

Ambassadors of Christ

DAVE BAST

Arriving in India in the middle of the night after two long flights, I slowly shuffled zombie-like through a huge jam of people in front of the immigration control desks, looking with envy at the empty line marked: Diplomatic passports only. Ambassadors enjoy VIP perks because they really are important people. Their job is to speak authoritatively on behalf of the government they represent. In order to do this, ambassadors must be sure they know what their own leaders want them to say. So who are we as servants of Jesus Christ? Well, here is another answer given by Paul to the church in Corinth. We are Christ's ambassadors. We will think about what that means today on Groundwork. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and it is great to be rolling again, Scott, through Paul's second letter to the Corinthians; so many great and interesting things here, and one of the things that we have discovered in the course of this series is that Paul uses many different images or analogies for what his work is as a Christian witness – as a minister of the Gospel; and a lot of what he says, well frankly, it does apply especially to current-day ministers whose profession it is, or job, to share God's word; but really, in a sense it applies to all Christians, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and it is interesting that I Corinthians is generally better known to a lot of people in the Church than II Corinthians, but II Corinthians has, as you said, so many more images. You know, the jars of clay image, the aroma of Christ that we looked at in a previous program; there are so many images, and in this program we will particularly focus on the image of being an ambassador for Christ – Christ leading us in triumphal procession, also on a previous program in this series; so, this is an image-rich letter from Paul maybe because he was really trying to get the word across to the Corinthians, who were a very troubled congregation. They had a lot of issues. Paul was desperate to get his message across in the face of false teachers and critics in Corinth, and so Paul is pulling out all the stops to get these ideas across.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it is the principle of the squeaky wheel gets the grease, so lots of squeaking going on in the church in Corinth. If you are tempted to believe that all we need to really do is get back to the Church as it was in the days of the apostles, you know, when everything was... some golden age of the Christian Church; that attitude won't survive more than a few minutes reading in the Corinthian letters of Paul because what we discover is tons of problems; all kinds of serious issues; and one of the most surprising I think to many of us is the level of personal criticism that Paul came in for. Just attacks on his character, on his performance as a minister. He was the founding pastor of the church; and again, as we have noted in this series, we are listening to one side of the telephone conversation, so we have to kind of fill in or reconstruct what they were saying as Paul responds.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But you can tell... We are going to listen to some verses now from II Corinthians Chapter 5, beginning at verse 11, and implicit here, reading between the lines, we can tell what Paul's critics in Corinth were accusing him of. They were accusing him of being a little bit nutty and out of his head. They were accusing him of being a braggart who was just always promoting himself; and you can tell by listening to these words.

DAVE BAST

¹¹Since then we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. ¹²We 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 what is in the heart.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹³If we are out of our mind, as some say, it is for God. If we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴For Christ's love compels us because we are convinced that One died for all, and therefore, all died; ¹⁵and He died for all that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and was raised again.

DAVE BAST

Here Paul is obviously on the defensive again, and he says: Look, I am not trying to commend myself to you. I am not trying to make myself seem to be somebody great or to kind of underscore my qualifications. You know me. God knows me – God knows what I am; but the fact is, what was happening clearly was that Paul's character and person were being attacked in order to discredit his message. So that is the key point here. It is not about how they feel about Paul personally or whether he has been unjustly maligned or critiqued. People are going after Paul to them so that they would end up rejecting what he had taught them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, reading between the lines, it is pretty clear that what these critics of Paul were saying, and the lies they were spreading about Paul to the other Corinthians in Corinth was that look at how he behaved when he was here. He gets all worked up and he just gets all excited and he is kind of out of his head. He just seems like a crazy man just jumping around; and Paul says: Yes, you are right. That is true. I get a little bit worked up because of God; because of the message of this incredible Gospel we have that one man – the Son of God Himself, named Jesus no less – He died. He sacrificed Himself for us so that we would all die with Him and so that our sins would be forgiven. This is the most amazing message the world has ever heard. This is the most counterintuitive message the world has ever heard, Paul says. So yes, when I talk about the death of Jesus, I am going to jump up and down a little bit and I am not making any apologies for that. If I am a little out of my head it is because of God and this incredible message that He has put into my heart.

