

Paul was defending himself against charges of being unreliable because he had changed his plans about visiting the Corinthians. But the change in plans had good reasons. Even when we plan correctly, we are sometimes faced with a similar challenge of knowing when it is right and acceptable to change plans without be accused of a lack of integrity. Paul's example can give us some guidance.

The historical situation

1. The complete picture is uncertain: Who is the offender (2:5ff)? What is the “severe” letter (2:4)? What was the previous visit (2:1)?
 - a. Most modern scholarship suggests that someone had personally affronted Paul on a previous and hence painful visit resulting in his sending a “severe” letter which is now lost. Traditional scholarship (prior to the last century) identifies the offender with the incestuous man of 1 Cor 5. The “severe” letter 1 Corinthians. There is an unrecorded previous visit, but associated with the current issue. Paul is wishing to avoid his next visit being painful.
 - b. My preference is for the traditional position. However, it appears that knowledge of the complete historical situation is not necessary to get from this passage that which God wants.
2. Certain details about the historical situation are clear: Paul had planned a visit, which he then cancelled to spare them pain (cf 1:23; 2:1). Instead he wrote a letter.

Four observations concerning the reasons for Paul's changed plans

1. Paul did not cancel his visit in order to avoid the issue or avoid confrontation.
 - a. Paul did not avoid the issue because he wrote, and obviously from his heart (2:4).
 - b. Paul will later write that his letters and personal presence are mutually consistent (2 Corinthians 10:10-11). His letters were not a way to avoid dealing with problems or to avoid dealing with them face to face.
2. Paul chose a manner of dealing with the problem that would minimize the pain and increase the joy.
 - a. Paul wanted to spare them (1:23), avoid a painful visit (2:1), and not grieve them (2:2).
 - b. Paul also wanted to increase the joy: working with them for their joy (1:24), understanding they were the source of his joy (2:2-3), and being confident that they would share his joy (2:3).

Avoiding a situation to temporarily avoid discomfort is not an acceptable solution. It is, however, acceptable to consider the bigger total picture and seek to minimize the total pain and maximize the joy. It can require having an eternal perspective. We may change plans in light of greater values that God has placed upon us.
3. By writing instead of visiting Paul was assuming a level of spiritual maturity in the Corinthians.

Paul gives numerous indicators of his confidence in their spiritual maturity – despite the immaturity expressed in 1 Corinthians.

 - a. He was confident of God's work in them (1:21-22).
 - b. He elevates them to a level of “co-workers for your joy” (1:24). By visiting Paul's very presence as an apostle could have easily overshadowed their own spiritual maturity and diverted them from their responsibility and ability to handle the situation.
 - c. He was confident of the faith by which they stood firm (1:24) and wanted that faith demonstrated by true compliance from the heart rather than something forced by his presence.
 - d. Paul was confident that the things which made him rejoice would also bring them joy (2:3).

It would be much more satisfying – much more a reason for joy – for both Paul and for the Corinthians, if they were to do what God wished as a result of their own spiritual maturity rather than because they were forced into action by the presence of Paul. It might be satisfying to one's sinful, human nature to go into a situation and straighten it out. But Paul's change in plans sought to foster the spiritual maturity of the Corinthians. He thought more highly of them than of himself.

Thinking more highly of others than ourselves may involve changing our plans, as it did with Paul. To hold stubbornly to plans may be for our own benefit, such as admitting being wrong or not showing weaknesses. We may even elevate “keeping our word” above other Biblical commands. But we should not ignore obedience in those other areas.

4. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, letting them know the depth of his love for them. (2 Cor 2:4)
 - a. In love he was willing to confront.
 - b. In love he acted in confidence of their maturity.
 - c. In love he wrote on top of all else he did for them. A literal rendering of “depth of love” implies an abundance of things done for the Corinthians by Paul. He may even have dedicated more of his time to the Corinthians than to any other church up to that time. Perhaps it is a subtle rebuke to put his change in plans into that context.

It is right and good to keep our word. But we should plan with an understanding of the uncertainty of the future, i.e., plan “if God wills.” Plan in a way to give us the freedom to change those plans in a way that will allow us to continue to conform to God's will. Part of that will is caring for people the way God cares for them. Perhaps here is the key to understanding when to change plans. Plans must change when God's purposes for people are more important.