

The Perspective of an Aging Apostolic Worker

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KINGDOM KERNELS

As success in ministry rises, it is so easy for our own self-estimation to rise with it—especially in the world of church planting movements. If a movement breaks out, then surely we were a key in that process. How easy for us to trot out our achievements in conversation and to become at least a bit more self-assured of our unique gifts and abilities.

What is the proper attitude for a movement catalyst as we become more fruitful in ministry?

Without a doubt, Paul the Apostle is the example most apostolic workers¹ in the world look to as a benchmark. To be able to declare that there is no place left for our foundation-laying ministry is an amazing aspiration (Rom 15:23)

If we emulate Paul’s **ministry**, should we not also emulate his **attitude**? As Paul progressed from one degree of success to the next, how did his heart progress? In our endeavors, we must constantly balance the twin areas of attitude and aptitude. David is an example of this:

So he shepherded them according to the *integrity* of his heart, And guided them with his *skillful* hands. (Psa. 78:72, NASB, emphasis added)

To see how Paul’s attitude progressed as his aptitude and impact increased, let’s look at the three times Paul describes himself in superlatives—greatest or least. I invite you to open your Bible and reference it at every point in this journey.

Ephesus circa 54 A.D.: “Least of the Apostles” [1 Cor. 15:1-10]

The context is the greatest of the movements Paul helped catalyze: the Asian Province outreach from Ephesus. Paul has just finished two very successful missionary journeys. He has had further-ranging impact than any of the twelve Apostles. It appears from the Scripture that kingdom movements have emerged in six provinces (Cyprus, Phrygia, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and now Asia).

In the midst of this success, Paul is being attacked by religious leaders who are denigrating Paul’s apostleship and elevating others as “super-apostles” (2 Cor. 12:12).

In the face of such success, what would our response be to these attacks? Would we justify ourselves and rank our ministry results against others? What did Paul do?

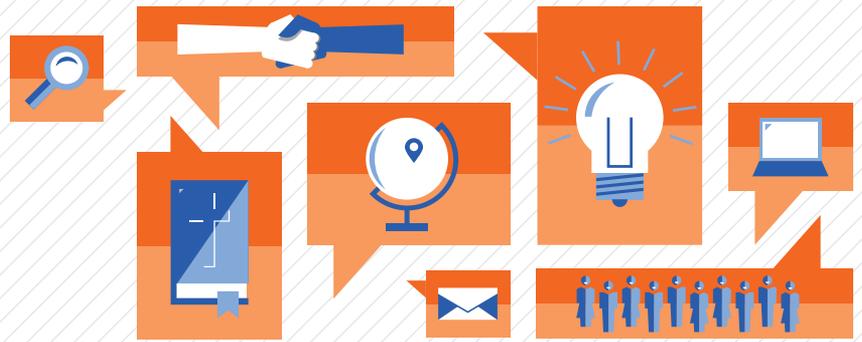
Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am *the least of the apostles*, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Cor. 15:8-9, ESV, emphasis added)

Where does Paul rank himself? It is not just that he is fulfilling an apostolic (missionary foundation-laying) work, he is actually an Apostle of Christ (e.g. 1 Cor. 1:1) just as Peter is an Apostle of Christ (1 Pet. 1:1). He is in that special never-to-be-repeated category of Apostles designated by Christ with special authority and a Scripture-giving role.

Where does Paul rank himself among that august company? Last. The attitude of the least.

Paul displays growing humility throughout his ministry, which genuinely demonstrates his heart attitude. 1 Corinthians 15 is just our first of three stops through the progression of his life. Each stop will

¹ In this article, I normally refer to an apostolic worker as someone who enters an unchurched area and lays the foundation for a kingdom movement by bringing the gospel and establishing churches where they had not been before. Context will indicate if I am describing the unique role of the original Apostles.



show increasing humility rather than increasing self-importance. **Increasing humility throughout life is the foundation for God to do a great work.**

The secret to such an attitude is a progression of understanding demonstrated in each of our three texts. The refrains of this progression grow louder through the chronology of Paul’s life. At the apex of ministry effectiveness (see Acts 19:10 for the impact of two years in Ephesus), Paul displays amazing humility.

Amazement at the Gospel

In 1 Cor. 15:1-7, Paul describes as of “first importance” the good news of Christ’s atoning work—His death, His burial and His resurrection for our salvation. Paul has been preaching this gospel for years, yet each year he is more amazed that Christ would die for

sinners. Look at Romans, written just after this:

For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:7-8, ESV)

Paul is amazed at the gospel he preaches—the totally unmerited and unearned salvation initiated by God. How often as years tick by do our hearts become less amazed by the gospel? We have become so familiar with the story that it loses its power to humble us once again.

Understanding of personal sinfulness and unworthiness

Into the context of the gospel, our personal inability and unworthiness to merit any of that salvation should only be magnified. Instead, the merits

of our ministry lure us to ignore our inherent unworthiness. Instead, status goes to our heads. “I’m pretty special after all.” Effectiveness in ministry can lead us down a path of increasing Pharisaical pride rather than apostolic humility.

Paul felt the weight of his unworthiness to be an apostle, for he was a persecutor of the church (1 Cor. 15:9). Paul genuinely ranked himself the lowest of the Apostles of Christ, for he knew his past and knew his sinful heart.

Reliance upon grace alone

Knowing his past and his inherent inadequacies, Paul acknowledged that his personal godliness and his ministry effectiveness were solely by God’s grace—the favor and anointing of God on his life (1 Cor. 15:10). His success came not from effective ministry models, personality type, spiritual gift-set or work ethic. These were contributors. Paul says that he “worked harder” than the rest of the apostles but in the next breath says, “not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (v.10).

