

Qualities of an Ambassador 2 Corinthians 6

Several years ago, our ambassador to the United Nations made statements that caused him to be replaced that very evening. He had not obligated the United States by his statements. He revealed no secrets. He simply stated his own opinion in a public forum – an opinion shared by many and in keeping with the position of the administration. But, he had not been authorized to make that statement at that time, so he was replaced. Ambassadors cannot speak for themselves.

Other ambassadors, of course, have done far worse things: been accused of espionage, made terrible blunders in diplomacy, caused scandals. Some ambassadors have even started wars, some accidentally, some purposefully.

The position of ambassador has many pitfalls.

Ambassadors also must be well trained in political science, history, economics, etiquette, culture, language – and that’s just the beginning.

2 Corinthians 5:20 says, “We are ambassadors for Christ.” What sort of ambassadors must we be? In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul describes the qualities necessary of an ambassador for Christ so that, as he put it in verse 3, “the ministry is not discredited.”

That’s a warning that should give us pause. What if I discredit Jesus? What if I turn people away? Being an ambassador for a country takes a lot of training and study, and still, for one mistake, your career is over and you go home in disgrace.

2 Corinthians 6 is a description of God’s training program for His ambassadors.

First, an introduction to the task: 2 Corinthians 5:20 – 6:3

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain, for He says:

At the acceptable time I listened to you,
And on the day of salvation I helped you.

Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation, giving to cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited.

First, a comment on verse 2, which is a quotation from Isaiah 49:8. If we were to go back to Isaiah 49 and examine the context, we would find that this ‘now’ (now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation) is not ‘now’ as in this 24-hour period. Although many have used this line to exhort people to respond to the grace of God ‘now’ (because there may be no tomorrow), although it is a valid point, it is not in this verse. Isaiah and Paul both wanted to say that the acceptable time and the day of salvation began with the Messiah and has arrived. The ‘now’ is this age. “Now” describes the time from Jesus to the end of this world. Paul was exhorting ambassadors with the fact that they were representing a present kingdom, not a future one, that the promise had been fulfilled, it was not still waiting. God’s ambassadors come with a plan for today, not one for the future at the expense of today.

In the 3rd century, it became customary to wait until an advanced age to be baptized because the ambassadors brought the wrong message. They had only a message of death, a

message that had good news only after you were dead, instead of a message of life that starts with Jesus and continues from there, forever.

But even with such an exciting message, an ambassador can be frightened to a standstill by verse 3, “that the ministry be not discredited.” What if I mess up? Paul gives the qualities necessary to be an ambassador for Christ: first, endurance despite affliction (2 Corinthians 6:4-5)

But in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger.

How is it that these afflictions give no offense to the ministry? This does not sound like the tuxedos and limousines of the political ambassador. He would be disgraced by affliction. But God’s ambassador brings credit to the ministry by his endurance of such affliction.

Some people see hard times as a sign that your policies do not work. We certainly would say that of economic policies, or military policies. Why not religious policies? In fact, the majority of Christian denominations take exactly that position. They teach that, if bad things happen to you, it is because you sinned. The three friends of Job took that position, and God told them plainly that they were just wrong. The life of Jesus (who knew no sin it says back in 5:21) should be a vivid illustration that affliction does not mean you sinned. Paul’s point here is that affliction commends the ministry.

People are interested in learning how to cope with life. Seeing someone who does it well attracts attention. And, knowing that our own coping with bad times can commend the kingdom of God gives us one more good reason to persevere through affliction.

But, people are attracted by success, too. People who don’t have all these bad things happening to them can write books about their success stories and those books will sell. People are attracted to success; they just respect the ability to cope with affliction. People love a winner; they just admire a good sport.

That’s why churches build fancy buildings. The appearance of prosperity attracts people. The problem is whom it attracts. Who is attracted by success stories? Those attracted by success are coming for themselves. On the other hand, those attracted by coping with affliction are ready to trust someone other than themselves. That’s why endurance despite affliction commends the ministry. It attracts the right kind of people: those who have already given up on themselves and who are willing to listen to just about anyone for an answer, even God. Conversely, people who are looking to improve themselves don’t need God.

