

Paul is writing this final section of the letter to deal with challenges to his apostolic authority before he arrives on his third visit to Corinth. The accusation against him of duplicity and weakness, which is reported here, is answered by Paul in his claim to be consistent. Being consistent is not the same as acting uniformly. Paul's example of consistency here helps us understand what consistency means.

I. His actions were consistent with his divine commissioning.

The beginning of verse 7 can be understood as a declaration (as in the NIV), a question ("Are you only looking on the surface of things?"), or as a command (as in the ESV, "Look at what is before your eyes!"). The latter explains best the immediate context of verse 7b and 8. "Look at the evidence!"

A literal rendering of the rest of verse 7 highlights the self-confidence of Paul's opponents, "If anyone [or a certain one] is confident in himself that he is Christ's ..." They were claiming to be agents of Christ, apostles, but were questioning Paul's claim to the same. Apostolic authority is the issue at hand, and will be throughout this section. But let such a person and all the Corinthians consider the facts once again, that Paul has at least as much proof and actually much more that he is an agent of Christ.

A representative of Christ could be expected to act like Jesus did. Paul exhorted with the meekness of Christ (v 1). Jesus claimed and demonstrated meekness and gentleness, but yet he acted with boldness and forcefulness (cleansing the temple, rebuking the Pharisees, etc.). Jesus was not hypocritical and neither was Paul. Paul was being consistent with his divine commissioning. We need to act consistent with our "callings" as well, as parents, spouses, children, etc.

Paul was not concerned about what anyone would find if they investigated his credentials (v 8). Examine the evidence and nothing would arise that would put him to shame. Paul had acted consistent with his divine commissioning.

II. His actions were consistent with the purpose of that authority.

Parenthetically Paul states that the purpose of his authority was to build up others and not to tear them down. This matches what Paul writes elsewhere, where the word is alternately translated build up, edify, or edification. Specifically in Ephesians 4:12 apostles (such as Paul) and others are given to the church to equip believers for ministry for the building up of the body of Christ. Cf. Ephesians 4:16, 29; Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 14:26.

By calling the Corinthians to look at the evidence, Paul is claiming that he used his authority to build up believers and not to tear them down. There is the unspoken question, if his opponents also lived up to this purpose.

A ministry of "building up" does not contradict verses 4-5, where Paul spoke of tearing down strongholds and arguments that were contrary to God. Sometimes it is necessary to destroy what is wrong, before what is good can be built on a right foundation. Cf. Jeremiah 1:10.

Paul did at times write boldly and strongly. But he wrote that way to help them grow spiritually, to mature, and to care for the spiritual health of the Body of Christ. Writing that was not intended to frighten them (v 9), nor was it a tactic to frighten them to action. They were intended to build up.

Although we do not have apostolic authority, we should not accept the notion that we have no right to speak to the sin problems in other people's lives. Sin must be corrected. The authority which we have is the Word of God, defining for us right from wrong. The Spirit of God works in hearts and minds. He produces the fruit by which we correctly interact with people. All that works toward the goal of building up the Body of Christ.

III. His actions were consistent with the need.

Someone once said, "Nothing is more unfair than treating unequals equally." Neither people nor situations are identical. Acting identically is therefore only a superficial consistency and not a true consistency of character.

Jesus Christ, who was full of grace and true, demonstrated the character of God. He was gentle and compassionate, but spoke the truth, calling sin "sin".

God also must change His actions, i.e., "repent", to be consistent with His character. E.g., God changed His plans toward Nineveh when they repented.

Paul similarly responded differently in different situations in order to consistently portray the character of Christ. He exhorted "by the meekness and gentleness of Christ" (v 1) but warned of his readiness to punish continued disobedience (v 7).

The charges against Paul (v 10) were actually an evidence of his graciousness, giving them a chance to repent so that he would not have to be harsh when present. Never-the-less to be consistent, he would be just as "weighty and forceful" when present, if they did not change.

When the need or situation changes, it changes how we should act in order to remain consistent with the character we should have. This is true with God. It should be true with all those who seek to follow Christ.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that one solution fits all situations. It would certainly make it easier if that were the case. It is true that the truth of the Bible never changes. We deal with similar situations differently in order to be consistent.

Paul could give his opponents a clear and reasonable answer. He acted differently at different times to remain consistent. We, too, need to live consistency, especially to live a life matching the high calling of being a child of God (Eph 4:1). The closer we are to people, the greater is our need for consistency. Let each ask God to reveal his or her own inconsistencies and ask for strength to change.