DAVE BAST

It is funny because still today in certain churches or certain circles you will hear somebody criticized for being too emotional; and apparently that is what they were saying about Paul: Aw, he is too emotional. He is tugging at the heartstrings or he loses control of himself so he is shouting and he is weeping; and Paul says: Yes, okay I admit it. I am guilty as charged; but listen to what I am trying to convey to you; listen to this message. If you don't get a little bit excited about that, there is something wrong. You know, check your pulse. So, again, on the defensive, but it is for the sake of the truthfulness of what he has told them because in Paul's mind, this is a message of life and death, and we are going to look at the content of that message in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are talking now about Paul's defense, Dave, of his ministry and his tactics, and why he seemed to just be a little overly emotional, as we said; a little overly enthusiastic. Well, there is a reason that Paul is that way, because he knows that he is representing God; and so here again from II Corinthians 5 – here is Paul describing his ministry, and this is rich in imagery also for us.

DAVE BAST

II Corinthians 5 beginning at verse 17: Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come; the old is gone, the new is here. ¹⁸All this is from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ; not counting people's sins against them, and He has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

SCOTT HOEZEE

²⁰We are therefore Christ's ambassadors; as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. ²¹God has made Him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.

DAVE BAST

Let's start with this image of the ambassador: We are Christ's ambassadors. Now, I think most of us have a pretty good idea of who an ambassador is or what an ambassador does. The world is still full of ambassadors. They are the accredited representatives from one government to another; so they come to a foreign country representing the head of their own government back home and they are to be representative in every way. They are kind of the person on the scene. They are the highest official in any given country from another, and they are specifically charged with delivering official messages.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they have to get it right. I remember that John F. Kennedy... President Kennedy's father, Joseph P. Kennedy was the ambassador of Franklin D. Roosevelt...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To the Court of St. James in England in the run up to World War II, and at one point Ambassador Kennedy was there and he spoke kind of words of appeasement about Hitler and that he wasn't too worried about Nazi Germany's rise. That was *not* Franklin D. Roosevelt's message, and that was the last day Joseph P. Kennedy was ambassador.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you don't speak for the President, you are not an ambassador. You have got to get the message right when you are an ambassador.

DAVE BAST

Right; and even more so in the ancient world – the world of Paul and the Corinthians – because, you know, with our instantaneous communications a lot of times the ambassador's job is kind of a political perk that is given, especially for a smaller country, to some political supporter of the current president; but in the ancient world, the messages passed much more slowly, so the ambassador had to be able to really create and craft the message in an authentic way; and make sure he knew what his king wanted to have said, and that he delivered it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in this case, what a thing. Paul says we are Christ's ambassadors; so Jesus wants Paul, and really ultimately Paul will say all of us who preach the Gospel or witness for Christ – this isn't just about ministers or apostles – we are Christ's ambassadors as though, he says, God was making His appeal through us; and He is. You want to hear what God has to say? You are going to hear it through human lips; and in this case Paul is saying: We are here to re-present Jesus – to represent Christ – and God is making His appeal for reconciliation directly through us. That is why you listen to an apostle – the true apostle, not the false ones who were infiltrating Corinth; and that is why the apostle makes sure to get the message right about, again, the death of Jesus. We saw in the first segment that Paul said: Yes, when I talk about how Jesus died I get worked up because it is such an amazing story because that... and now he goes on to say: That is how we are reconciled to God. Our relationship with God is healed through the death and resurrection of Christ.

DAVE BAST

It is a wonderful image, and it is wonderfully encouraging today because so many pastors I think today are kind of under the gun. It has often been observed that it has become a more stressful occupation; you are torn in different ways; and there is, in many churches, as there was for Paul, a lot of personal criticism. Somehow it seems to go with the territory. You cannot please everybody. And Paul has had some examples that he has used that seem to indicate that. He says in one place to the Corinthians: We are the scum of the earth as Christ's ministers; but here, it is this high, exalted position. To think that we are actually authorized by God to speak on His behalf to a listening world, sometimes a world that doesn't want to listen.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But one of the reasons the world doesn't want to listen sometimes is because one of the things you have to say to the world: Look, if you want to tell somebody you have to be reconciled to God, the first thing you have to believe for that to be good news is that you are at odds with God now. The relationship is broken. In fact, there is the story about the French skeptic Voltaire, who was kind of an atheistic/agnostic; he didn't believe in God, but he was dying – he was on his deathbed – and so somebody said: Have you made peace with God? And Voltaire is said to have replied: I wasn't aware we had quarreled. Well, you have to know that we have quarreled with God. We have fallen away from God because of sin, and somebody has got to be the bridge – the reconciling bridge – to bring us back together; and Paul says that is Christ. The mechanism is Christ's death.