Grace does not mean that we do not work hard. It just means that our hard work is reliant upon the proper source of power—the Spirit of God.

Effective ministry as a grateful by-product

Paul calls himself the hardest working of the apostles (1 Cor. 15:10) not because he needed to earn his salvation

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or do penance. Rather, Paul was so grateful for his salvation that he worked diligently to express his love to God. He could do this through fulfilling the stewardship he had received (1 Cor. 4:2).

Paul ardently desired great results so that he could offer these to his Lord as a gift one day (Rom. 15:16). Paul aspired to the salvation of multitudes from the nations. But all of this was a by-product of his salvation and his reliance upon the grace of God rather than his inherent gifting and personality, much less techniques and methodologies.

We labor diligently to equip Church-Planting Movement catalysts to be effective in their biblical methodologies. But it is all for naught without an attitude of humility fully reliant upon the grace of God. Until these workers see that God alone provides the increase, just as Paul did twelve chapters earlier (1 Cor. 3:7), no lasting results emerge.

At the height of Paul's ministry, the pattern of humility is set. As his life goes on from here, the pattern only deepens. The perspective of an aging apostle is one of increasing humility.

In prison circa 60 A.D.: "Least of All Believers (saints)" [Eph. 3:1-12]

As Paul's ministry and influence increases, we would expect to see his sense of his unworthiness decrease and his evaluation of himself become less harsh.

Fast forward six years: what is Paul's personal assessment?

To me, though I am *the very least of all the saints*, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. (Eph. 3:8, ESV, emphasis added)

Paul has taken himself down a notch. Previously, at least we could say he was a great apostle, even if he claims to be the least of that small band. But six years later, Paul demotes the title he gives himself. Now he is no longer the least of the apostles but the least of all Christians ("saints" is the term for believers).

How can Paul take this next step? Relative perspective. As God deepens Paul's perspective of the magnificence of the gospel, Paul's relative sinfulness grows in comparison as does his need to absolutely rely upon God alone for any fruit.

The progression of 1 Corinthians 15 holds true here as well because it is the perspective of his life.

Paul is **amazed at the gospel** and the mystery it had long held that all nations

would be blessed through it (vv. 4-6). Now, Paul magnifies this gospel as "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (v.8).

In relation to that, Paul is astounded that God would choose him of all people to receive this new life. Now he calls himself "less than the least of all saints" (v. 8), and is even more amazed that God would choose him as an instrument of His work (vv. 7-8).

So, he must labor by grace alone. In fact, he qualifies this grace as a gift from God; he (Paul) did nothing to merit this grace for his ministry. As a result, ministry is a by-product of his gratitude. He feels immense privilege to have been entrusted it as a stewardship by God (v. 2). Paul's relative importance in the grace equation is lessening.

In prison circa 63 A.D.: "Foremost of all sinners" [1 Tim. 1:8-16]

Fast forward three more years. Paul is near the end of his life and in prison again. Finally, Paul stops calling himself the least. Now he is finally the greatest... sinner! In our current age of fanning the flames of self-worth, Paul appears to nosedive toward a self-destructive self-image. In actuality, Paul has finally arrived at the truest image of himself.



At the end of his life, Paul's amazement has grown beyond bounds. It is almost as if words cannot express his praise . . . "the gospel of the **glory** of the **blessed** God" (v.10). The good news is filled with glories we can only partly understand because they come from the blessed God of heaven.

Are you more amazed at the gospel than you were last year?

Why is Paul so amazed? Because he understands how despicable he was (inserting himself right after a chain of sinful people [vv. 9-10 e.g. enslavers, murderers, etc.]). In that company, he calls himself a former blasphemer, persecutor and opponent and still the chief of sinners ("I am foremost" v.15).

Paul recognizes at the end of his life how deep the sin is from which he was plucked and made a child of God. Paul recognizes that his heart is still being sanctified and is still prone to evil. One misstep could lead him down a path of sinfulness like Demas.

Think about this for a moment. You do not know anyone else's heart, but

you know your own. You know how easy it is to give in to temptation, to be hypocritical in thinking, to judge others in your heart, etc.

The older I get, the more I know that my heart is prone to evil, that I am not as good as others think I am, that I am not living for God's glory to my full potential, that my mind still entertains temptations. I cannot speak for anyone else, only myself. Like Paul, when I see the dark places of my heart and the weaknesses still there, I must say, "I am the foremost of sinners. I am utterly amazed God saved me by grace!" It could be done either way, but here the comma and quotation marks seem cleaner.

As self-worth decreases we can allow God-worth to be our identity. We see our relative importance in the grace equation. We can increasingly rest in our identity in Christ and live with greater faith that this glorious God is able to do, even through us, exceedingly more than all we ask or think. In this attitudinal equation, our ministry, like Paul's, can become extremely fruitful because it is God who is appointing us to service (v.12).

Which direction is your perspective moving?

I've seen the perspectives of workers in God's kingdom move both directions as they age. Some scorn the idea that we come to this grace equation depraved and helpless. As they progress in proficiency in ministry, their self-worth increases but their God-gratitude decreases. More and more, they credit their effectiveness to their personal gifts and methodologies. This moves them very close to two forms of idolatry: method-olatry and gift-olatry. This is the opposite of "take heed lest you fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). I say with tears that colleagues who have scorned Paul's perspective have since crashed morally.

It is not that Paul was less confident as he grew older. Just the opposite. But for Paul it was a perspective of his relative importance in the grace equation. Paul's relevant importance was one of surrender. All the increase was from God.

Oh, may we, like Paul, grow in amazement at the glory of the gospel, that God would save someone like us, equip us by his grace and call us to bear fruit with grateful hearts! 