So, when things are going badly, we have an extra reason for overcoming. Our overcoming can teach others the real message of the gospel: overcoming the mess we’ve gotten ourselves into.

A second quality required of ambassadors, credentials and a message: 2 Corinthians 6:6-7:

In purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the Word of truth, in the power of God, by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.

This is the description of the ambassador’s life (pure, patient, kind, loving) and the ambassador’s learning (knowledge, in the Spirit, the Word of truth, the power of God, the weapons of righteousness). This is the ambassador’s lifestyle.

Notice some of the qualities that are missing from this list. Eloquence is missing; both Moses and Paul were poor speakers. Formal education is missing; Paul and Apollos seem the only early preachers with a higher education. Percentage-wise, the early church had about the same number of educated people as the general population. While knowledge of the Word is required of an ambassador for Christ, formal education is not.

It is the life of the ambassador (purity, patience, kindness, and genuine love) that are his credentials, and the gospel is his message.

Every ambassador has to have credentials. Whenever a new ambassador is sent to another country, he first presents his credentials to the other government. These credentials tell of his endorsement by his own government. We have no such written endorsement from God. As Paul mentioned back at the beginning of chapter 3, the church has no need of letters of recommendation. Paul was opposed to the practice that has come down to us as the ordained clergy. Paul found such endorsements counterproductive. Credentials from self-appointed religious boards defeat the purpose of an ambassador for Christ. What makes people believe that the message is actually from God are our credentials: our lives.

That makes purity tremendously important. It is our scrupulous honesty that recommends the gospel, our patience when wronged, our kindness towards the helpless and the ignorant, and our genuine love for family and friends.

It is frightening to think that shortcomings in these areas discredit the gospel and the kingdom of God.

But, credentials are not the end of the story. Once we have their attention, we must have something to say. Our lives are our credentials, but we must also have a message. An ambassador without a message has no purpose.

And this message is not just to invite people to church, or to tell them how nice the people are, or how it makes you feel. Those are nice things, but they are credentials, not a message. An ambassador must have both. Too many ambassadors for Christ have missed that – and they have no message.

Our message, as Paul describes it, is the Word of truth, the weapons of righteousness. It is knowing the Word better than any other book you have ever read. It is knowing the Word better than you know your line of work. It could get very embarrassing on Judgment Day to have to give your favorite subject, or your best skill – and it has nothing to do with God.

It is only when we know the Word that we have a message, something from the King, not just my personal opinion. Ambassadors are not allowed to express personal opinions, even if those opinions agree with those of the King. Our message, as ambassadors, is His Word, not ours.

A third quality needed by an ambassador for Christ: endurance despite slander (2 Corinthians 6:8-10)

By glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report, regarded as deceivers yet true, as unknown yet well known, as dying yet behold we live, as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.

Paul endured many slanders in his ministry. He was accused of being wishy-washy because he changed his long-range plans. He was accused of being in it for the money by one group, and was accused of not being a real messenger from God because he earned his own

living. In Jerusalem, he was almost lynched because someone accused him of taking a Gentile into the Temple. And these were the slanders of the religious people. The unreligious people whose toes Paul stepped on were worse.

All these charges were false, but they got repeated enough times that people began to believe that they were true.

A political ambassador packs up and goes home when slander comes, whether it is true or not, because his credibility is shot. Is that what happens to us? Are we so afraid of what people might make out of what needs to be done that we don't do anything? Paul hated slander, but he learned to endure it.

The early Christians were accused of being cannibals by those who only caught bits and pieces of the story of the Lord's Supper. They were accused of sacrificing babies because they attempted to rescue those victims of the birth control of the time – exposure in a bush on the edge of town. The Christians saved many, but lost many, so they constantly were having to bury babies – and the rumor started. But they continued to do it anyway.

