

1-1-2002

Authentic Ministry: 2 Corinthians 2.14-6.10

Carl R. Holladay

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Holladay, Carl R. (2002) "Authentic Ministry: 2 Corinthians 2.14-6.10," *Leaven*: Vol. 10: Iss. 4, Article 3.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol10/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

Authentic Ministry: 2 Corinthians 2:14-6:10

CARL R. HOLLADAY

What does it mean to be called into the service (*diakonia*) of the gospel? On behalf of himself and his larger circle of associates, Paul supplies an extended answer in 2 Cor 2:14-6:10. Because these remarks have a slightly polemical edge, he may have framed them in order to contrast his own understanding of ministry with other views of ministry circulating in the congregation. Even so, they are more in the spirit of thoughtful reflections on his theology of ministry than a response to charges that had been leveled against him.

Writing in a highly compressed form that at times resembles shorthand, Paul explains why he does what he does. Whereas Paul in other letters elaborates more fully on many of the specific theological themes found here, nowhere else does Paul reflect on ministry in such a detailed, thoughtful manner. Rather than reflecting a clear, logically ordered arrangement, his remarks explore some of the basic presuppositions and themes that informed his apostolic ministry.

If ancient manuscript chapter headings are any indication, the section should begin with 2:12, where Paul mentions his inability to follow through on a mission opportunity at Troas because of his anxiety over Titus's failure to arrive with news from Corinth. If so, the remarks that follow would be prompted, once again, by "ordinary" ministerial concerns. And in any case, that is their canonical context.

MINISTERIAL SINCERITY (2 COR 2:14-17)

If ministers are captives in a triumphal procession who, as Christ's incense, make God known wherever they go—a fragrant smell to sympathetic observers, a foul odor to sneering detractors—they can scarcely take their role lightly, much less adulterate God's message by peddling it like cheap goods. A high sense of calling precludes a low sense of worth—and low motives as well.



As those who speak "from God before God in Christ" (2:17, literally rendered), ministers position themselves in the very space Christ occupies: as those sent "from God" they have God's full authority, and by doing their work "in the presence of God," they operate in full view of God. Paul stretches the metaphor of God's triumphal procession in some unusual directions. Probably drawing on the underlying metaphor of Christ's death as a sacrifice for sins, Paul portrays ministers as God's representatives who march with Christ at the end of the procession. As such, they are "handed over to death" and thereby share his destiny. This graphic image, drawn from everyday life in the Roman world, is crafted not to

develop an elaborate Christology but to produce and reinforce an elevated view of ministry. One cannot function as “Christ’s aroma,” the smoke that arises before God from the sacrificial death of Jesus, an aroma salvific to some lethal to others, without developing a profound sense of responsibility before God. To do otherwise, in Paul’s view, is ministerial malpractice.

MINISTERIAL CREDENTIALS: MOSES AND CHRIST, OLD AND NEW COVENANT (2 COR 3:1-18)

The practical problem Paul addresses here is that of letters of recommendation used to introduce ministers to churches. Does authentic ministry turn on having strong letters, or are there better ways of deciding? Obviously, other teachers had come to Corinth, presumably bearing strong letters of introduction to certify their credentials, and to that extent, they were challenging Paul’s credentials. At one level, it is an ordinary question but one with potentially serious consequences. Rather than dealing with the question pragmatically—producing a letter written on his behalf that the church could compare with the other letters—Paul responds theologically. What finally authenticates ministry, Paul insists, are the ways God, Christ, and the Spirit are present (or absent) within the minister’s church. More important than what is written “with ink” is what “the Spirit of the Living God” has written in the church’s heart(s). Divine action is what makes the church a “letter of Christ” (3:3), a living, publicly accessible document, legible to everyone—delivered but not written by Paul.

God—not Paul nor any other minister or teacher and certainly no written document—finally certifies authentic ministry. Why? Because God, through Christ, decided to relate to humanity no longer through the “letter” of the law that was “chiseled in letters on stone tablets” but through the Spirit (3:7). What prompts Paul’s midrashic exposition of Exodus 34:29-35, the account of God’s giving the law at Sinai, is a quite ordinary question: ministerial credentials and letters of introduction. Yet what emerges is a penetrating critique of the law that provides the rationale for his ministry in the service of Christ. The hard edge of his extended exposition should not be missed. Moses and Christ are seen as polar opposites, representing two different eras, two dispensations, contrasted in the sharpest possible terms.

