

“The Signs of a True Apostle”

2 Corinthians 12:11-13

Theme: Those who laid the foundation of the church were a unique group of men, personally chosen and empowered by Christ.

Introduction: The church did not emerge out of human strategy or religious innovation. It was established by the will of God, built upon the unshakable foundation laid by Christ through a unique group of men—His apostles. These were not self-appointed leaders, but personally chosen by the risen Lord, endowed with divine authority, and empowered to speak and act on His behalf. Their ministry was not about charisma, popularity, or worldly credentials, but about bearing the marks of true apostleship—suffering, perseverance, and the power of God visibly at work.

In 2 Corinthians 12:11–13, the Apostle Paul defends his apostleship not to elevate himself, but to preserve the integrity of the gospel and the church, which had been infiltrated by false teachers. Though he calls himself “foolish” for having to make a defense, Paul reminds the Corinthians that his ministry bore all the signs of a genuine apostle. He had not failed them or fallen short of the other apostles—in fact, the only thing he withheld was being a financial burden to them. **[Read Text]**

This passage teaches us not only to recognize and value true spiritual authority but also to appreciate the unique and foundational role the apostles played in the early church. This role cannot be duplicated or replaced. As we study Paul’s defense, we will consider:

- I. **The Authenticity of Authority (v. 11)** – Paul’s apostleship was genuine, even though he had been forced to defend it.
- II. **The Authentication of Authority (v. 12)** – God confirmed his authority through perseverance, signs, wonders, and miracles.
- III. **The Administration of Authority (v. 13)** – Paul exercised his authority with integrity and love, never burdening the church financially.

These verses remind us that the authority Christ gave His apostles was both supernatural and servant-hearted. It was through men like Paul that God built His church—and through their inspired writings that we continue to be strengthened today. The theme of these verses is: ***Those who laid the foundation of the church were a unique group of men, personally chosen and empowered by Christ.***

I. The Authenticity of Authority – *12:11*

A. The Absent Commendation

1. The Corinthians’ confusion regarding apostleship and which teachers can be trusted has prompted the Apostle Paul to defend his apostolicity against the usurpation by the false teachers.
2. In the process, he has had to stoop to “speaking their language” for the Corinthians to respect his credibility as a genuine servant of

Christ.

3. As such, Paul again rebukes the Corinthians that he has needed to do this – *“I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me.”*
4. He felt forced to boast in order to gain their respect – something he ought not to have had to do.
5. As he has listed the sacrifices he has made throughout chapter 11, as well as the humility he has found through the grace of God and his thorn in the flesh, the Corinthians had no ability to compare the claims of the false teachers with the Apostle Paul.
6. They should have recognized the distinguished ministry of Paul – *“Actually, I should have been commended by you ...,”* but I have not been!

B. The Appropriate Commendation

1. Indeed, the appropriate commendation is claimed by Paul – *“I should have been commended by you”* - [συνίστημι] – lit. = “to stand together or with” to the degree they would put their own reputations on the line to recommend Paul and his message.
2. He then uses a bit of sarcasm – *“... for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles ...”*
 - a) Some believe he is comparing himself with the 12 Apostles and declaring that his apostolicity is just as legitimate as theirs.
 - b) However, the phrase *“most eminent”* [ὑπερλίαν] – refers to “super apostles” or those beyond measure, a term of hyperbole in light of the false teachers’ claims about themselves.
3. Instead of the Corinthians vouching for Paul and his authority as an Apostle, they had considered him *“a nobody”* – *“... even though I am a nobody”* in your eyes.

II. The Authentication of Authority – 12:12

A. The Perseverance of the Signs

1. His point is clearly made by claiming his authority as established by the way that he performed the ministry of an Apostle: *“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance ...”*
2. Despite their resistance, rebellion, and rejection, Paul continued to serve the Lord among them as an *“apostle”* of Jesus Christ.
3. *“were performed”* is a passive reference indicating that the source of Paul’s abilities in ministry was from outside of him – sourced in God

Himself, specifically, Jesus Christ, who sent Him.

