

2 Corinthians 2:14-17 “A Vision for Ministry that Never Changes”¹

Main Idea: Ministry is, a *manifestation*. God is intent on making something known through us, and we are privileged to cooperate with Him. To do so, we must see three things clearly which Paul spells out for us in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17.

First Series in WBC’s new building in 1990: “*New Covenant Ministry: 2 Corinthians 2-6*” According to 2 Corinthians 2-6, new covenant ministry involves...

- Manifestation – 2:14-17
- Involvement – 3:1-6
- Newness – 3:7-18
- Integrity – 4:1-6
- Suffering – 4:7-18
- Tension – 5:1-10
- Reconciliation – 5:11-21
- You – 6:1-18

The first message in the series focused on 2 Corinthians 2:14-17.

- I. We need to see the promise (14).
- II. We need to see the potential (15-16).
 - A. To some, the message of Christ is a fume.
 - B. To some, the message of Christ is a fragrance.
- III. We need to see the people (17).
 - A. There are people ministering with wrong motives.
 - B. There are people ministering with right motives.

Two Questions to Consider:

- 1. Are you ministering with right motives?
- 2. Are you ministering?

Today for our 25th anniversary celebration, I want to revisit the texts and messages of the first two sermons I preached in this building. One tonight (2 Corinthians 4:5 “Mission Possible”), and the other this morning (from 2 Corinthians 2).

I began that message with a question...

What’s God’s vision for WBC? That question is critical. What does God want us to accomplish in this once new and now 25 year old facility? Why are we here?

If I asked you to write down your answers to that question, I’m sure one word would appear again and again. *Ministry*.

Why are we here? Why did we build this building in 1990? For *ministry*.

But what is ministry? That’s a critical question. And how we answer that determined what we did with this building for the past 25 years, and what we’ll do with it in the next, if God grants us the opportunity.

It was with that question in mind that the first series preached in this building in 1990 on Sunday mornings had one simple goal—to determine God’s vision for the ministry of WBC. God’s vision. For ministry. We wanted to find out what God said qualifies as real ministry that pleases Him, and then do that.

And where did we find the answer? Not by taking a poll. Not through a dream or some mystical experience. We investigated God’s Word, specifically 2 Corinthians 2-6, in a series we called “New Covenant Ministry.”

¹ This text and the basic outline of this sermon was first preached at WBC after moving into the new auditorium 11/18/90, then again on 3/28/99 PM.

There were eight messages in that series, for 2 Corinthians 2-6 highlights for us eight characteristics of God-pleasing ministry. We created a little acrostic to help us remember them. New covenant ministry involves:

Manifestation – 2:14-17

Involvement – 3:1-6

Newness – 3:7-18

Integrity – 4:1-6

Suffering – 4:7-18

Tension – 5:1-10

Reconciliation – 5:11-21

You – 6:1-18

That's the aerial view of God's vision for a church's ministry. On that first Sunday after dedicating the building, November 18, 1990, we landed the plane and began to investigate the eight characteristics, one at a time. And I'd like to revisit the first this morning in a message I've entitled, "A Vision for Ministry that Never Changes," for indeed, when it never does.

According to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, ministry involves a manifestation. To manifest means "to make known, to reveal." Ministry involves making something known.

"Now thanks be unto God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and *maketh manifest* the savor of his knowledge by us in every place."

There's what ministry is, a *manifestation*. God is intent on making something known through us. He is doing the ministry, and we are privileged to cooperate with Him. To do so, we must see three things clearly which Paul spells out for us in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17. If we are to have the kind of vision that pleases God, we need to see the promise (14), the potential (15-16), and the people (17).

I. We need to see the promise (14).

What's the promise? "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him."

God promises to do two things. What are they? One, He promises to lead us in triumphal procession in Christ. And two, He promises to make Christ known through us in every place. He promises to do something *in* us and *through* us. He's committed to enabling us to know Christ and to make Christ known.

Did you catch that? God has committed Himself to making Christ known through His Church. That's what *God* does.

Question: Is it our responsibility to make the church grow? No. Whose is it? What did Jesus say, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."

What's our responsibility then? It's to allow God to make Christ known through us. *To make Christ known*. As we do that we can claim Christ's promise. God will cause the ministry of His church to triumph. And our appropriate response should then be the same as Paul's--"Thanks be to God...for leading us in triumphal procession!"

There's a beautiful cultural imagery that provides the backdrop for verse 14. Paul has in mind the picture of what was known as the Roman Triumph. The highest honor a Roman general could receive was called a Triumph. To attain it, he had to meet certain conditions. He must have been the actual commander in chief in the field of battle. He must have finished the campaign, defeated the enemy, and brought the troops home. He must have killed 5,000 opponents in one engagement. He must have conquered enemy territory. And finally, he must have won over a foreign foe, and not in a civil war.