For all of its splendor—and Paul readily concedes that the giving of the law at Sinai was a splendid moment in Israel’s history—the Mosaic covenant was fatally flawed, and God brought it to

an end through Christ. As the one who made the promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 come true, Christ, as the yes to all of God’s promises, introduced God’s “new covenant,” thereby rendering the Mosaic system an “old covenant.” Christ, then, stands at the midpoint of history, marking the end of Moses’ era and the beginning of a new era. Given this construal of God’s story, the era of Moses is seen as “fading splendor,” a temporary arrangement that eventually yielded to the “permanent splendor” of Christ’s era.

What marks the essential difference between these two eras or covenants? Paul contrasts them succinctly: letter (*gramma*) and Spirit (*pneuma*). What Paul signifies by this pair of opposites is much debated. Possibly “letter” is just another way of saying “law” (cf. Rom 2:27, 29; 7:6), but it has special force here because it points to an agreement that was written down (2 Cor 3:7). It was given by God to Moses, thus it assuredly came from God in a moment of splendid revelation. Yet the true meaning of this written code remained obscure. Just as the Israelites’ vision of Moses’ dazzling radiance was blocked by the veil that covered his face, so their understanding of Moses’ law is “veiled” when they hear it read. Somehow, what was written—“the letter”—failed to yield an unobstructed vision of God. This was achieved only by Christ, God’s life-giving Spirit, who provided unmediated access to God. In this way, free, unrestricted space is created between God and God’s people. In this space emerges a living bond stronger than anything written on

**God—not Paul nor any
other minister or teacher
and certainly no written
document—finally certifies
authentic ministry.**

paper or stone because it is sustained by a splendidly revealed God who connects with transformed human hearts. Because Christ enables the “one who turns to the Lord” to encounter God’s Spirit directly, those who serve as “ministers of the new covenant” are inescapably engaged in the “ministry of the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:8).

Seen through Paul’s eyes—the eyes of a strictly observant Pharisee who had been transformed by God’s life-giving Spirit through his experience of the risen Lord—the law of Moses was severely flawed. Trying to live under it, Paul had only experienced frustration, which is why he speaks of the “ministry of death” and the “ministry of condemnation.” In sharp contrast, whereas under the law he had experienced death, in Christ, he experienced life; whereas under the law he had felt only condemnation, in Christ he experienced

**Despair and hope may thus
live side by side, but the
experience of Christ tilts the
scales finally toward hope.**

God’s fidelity and integrity—God’s justification.

Because the old order has been set aside (2 Cor 3:11, 14) and is now superseded by the new order, in no way can Paul have truck with ministers who are aligned with the old order, even if they are doing so in the name of Christ and producing strong letters

of recommendation to back them up. Because ministry of the new covenant involves God and the people of God in a relationship of an utterly different texture, both its message and methods must be equally distinctive. Above all, they must be congruent with Christ, God’s life-giving Spirit.

To be sure, much of Paul’s tightly compressed argument remains obscure, but the upshot of his remarks is quite clear: for whatever reason, Moses, the written law and therefore the source of true knowledge about God, remains “veiled” to those who read (or hear) Torah without seeing it as bearing witness to God’s work in Christ. In Christ, by contrast, it is possible to have an unobstructed view of God, one so dazzling that it transforms the one who views God into a mirror image of God.

What is the point of this extended theological exposition of the old and new covenant? To show that authentic ministry occurs when God’s Spirit, experienced through Christ, transforms the hearts of those who fix their gaze on God’s splendor. Finally, authentic ministry is neither confirmed nor disconfirmed by letters of recommendation, however glowing.

MINISTERIAL METHODS (2 COR 4:1-6)

In a sharply apologetic tone, Paul eschews a wide range of tactics used by his opponents—secrecy, cunning, and distortion. He rebuts charges that his own gospel was “veiled”—hard to understand—by accusing his detractors of having vision obstructed by “the god of this passing age” (4:4 REB), perhaps the idolized values of “human thinking” rather than evil personified as Satan. But what is it that is actually being blocked when people try to obstruct Paul’s ministry? Not Paul himself, since he, after all, is not the content of his own preaching: “we do not preach ourselves” (4:5). Instead, as those who “proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord,” he and his associates are “your slaves for Jesus’ sake”—a highly unusual expression because Paul ordinarily characterizes himself as a “slave of Christ.”

In the proclamation of the gospel, more happens than words passing over lips. As God’s authentic minister, Paul has experienced the transformation of which he spoke earlier—confronting the dazzling splendor of God by looking not at the veiled face of Moses but at the “face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). In a revelatory event comparable to creation itself, when God brought light out of darkness, the gospel reveals Christ as “the very image of God,” as primal humanity who represents God’s imprint in a way no one else has and therefore serves as the master mold by which every human being “created in the image of God” can be measured.

