

PREFACE

Back in the late 70s, when I was a fashion photographer in San Diego, the husband of my makeup artist—a handsome dude named Randy, whom we regularly used in some of our ads—had a bit part as an extra in a movie being shot in the city. He asked me to visit the set to get some shots of him with some of the principal actors for his portfolio.

One day they were filming in Balboa Park, in the center of the city, so I showed up to do just that. At one point the principals were sitting around on the lawn, discussing an upcoming scene, and Randy positioned himself behind them so I could shoot him with them in the foreground.

At which point another photographer approached me to question my reason for being there. He was rather defensive, pointing out that *he* was the official still photographer for the film. I quickly assured him that I wasn't there to usurp his position; I was just getting some quick shots of the flunky standing behind the group—and that none of the shots would be for publication. He accepted my explanation, but I felt kind of sorry for him. By all rights it should have been some assistant to an assistant producer who confronted me, but clearly the photographer had to protect his turf himself, on top of the actual work of chronicling the film.

The Corinthians have been challenging Paul from the outset. At some point after their conversion and Paul's departure from Corinth, some of them began returning to some of their old ways and, thus, criticizing the apostle's firm stance. They saw no harm in sitting down to a banquet with their old chums—even if it were held in a pagan temple; and they were starting to question his apostolic authority on such things because, first, he was not permitting them to support him in the manner of a “true” apostle, and, second, his position on eating food was confused (in their eyes) by his admission that he abstained when eating with Jews, but partook when eating with Gentiles ([as we will see in vv19-23](#)).

In Chapter Nine—a most remarkable, dramatic, even explosive portion of this letter—we find the apostle Paul in a similar situation as that Hollywood photographer. Since he began this letter to the Corinthians Paul has been hinting at this—especially in Chapter Four.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-4.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:9.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:14-16.

In Chapter Nine, however, he delivers a full-voiced defense of *his* turf—and of his credentials as an apostle. And we are a little embarrassed for the apostle—first that he finds it necessary, and second that it falls to him to defend himself. It shouldn't be necessary for *anyone* to defend him to the Corinthians, but it *certainly* shouldn't be necessary for him to do it himself.

v1

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord?

Right off the bat we have a discrepancy between versions—not in translation, but in the order of the first two questions. The KJVs place “Am I not an apostle?” before “Am I not free?” which is the result (as we have discussed before) of working from different manuscripts. For our purposes it is a small thing, and we needn't concern ourselves with it.

This dramatic series of rhetorical questions, delivered as if from a Gatling gun, all expect a positive reply. Each begins with the Greek *ou*, that is “not”—i.e., “is it not so?” The expected reply would be, in order, “Of course I am; of course, I have; of course you are” (Fee).

The two last rhetorical questions in v1 represent Paul's evidence for his authentic apostleship. His first claim of authenticity is that he had “seen Jesus our Lord.” It seems obvious that Paul here refers to that dramatic moment on the Damascus road—and that he considers that visitation to be something more than a mere vision. To Paul “it was a resurrection appearance of a kind with all the others” (Fee). We get that from what he writes in Chapter Fifteen of this letter.

Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.

He adds more appearances of the resurrected Christ, then, in vv7-8, he closes with

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

Paul's contention is that he received the same, in-person call to apostleship as the rest. He didn't just dream it, nor was it a waking vision. The resurrected and (in his case) ascended Christ Jesus personally appeared to him for his call. This is Paul's first piece of evidence to substantiate his apostleship.

Why is this visitation important? Because from Acts 1 we know that this was one of the criterion used by the apostles to replace Judas.

Read Acts 1:21-22.

M. R. Vincent: One who shall bear testimony: not a spectator [of].

Are you not my work in the Lord?

His second claim of authenticity is the existence of the Corinth church itself!

David Garland: The indisputable fact that they came into existence as a Christian community through his missionary preaching reveals God's grace working through his life and confirms his apostolic role.

And Paul elaborates on this in v2.

v2

If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Paul begins with statement of an unarguable fact; then he follows this with the reason it *is* a fact.

We cannot say with certainty who he refers to when Paul writes that "others" (*allos* = different) are suggesting he is not a true apostle. Does he mean some within the church, or other individuals that have come to teach the church—e.g., Cephas, Apollos (v1:12)? Or could he be referring to other Christian communities, other churches? Could it be troublemakers from outside the church, as he suggests in the second letter we have from him to the church (2 Corinthians 10-12)?

The evidence seems to be overwhelming, as we have seen, that no matter the instigators (from within or without) there were some in the Corinth church who were questioning Paul's apostolic bona fides. As far as Paul was concerned, it was inconceivable that anyone in the church could or would doubt his apostleship. Why? *Because of them!* Because there was a church in Corinth, because they were a part of that body. Because the fruit of the Spirit was evident *in* that body.

Just as some doubted Jesus, repeatedly demanding miraculous signs from Him to establish His authenticity, there were some in the church who were doubting Paul, demanding some heavenly seal of approval on what he claimed to be his apostleship. But Jesus Himself established the authenticating criterion Paul will use.

Read Matthew 7:15-20.

“You will know them by their fruits.” You will know whether a prophet—or teacher, or apostle, or even another believer—is true or false by the fruit they produce.

for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

seal = *sphragis* (sfrag-ece') = probably strengthened from <G5420> (phrasso); **a signet (as fencing in or protecting from misappropriation); by implication the stamp impressed (as a mark of privacy, or genuineness), literal or figurative :- seal.**

Sidebar: In secular Greek *sphragis* referred to the tool that seals, the stone set in the tool (the medium in antiquity), the engraving *on* the stone, and the imprint left by the stone and tool. It used to be that the seal of a Notary Public in the United States was more impressive. It literally, physically impressed into the document paper a permanent sign that the accompanying signatures were valid—far more impressive and official in appearance than today’s rubber stamp and ink.

A seal can also represent ownership and protection. And perhaps the best example we have for a “seal” in the Christian life is the indwelling Holy Spirit. Paul mentions this in the second letter to the Corinthians, but let’s look at the fuller description he offers in his letter to the Ephesians.

Read Ephesians 1:13-14.

The seal, the authenticating stamp of the Holy Spirit in each believer, constitutes a pledge by God that we will receive our inheritance in His eternal family—fellow heirs with Christ ([Romans 8:17](#)). He is also God’s seal of ownership upon the believer, as well as His protective fence encompassing the Christian’s life.

Paul is essentially saying here, *You want to see my stamp of approval? Look in a mirror!* The very existence of the church represented the authenticating seal of his apostleship—and he expands on this, switching metaphors, in his second letter.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.

The church in Corinth was the “good” fruit, and establishing letter that proved that Christ had personally commissioned Paul and sent him out to speak for Him. And here is both comforting and convicting news for *every* church: When we are faithful and obedient to His word, we become a letter of Christ’s to the world, written by the Holy Spirit. But when a church is *not* faithful and obedient to His word and teachings, it becomes a poison pen letter that effectively works *against* His kingdom and will.