DAVE BAST

One of the most profound sentences in this passage is the one that goes: ¹⁹In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself. So think about, first of all, what that says about who Christ was. Christ was not a mere man living a beautiful, exemplary life of how to win your way to heaven by imitating Him or walking in His steps. No, Christ was God in human flesh...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And the work that He was doing was being done by God. God had to do something first in order for reconciliation to be affected. Sometimes we think that, well, if only people would turn to God, you know. It

is all on us. We have wandered away; we are like the prodigal son; we are living in the far country. We need to come to our senses and we need to go back home to the father's house and all will be well. Well, yes, okay; that is true; but something has to happen on God's side, too. That is what Paul says here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the whole scripture makes clear God cannot just wink at sin. He cannot wave it away; He cannot just sort of say: Oh, no big deal. You know, I think sometimes... A baseball analogy comes to mind here: If you are in the backyard with your little kid and you throw a softball for him to hit with a baseball bat... you know, you throw it as low and slow as you can and the kid swings and misses, and you say: Well, we won't count that one. You know, its okay... Well, that is not going to work when the Chicago Cubs are playing the Detroit Tigers in a major league game. You miss, it is a strike. The stakes are higher. God cannot look at our sin and just say: Ach, we won't count it. We won't worry about it. No, something concrete and cosmic has to change for our relationship to be made right; and again, that was so serious a matter it took no less than the death of God's own Son, but that did work, Paul says.

DAVE BAST

Yes, it happened.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are reconciled.

DAVE BAST

It happened, and because it has happened, this is the message that we have been entrusted with for the world. We know what our king wants us to say to the world. He wants us to proclaim that the work has been done, that God did it in Christ, and that therefore now if anyone is in Christ there is a new creation – there is a new start; as the older version says: If anyone is in Christ, *he* is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has come. This is the message that we are commissioned and called to share with the world; and this is why for so many people to hear an authentic minister of the Gospel – ambassador for Christ – is a wonderful experience. It is a powerful experience because what they actually hear is the word of God. There is an old saying that the preaching of the word of God *is* the word of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And when people are exposed to that wonderful things happen. So let's look at that next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to Groundwork.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we are in II Corinthians 5; and Dave, we were just rehearsing the cosmic message that in Christ God has reconciled the world to Himself. You know, we sometimes hear that word yet today. You know, if a couple is on the brink of divorce – a husband and wife – and they have been fighting for years and the marriage looks over, but then something happens and there is a breakthrough and they reconcile and the marriage is saved and they come back together and the children have two parents in the home and the love is back. What a wonderful thing reconciliation is; but because being reconciled to God is something of cosmic ramifications, now Paul goes on to say we *all* have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation with God means reconciliation with one another...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

With the world, with the creation. That is what we are called to do in the Church; to sally forth into the world, trying to make people get along with God through Christ and people to get along with each other in Christ.