This highly compressed theological exposition of God’s action in Christ draws heavily on Old Testament imagery (Gen 1:3-4, Ps 112:4, Job 37:15, Isa 9:2). It mixes imagery of new creation with the metaphor of light, which is used frequently in antiquity of divine revelation and put to quite a different use in John’s gospel. This exposition is done not as an end in itself but to establish the boundaries within which all ministerial action must be viewed. Such dazzling illumination from God exposes all secrets, all underhanded methods,

and all forms of deceit and distortion, regardless of how successful they seem. Given this understanding of God's revelation in Christ, "declaring the truth openly" (4:2 REB) is the only form of speech appropriate to authentic ministry.

MINISTRY SHAPED BY CHRIST: LIVING THE GOSPEL (2 COR 4:7-15)

"Clay jars" symbolize the fragility of ministerial existence. Any "treasure" they contain must have been put there by someone else. Whatever "transcendent power" passes through the minister's life cannot, therefore, be self-generated. Facing hardships, one can either yield finally to the pressures or stoutly resist, finding some deeper, inner resources that allow one to say, "but not . . ." (2 Cor 4:8-9). How is this done? By understanding ministerial, and by extension Christian, existence as living out of the gospel of Christ.

The contours of ministerial life are shaped by the kerygma. Just as death and life make up the complementary halves of Christ's existence, so do they form the interpretive axes of ministerial (and Christian) existence. Through experiences of "death"—suffering in all its forms especially in the service of the gospel—ministers relive Christ's suffering and death. Paul expresses this in remarkably compact form in the blessing that opens the letter: "as Christ's cup of suffering overflows, and we suffer with him, so also through Christ our consolation overflows" (1:5 NEB).

The suffering of the physical Jesus ended with his death. Yet Paul seems to envision the risen Lord continuing to experience pain as do those who suffer on his behalf. Pain is not Christ's only emotion; suffering is only half of the Christ story. The other half is the "life of Jesus," most likely, though not certainly, the resurrected life of Jesus. Although not denying the "death of Jesus," the "life of Jesus" trumps it, thereby rendering hope as a defining emotion of ministerial existence. Despair and hope may thus live side by side, but the experience of Christ tilts the scales finally toward hope. As the one who exemplified death finally yielding to life, Christ engenders a pattern of living where despair finally yields to hope.

This struggle between death and life, between despair and hope, is carried out in the human body, the one thing every person and Jesus have in common. *Paul lives from the gospel by living within the gospel.* Life so defined means that suffering experienced for the sake of the gospel is seen as an extension of Christ's suffering. Christ's death gets relived as

those "in Christ carry in the body the death of Jesus" and are "handed over to death for Jesus' sake." The other word of the gospel, however, the "life of Jesus," while not denying the first word, has the last word. Whether Paul has in mind the fully free yet fully obedient human Jesus exemplifying authentic existence before God or the resurrected Jesus exemplifying life triumphing over death, the creative, irrepressible, and hopeful dimension of Jesus also finds

a home "in our mortal flesh." As it does in the minister, it enlivens the church: "death is at work in us, life in you" (4:12). As the vicarious death of Jesus benefits the minister who replicates the Christ event by living the gospel, so this cycle of "death giving way to life" within the minister gives life to the church. By living out of the gospel, the minister experiences life. By seeing the creative power of the gospel exemplified in the minister's life, the church itself learns to appropriate and experience new life.

Confidence in proclaiming the gospel is grounded in confident faith; before one can speak with conviction, one must believe with conviction. Paul draws this conclusion from Ps 116:10 (Ps 115:1 LXX). The root conviction of authentic Christian ministry is faith in the one who raised Jesus from the dead (4:14). As something we know, this conviction serves as the authorizing warrant for all Christian proclamation and action. Equally clear, however, are its corporate implications. Ministers and their faithful churches, or, in this case, Paul, his associates, and the Corinthian church, all share in God's resurrection "with Jesus"; "God . . .

Yet to affirm the gospel is to affirm life and the possibility that a person can actually get stronger through the renewal of one's inner resources, a weakening body notwithstanding.

will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence” (4:14). God’s action in Christ thus extends to both minister and church who together experience resurrection life “with Jesus.” It is ultimately for communities of faith, “members of Christ,” that the God of life acts: “everything is for your sake” (4:15).

