbeliever (“to the one an aroma from death to death”). What was he trying to convey to the readers of this epistle?

For Paul, the notion of a morally neutral universe was nonsense. He was well aware of the true nature of the cosmic struggle going on between the forces of darkness and God’s Church. As unbelievers become aware of what a Christian believes, they are offended (Phil. 3:18; I Corinthians 1:23-24). The exclusive nature of the truth claims of the Christian faith are provocative to those who don’t accept them. In spite of the fact that an unbeliever may not believe in God or absolute truth or even sin, Paul makes it clear in Romans 1:19-20, 2:14-15 that they inherently know the Christian message is true, yet they choose to reject it. This stubborn rejection causes them to feel cornered, hence, they become angry.

Note for Leaders:

“Similarly, the aroma of the gospel penetrates everywhere so that both those people who are being saved and those who are perishing take notice. Preachers of the good news present to everyone Jesus Christ as the savior of the world. Their heart is filled with the knowledge of Christ so that from their mouth and by their conduct all people hear and observe Jesus...Writes Calvin, ‘The Gospel is preached unto salvation, for that is its real purpose, but only believers share in this salvation; for unbelievers it is an occasion of condemnation, but it is they who make it so.’ The heralds who proclaim God’s Word meet acceptance and rejection. God takes no pleasure in the death of the unbeliever, as is evident from both Old and New Testaments. In fact, God pleads with the wicked to repent and believe (see Ezek. 18:32; 33:11; and II Peter 3:9). The responsibility for accepting or rejecting the pleasant aroma of the gospel is that of the individual, who chooses either life or death. (Kistemaker)

When a Christian finds that he seldom or never faces conflict, persecution, or opposition from unbelievers God has placed in his life, what does this mean?

It always means that he fits in with the world too well (Romans 12:2). He has compromised his convictions. He is silent about his Lord. He has become a man-pleaser. That does not mean that Christians should always be in conflict with unbelievers, but rather that the complete absence of conflict or tension is a contradiction of the reality of the cosmic struggle (spiritual warfare) going

on. Remember that Christ was crucified because of His message. Should the Christian expect less?

Contrariwise, when a Christian finds that he has no affinity or attraction to other believers, there is a problem as well. Paul describes the effect of believers on other believers as “a fragrance of Christ...among those who are being saved...an aroma from life to life.” What was Paul getting at?

Christians should enjoy the fellowship of other believers as they are encouraged in their faith, strengthened in their convictions, reminded of God’s grace, and affirmed in their purpose in life. Christian fellowship should be a sweet and refreshing aroma. Christians should quite naturally seek out the company of other Christians.

D. Paul contrasts his ministry to that of those who peddle religion as a means of profit and the attaining of power over others. Read II Timothy 4:2-3; Galatians 1:6-7; Romans 1:32 and list some characteristics of religious peddlers.

1. **They are primarily concerned with pleasing consumer-oriented congregations. (They want to grow numerically at all costs; their chief desire is popularity and acceptance among the people; they will seldom, if ever, say anything from the pulpit that might cause someone to be offended. Here, the difficult truths of Scripture will be avoided. Prophetic messages will be eschewed.)**
2. **Their central message is something other than the Word of God. (They use Scripture only for appearance’s sake. The bulk of what they say from the pulpit comes from somewhere else. Anecdotes, jokes, stories become the sermon’s primary text rather than the Scripture. Stories and anecdotes are fine as illustrations, as long as they support the exposition of Scripture rather than replace it.)**
3. **They add something to the simple gospel of Christ as the way of salvation. (Their church is the only way to be saved. Traditions are put on par with Scripture. It is Jesus plus works or Jesus plus ceremony. This is common to cults and even to some so-called Christian denominations.)**
4. **They seek to cover up their sin and immorality by encouraging others to follow their path. (Adulterers say adultery is sometimes okay, homosexuals say homosexuality is just one more alternative, etc.)**
5. **They call the integrity of Scripture into question. (This is common in liberal churches.)**

E. Perhaps more than ever before, we live in a day in which opportunities to use religion as a means of personal gain abound. Television, radio, the doctrinal ignorance of evangelicals, all work together to create an ideal situation to take advantage of professing believers. How do the things mentioned above work for the religious peddler of our day?

Preachers and tele-evangelists who use the TV and radio as their pulpit often operate apart from any effective system of accountability. People *think* they know their favorite radio and TV preacher but they really don’t. In the context of the local church, you can see what sort of life a man lives, what his family is like, what he really thinks is important. The tele-evangelists allow you to see and hear only what they want you to.

Additionally, in the past—at least from the Reformation (1520s) to the early 20th century—believers typically had a better doctrinal foundation and a better understanding of the fundamentals of the faith. They had been taught sound doctrine by their church. They had a degree of discernment. They were less gullible. Today, evangelicals promote doctrinal ignorance as the mark of spirituality. (No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible!) When they come under the spell of a dynamic religious peddler, they are easily sucked in because he makes them *feel* good! He uses enough Christian lingo to sound like a genuine Christian preacher, but he omits or confuses the real substance of the faith.

Another factor that contributes to the vulnerability of many evangelicals is their fascination with bigness. Big buildings, big programs, big congregations, big listening audience, even big hair, all tend to turn the head of the typical believer in our day. *Surely if their church is that big, God must be blessing their ministry!* Jesus was suspicious when big crowds began to follow Him. He wondered if they were really listening to what He was saying. Big churches are fine, but truly, there are not all that many extraordinarily gifted preachers who are teaching the uncompromised truth. Most exceptionally large churches are growing for the wrong reasons!