DAVE BAST

You know, just at the risk of being too repetitive, I think it is important to stress what Paul stresses here, which is first the vertical dimension, because the first thing that he does by way of exercising what he calls the ministry of reconciliation, which is to proclaim the message of reconciliation, is to say to the Corinthians: 5:20^b We implore you therefore, be reconciled to God; which is really kind of interesting to me because he is writing to Christians, at least nominal Christians or church members at any rate. He is writing to the church, and the first thing he says is: You know, you need to respond to this message, too. Even if you were born and raised in the Church, if you have kind of heard it all your life, if you consider yourself a Christian, somehow there has to be this personal appropriation of this wonderful thing that God has done in Christ. So, that great verse that we quoted a bit ago: 5:17⁷ If anyone is in Christ he or she is a new creation. Well, that is if you are *in* Christ. If you are not in Christ – if you are outside of Christ – you are just the old, you know; there is nothing there; so the way you come into Christ is through faith.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I think Paul is also reminding the Corinthians here of something we all need to be reminded of. In my tradition, in the Reformed tradition, and with a Calvinist-tinged Reformed tradition, sometimes there has been too much of a tendency to downplay our spiritual status: Oh, all of our works are still as filthy rags; and we are lower than low, you know.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul wants to say: Now hold on, hold on. I don't want you to get full of yourself or anything, but you are a new creation. The new creation that is going to renew the whole cosmos, it is living inside you now if you truly are baptized and you now dwell in Christ. You are a new creation; and so the idea on the ministry of reconciliation is: Look, you are a new creation; start acting like it; and get along with other people, too.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, look at what God did to reconcile you to Himself. Now reconcile yourself to the others in your life, in your church community; probably a very needed message in Corinth at the time, which was being torn apart by these false teachers... bad rumors about Paul. Paul is saying: We have to look reconciled with each other even if we are going to make anybody believe we are also reconciled to God first of all.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; because that is the horizontal axis – vertically with God but horizontally with one another. You quoted, Scott, Voltaire, the skeptic, a little bit ago, and I forget who said this, but another typical skeptical person remarked: You Christians need to be acting more redeemed if you expect me to believe in your Redeemer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

If you expect us to listen to this message of reconciliation, we better see some evidence of it in your own churches, Christians, or what are we going to make of it? You know, this is kind of a tough word because any of us who have been around the Church very much knows that churches are often hotbeds of conflict: Personality clashing, failure to forgive, grudge holding, arguing about little things – trivial things. It is a real mess, and we do the disservice to the Gospel itself – to our role as ambassadors – when we live that way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Paul says there has to be unity visible because of Christ. I mean, the biggest chasm, the biggest relationship breach, in the history of the universe was the one that opened up between God and humanity because of sin. So Paul is saying: Look, if God... Now it took the death of no less than God's own Son to do it, but if God could bridge that gap, you surely can bridge the much smaller gaps in your own life, within your congregation, among congregations, among nations. This should be more than doable, Paul is saying, because Grace and reconciliation is where you live anyway.

DAVE BAST

You know, it is a beautiful image for the nature of salvation – the idea of quarreling parties making peace – making amends, coming back together, being joined again, being reunited. A marriage is a great example of where that can happen when there is grace, when there is forgiveness; and this is the message that we have to proclaim to the world, but also, as we have been trying to suggest, that we have to embody before the world. We need to be making our families, our congregations, our communities living, flourishing examples of the power of God to reconcile; to heal divisions, to heal wounds, to heal relationships; and it is a wonderful and powerful thing when we are living through this message; but there is often a price to pay for those who want to do that. It can be very painful; and Paul himself knew what that was like.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As we were just saying, Dave, the reconciliation humanity has with God is great, but that too came at a little bit of a price, you might say: The death of God's own Son. Death is often involved. Letting go of grudges, letting go... maybe letting go of some grievance you have a right to feel; but if there is going to be reconciliation, you have to find a way, through the power of Christ – the power of Christ compels us, Paul wrote earlier in II Corinthians 5 – the power of Christ compels us to do what we can to reconcile races, to reconcile family members, to reconcile congregational members. Yes, there are some ways to do that or to try to do that that probably aren't so good, but it is very near the core of the Gospel to make the effort.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is one more place in the New Testament where Paul refers to himself as an ambassador, and I find it very moving. It comes in his letter to the Ephesians, at the very end. Paul, some years later, is now in prison because of his work as an ambassador for Christ, and he writes asking them to pray for him: 6:¹⁹That words may be given me to boldly proclaim the mystery of the Gospel, ^{20a}for which I am an ambassador in chains.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Indeed.

DAVE BAST

Just that moving idea... not the gold chain of rank of an ambassador, but the manacles of a prisoner who has gone right to the end of his life faithfully proclaiming this Good News.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and we always want to know how we can help you to dig deeper into scripture. So go to our website. It is groundworkonline.com; and suggest topics and passages for future Groundwork programs.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/ambassadors-of-christ>

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