THE GOSPEL SHAPES THE PRESENT AND FUTURE (2 COR 4:16-5:10)

With seasonal changes come decay and renewal, but this cycle takes on a different meaning when categories for living are drawn from the gospel rather than nature. Refracted through the lens of the gospel, human life is seen to have both an outer and inner dimension. By outer nature and inner nature, Paul does not mean the soul/body distinction typical of much ancient thought, where, in its Platonic form, the soul is understood as immortal—without beginning or ending—taking up residence in a human body where it remains imprisoned until released at death and freed to repeat the cycle in a future series of bodies. Seen this way, bodies decay while the eternal soul lives on. Paul does, however, concede the fragility of bodily existence and the gradually deteriorating strength that comes with age, the pressures of living, and battling for survival. The body, as Paul’s own experience confirmed, wastes away.

Yet to affirm the gospel is to affirm life and the possibility that a person can actually get stronger through the renewal of one’s inner resources, a weakening body notwithstanding. Living out of the gospel means bucking the trend of deteriorating strength by refocusing one’s understanding of strength. Looking through the lens of the gospel, Paul thus envisions a form of human existence appropriate to life with God. Whether it is seen as a new dwelling or as a new garment that one slips on over the (living) body, the outlook is one of hope not despair. Having already tasted God’s future by experiencing the Spirit, those in Christ can expect full payment eventually.

Living the gospel concretely means acknowledging death—the fragility of human existence—yet affirming life—the capacity for experiencing inward renewal. Perspective is critical. How is reality defined? By what is seen with the eyes or by what is seen with the eyes of faith? By present reality experienced with the senses or by another eternal reality that is actually more real? Living the gospel points to transcendent reality, where God, Christ, and the Spirit are the prime realities.

Because God already has been experienced as decisively involved in human history, it is possible for those shaped by God’s action in Christ to live in the present with an eye fixed, though not fixated, on the future, leaning into the future with hope not despair. By extending the kerygma into ministerial (and Christian) existence, Paul provides interpretive categories that enable us to make sense of who we are and what we do “in Christ” and that also enable us to live not by what we see but by what we believe: “we walk by faith and not by sight” (5:7).

MOTIVES FOR MISSION: CHRIST’S COMPELLING LOVE, NEW CREATION, AND THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION (2 COR 5:11-6:10)

With all the abuses that come with persuasive speech, especially when spoken in the name of the gospel, a Lord to be feared and a God before whom our lives lie open serve as healthy antidotes. But Paul also hopes to have a place in the heart of the Corinthians. Solicitous of their good will, he targets those who operate with a different understanding of ministry who, as he characterizes them, fixate on outward behavior rather than inner dispositions and motives. To these opponents, Paul’s behavior must have seemed bizarre. “Beside himself” probably expresses their view (5:13). His ministerial behavior, how the church views him, how he views the church and his critics, and how they all relate to each other—this set of issues prompts Paul to engage in further theological reflections in which he is forced once again to probe even more deeply the significance of God’s action in Christ.

Throughout this section, the missionary impulse is evident. It opens with words about persuasion and concludes with a direct appeal to the Corinthians: “be reconciled to God” (5:20) and “(do not) accept the grace of God in vain” (6:1). Such overt appeals may not be addressed to nonChristians, but they are not for

that reason any less strong as missionary appeals. They are appeals being made to the Corinthians on behalf of the gospel. As his concluding “hardship list” makes clear (6:4-10), Paul is operating in a very defensive posture. He wishes to remove all obstacles coming between him and his church, hoping to convince them of his fault-free ministry (6:3).

Thus, once again, at stake are the credibility of Paul’s own ministry with the Corinthian church and the viability of his relationship with them. A network of living, human relationships, forged over time and nurtured by sweat and tears, hangs in the balance. Perhaps this accounts for why some of his most profound theological probings of the Christ event occur within this context.

As before, we detect basic beliefs widely shared by other early Christians informing Paul’s reflections: “one man (Christ) died for all” (5:14), Christ’s compelling love (5:14), Christ “who knew no sin” (5:21). In one sense, these creedal statements may seem ordinary, but Paul draws some quite extraordinary conclusions from them. Utterly unexpected is the conclusion he draws from Christ’s vicarious death: not, “therefore all might live,” but “therefore all have died!” (5:14). What does he mean by this much-disputed phrase? He probably means that Christ’s death for all has enabled everyone *potentially* to experience a death to the self comparable to what Christ experienced when he died obediently, yielding his will to God. Christ’s death somehow symbolized humanity’s fate. At least, Paul’s hope is that those who share the benefits of Christ’s death “might live no longer for themselves” but for Christ (5:15). The effect is quite clear; properly understood, the death of Christ establishes new norms for human behavior that, when taken seriously, create different criteria for judging ministerial, especially Paul’s, performance.