4. The authenticating of his apostleship was constant in their midst despite their receptivity.
5. His authority was not imputed by them, derived from them, nor was his ability to perform miracles dependent upon the level of their faith, but despite the Corinthians, Paul continued to do what only those sent by Christ can do.
 - a) *Only thirteen men entered the church age identified as Apostles of the Lord Jesus Christ – cp. Peter, James (son of Zebedee), John, Andrew, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Thaddaeus, Simon the Zealot, Matthias, and Paul.*
 - b) *Several others were also called “apostles,” but were sent by the church, not by Christ Himself – Barnabas, Andronicus, Junius, James (Jesus’ brother), Epaphroditus, and a few others.*
6. Such perseverance under adversity and persecution was not characteristic of false teachers who abandon the flock when it becomes difficult or dangerous – cp. [*John 10:11-13*](#).

B. The Purpose of the Signs

1. He was enabled to do these things to verify his identity as an apostle and the corresponding authority.
2. The issue of such “*signs*” was to demonstrate that Paul was indeed “*a true apostle ...*”
3. Thus, not just anyone could perform such feats in the name of Christ Jesus – but it was exclusive to the apostles.
4. The unique characteristics of the Apostles include:¹
 - a) *They were chosen directly by God for their ministry – [*Galatians 1:15*](#).*
 - b) *They were personally appointed by Jesus Christ – [*John 15:16*](#).*
 - c) *They had to have been eyewitnesses of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection – [*Acts 1:21-22*](#).*
 - d) *They had to receive the gospel by direct revelation from Jesus Christ, not other men – [*Galatians 1:11-12*](#).*
 - e) *They served to lay the foundation of the church – [*Ephesians 2:19-20*](#).*
 - f) *They were promised a unique place of honor in the future – [*Matthew 19:27-28*](#).*
5. Additionally, they were given special gifts enabling them to

¹ MacArthur, pp. 410-413

authenticate their ministry “signs of a true apostle.” – cp. [Acts 2:43; 5:12](#).

6. By the time the book of Hebrews was written, the “*signs of a true apostle*” were all referred to in the past tense, demonstrating that not only did the Apostles cease, but so did the “*signs, wonders, and miracles.*” - [Hebrews 2:3-4](#).
 - a) “*signs*” [σημεῖον] – lit. A distinguishing mark whereby something is known, sign, token, indication.²
 - b) “*wonders*” [τέρας] – lit. something that astounds because of transcendent association, prodigy, portent, omen, wonder³
 - c) “*miracles*” [δύναμις] – lit. the exercise of power or force, generally refers to something that overrules or suspends the laws of nature.
 - (1) “*Miracles*” were typically used by God to highlight when He was initiating a new era of divine revelation – clustered around Moses & Joshua, then Elijah & Elisha, and finally Christ & the Apostles.
 - (2) They were also typically performed through a human agent God would use to reveal truth – [Acts 2:22](#).

III. The Administration of Authority – [12:13](#)

A. The Abundance of the Confirmation of Authority

1. With such profound evidence all around them, they still struggled to distinguish between authentic and inauthentic individuals.
2. Paul again desires for the Corinthians to answer a question – “*For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches...?*”
3. Clearly, the Corinthians were treating Paul as inferior to the rest of the teachers who were claiming to be apostles.
4. Paul turns that around and wants them to point to the kids of abuses the false teachers are perpetrating against them – cp. [11:20](#).
5. He has done nothing but love them well since they, too, are those for whom Christ died.

² William Arndt et al., [A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 920.

³ Ibid., 999.

B. The Absence of the Clout of Authority

1. He states that his only “offense” was failing to burden them to provide for Paul physical needs, although he had every right to do so – cp. 1 Corinthians 9:11-12, 18.
2. He said, “... *except that I myself did not become a burden to you...*”
3. “*burden*” [καταναρκάω] – conveys that Paul, having been given wisdom from above, knew that their attitudes were such that any financial obligation associated with Paul’s ministry among them would be a “*burden*” or produce the accusation that he was “shaking them down.”
4. In sarcasm, Paul apologizes – “*Forgive me this wrong!*”

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a unique group of men, personally chosen and
empowered by Christ.**