Do we shy away from those with serious problems like those addicted to drugs or immorality because people might talk about the company we keep? But those are the people in need of the gospel – sinners like us – who are the most likely to be ready to give up trying to run their own lives. Respectable people like to think they can run their own lives, so there is no room for God.

Slander can make us back away from what is right. An ambassador needs to know how to handle slander, both how to endure it and how to overcome it.

Enduring isn't so bad. It's like a lot of other unpleasant things; just grit your teeth and get through it with prayer and the help of your friends. Slander is perhaps a little harder than some afflictions because of the injustice of it, but knowing that you are right and with the help of fellow believers, we can endure.

But what about overcoming slander? When faced with a lie, can we respond like ambassadors? Ambassadors are diplomatic. But ambassadors never back down from their message. To an ambassador, the message is far more important than I am. Paul endured slander, but he never allowed it to make him change his message.

A fourth quality required of an ambassador: openmindedness (2 Corinthians 6:11-13)

Our mouth has spoken freely to you, O Corinthians, our heart is open wide. You are not restrained by us, but you are restrained in your own affections. Now in a like exchange – I speak as to children – open wide to us also.

Paul was often accused of being narrow minded. He had no use for complicated religious theories because he knew that they only diverted people's attention from the real goals: (1) loving God because He first loved us, and (2) converting that love into an unquenchable desire to please Him because we love Him. Paul had been accused of being harsh and unfeeling because had pointed out the flaws in the Corinthians faith. But he told them here that it was not narrowmindedness that made him write this. It was because he cared.

Parents who take the time to do the very unpleasant parts of child-rearing, like discipline and correction, are often seen as narrow minded. And those who do not correct their children like to think of themselves as open minded. We can see from their results that it has nothing to do with open or narrow, but rather with putting love into action, taking a risk, doing the unpleasant so that someone else will profit.

Paul was accused by the Corinthians of retarding their development, restraining their growth. Paul said that that was not the case. Their development was restrained by misplaced allegiance, by their love for (as Paul described in detail in 1 Corinthians) fancy theories and eloquent speakers.

Paul wanted an open dialog with them (verse 13) because only in exchange do we grow.

Ambassadors for Christ seek dialog, not lecturing; exchange, not divided camps of competing theologies; open hearts, not animosity.

But, as Paul closes this description of the qualities of an ambassador for Christ, probably because the Corinthians were famous for taking everything to an extreme, Paul closes their list of qualities with the counterpoint to openness: separateness (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I will dwell in them and walk among them, and I will be their God and they will be My people. Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. "And do not touch what is unclean, and I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty.

I think Paul's primary application here is to marriage; do not be unequally yoked. But the same principle applies to all of life's relationships. We must open our hearts to unbelievers, but we must be cautious about making long-term commitments to unbelievers. There's too much difference between believers and unbelievers to make a long-term relationship work. And, as God told the Israelites very plainly, "Don't marry the pagans. They will draw you away from the one true God."

Whether it be marriage partners, close friends, or business partners, long-term relationships with unbelievers have a low probability of success. At some point, either the unbeliever will be unwilling to agree to something necessary to the believer, or the believer will compromise on God.

Objectively, we know that we should be separate from unbelievers, but it is much more difficult to practice. We have a really hard time comparing the other half of a romantic relationship to lawlessness, darkness, or the devil, as Paul described. Our unbelieving friends are nice people, or they wouldn't be our friends in the first place.

But that is Paul's requirement for ambassadors. Paul doesn't seem to think that ambassadors can consistently light up the darkness while yoked to it.

Ambassadors for Christ, in order to be successful, must have certain qualities: enduring despite affliction because it is the overcoming of bad times that illustrates what the gospel is all about; being pure and knowledgeable because every ambassador must have more than credentials, but also a message; enduring despite falsehood because Paul never changed his message for fear someone would lie about it (people will lie about us no matter what we do, so it might as well be about the truth); open-mindedness because we have open hearts, seeking dialog and not diatribe; and being separate because we just don't have that much in common with the rest of the world other than fearing for them.