What God accomplished in Christ was the bringing together of God and the world—a cosmic reconciliation in which divine forgiveness was extended to sinful humanity.

Equally practical in their implications are his remarks in 5:16-21, certainly one Pauline passage that has heavily influenced Christian notions of Christ’s atoning death—and justifiably so. At issue, however, is what it means to think “from a human point of view,” literally “according to the flesh” (*kata sarka*). Paul apparently thinks this aptly characterizes the viewpoint of his critics. In his view, they utterly fail to grasp the nature of his apostolic calling and the relationship between his form of ministry and his understanding of the Christian kerygma.

Does *kata sarka* function as an adjective modifying Christ or as an adverb modifying the way Paul once knew Christ? If the former, he would appear to be disclaiming interest in the physical, human figure Jesus, which, in the view of some scholars, would account for his relatively infrequent references to Jesus’ life and words. The latter would shift the emphasis somewhat, suggesting that he had indeed once known of, perhaps even seen, the figure Jesus, but that he had failed to see God at work in him—he had viewed him in essentially human terms, as Jesus, rather than Jesus Christ. Either way, Paul’s perspective on Christ is now radically altered. What God did in Christ has its only counterpart in creation, not in the giving of the law at Sinai, or in God’s covenant with Abraham.

God’s action in Christ must be seen as an event in which history turned a corner, when the “turn of the ages” occurred, when God effectively started over again, creating a new universe of possibilities. The one who is incorporated into Christ steps, as it were, into this new order, becoming part of its transformative, renewing process. Being “in Christ” is to experience the outburst of energy unleashed by the creator God, thus a “new creation.” To be “in Christ” is to participate in a “new creation” and to become part of a re-ordered world as well as an active agent in the reordering of that world. This occurs at both the individual and corporate level—within the person so incorporated into Christ and within the community of faith who lives in Christ’s “space.” Had Paul known nuclear metaphors, he might have likened God’s action in Christ to

an atom-splitting event, one that forever changed both the universe and the human universe of meaning not only by reconfiguring human perceptions of life and death but also by releasing sheer residual energy.

The particular form that the “new creation” takes is reconciliation. What God accomplished in Christ was the bringing together of God and the world—a cosmic reconciliation in which divine forgiveness was extended to sinful humanity. Christ becomes the person and event through whom God reaches out to humans in an embrace of reconciliation. Whether in Christ defines the sphere or the means of reconciliation, Christ is the prototypical sinless martyr whose death benefits sinful humanity. One shameful, innocent death—shameful in every way—enables others to experience life in the goodness of God. Once again, Paul draws on a widely held Christian conviction: Christ “knew no sin” (5:21; cf. John 7:18, 8:46; Heb 4:15, 7:26; 1 Pet 1:19, 2:22, 3:18; 1 John 3:5). His own distinctive understanding, however, is reflected in his insistence that “for our sake God made him to be sin.” In what sense? That Christ identified with sinful humanity by becoming flesh (Rom 8:3)? Or that by being crucified, he took on the curse of transgressing the law (Gal 3:13)? Or perhaps in some other sense. In any case, Paul is pushing traditional Christian belief in a new direction.

Through it all, God is the prime actor: “all this is from God” (5:18). Having accomplished this “macro-reconciliation,” God brings about “micro-reconciliation” between individual human beings and within communities of faith through those who have been commissioned by God as ministers of reconciliation (5:18). The initiative is fully God’s, yet God has embraced ministers as coworkers. The frame of reference here may be more cosmic, but it merely states in a different form the reality Paul expressed in 1:21-22—a community of faith in solidarity with its minister(s), both seen as living in the presence of a faithful God who sustains them as faithful disciples of Christ who have received God’s Spirit.

What form of ministry derives from this theological perspective? Above all, ministers see themselves as “servants of God” (6:4) who, on one hand experience “death” by suffering hardships (6:5) but on the other hand exhibit “life” by living above reproach. Above all, they exemplify the paradoxical existence that comes with living the gospel—confronting false charges, harsh realities, and the skewed perceptions of others with confident counter-assertions that derive from faith having a firm center of gravity.

CARL R. HOLLADAY

Dr. Holladay teaches New Testament at the Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