If a general accomplished this, he was entitled to a Triumph. Here's what happened. A fabulous procession paraded through the streets of Rome in honor of the victorious general. Here was the order of the procession:

1. The State Officials and the Senate
2. The Trumpeters
3. The spoils taken from the conquered lands. For instance, when Titus conquered Jerusalem, he took to Rome the seven-branched candlestick, the golden table of the showbread, and the golden trumpets.
4. Pictures of the conquered land
5. The white bull which would be sacrificed to the gods
6. The enemy princes, leaders, and generals who would be flung into prison, and then executed
7. The musicians
8. The priests swinging their censers burning with sweet smelling incense
9. The General himself, in a chariot drawn by four horses, wearing a purple tunic, embroidered with golden palm leaves
10. The General's family
11. The army wearing all their decorations, shouting the cry of triumph

The Triumph was quite a sight! It usually happened only once in a lifetime. And apparently, it's the picture Paul had in mind when He thought of Jesus Christ.

Right now, Christ is marching in triumph through the world. And nothing can stop Him. Two thousand years ago He defeated the enemies of sin, death, and the devil. And now He's marching in triumphal procession.

Beloved, that's what ministry is. Ministry is a manifestation. Ministry is making known the victorious accomplishment of Jesus Christ to people still in bondage to the enemy. We are soldiers in Christ's procession. The triumph of the ministry is certain. Why? Because of God's *promise*.

So let's apply this. Every ministry of WBC comes back to this. We exist to make Christ known. Awana exists to make Christ known. Word of Life exists to make Christ known. And the Metallic Club, and SS, and choir (those were the ministries I mentioned in 1990). And today we have different ministries (CRADLE, Community Center, Biblical Counseling, and many others). But the purpose remains the same.

Our purpose for living is to know Christ and to make Him known to others.

And that raises two questions. One, do you know Jesus Christ? Are you in the Triumph? And two, is it the consuming passion of your life to make Christ known?

So we have a promise. God is currently at work in our midst making Christ known, leading us in triumphal procession.

And now we have 25 years of evidence to consider. One morning this week I came into this room and just reflected on how God has manifested Himself through this building. Consider the following (keep in mind I'm using rough estimates based on memory, which can be a dangerous thing but I think it's close):

The 1990 church family saved approximately \$150,000 off of a nearly \$600,000 new building by doing the electrical work and some of the concrete work and painting etc.

We borrowed approximately \$400,000 on a 15 year mortgage with monthly payments of a little over \$4000 or \$50,000 per year. But the Lord enabled us to pay off the bank after only eight years!

To go back further, we could have lost our property to the Northern Baptist convention in the 1920s and 30s when it went liberal and we pulled out. But we went through legal channels in the 1960s and the Lord allowed us to obtain the deed to the property around 1970.

25 years is 1300 Sundays. So God has used this building to equip the saints for ministry on 1300 Lord's Days.

That's 1300 Sunday morning sermons preached in this auditorium, plus Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evening Bible studies. That's at least 3000 public proclamations of the Word of God in this room.

Approximately 100 people have made their faith in Christ public through baptism in this building.

Over 600 Scioto Hills summer staffers have been equipped here, who are now serving around the world.

Approximately 200 people from our community have received biblical counseling in our counseling offices (that number is a very rough guess, probably higher).

Approximately 400 people from 50 area churches have received biblical counseling training in this building in the last 15 years (began in 2000).

Erin Wawro was commissioned as a missionary to Brazil in this room in 2005.

Gary and Nancy Storm were commissioned as missionaries with ACCG in 2003.

Approximately 4 1/2 million dollars were given to God in this room through General fund offerings. Approximately \$1 million of this went to Missions (GF plus designated gifts).

We have preached through a major portion of the Bible during these 25 years. Sermon series (not counting Wednesday evening Bible studies) included the Gospel of Mark, two thirds of the Gospel of John, the book of Acts, Romans, Ephesians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, 1 Peter, 1 John (in the old building), 2 John, 3 John, Jude. From the Old Testament, Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Daniel, Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, Haggai, and Malachi.

Approximately 100 funerals of our church family members, and many of those were in this building. And I would estimate 100 funeral meals in this building.

Nancy Rae Litteral's memorial service took place in this room in 2006 after over 50 years of coming to this church as a quadriplegic in a wheelchair. We used a gift from her estate to construct the foyer fellowship area dedicated around 2008.

Over 5000 songs of praise have been sung to the Lord in this building.

We have come to the Lords table 300 times for communion.

We have prayed together during 1300 midweek prayer services.

13000 Sunday school lessons taught (based on an average of three adult classes and seven children and youth classes; 1300 Sundays times 10 classes)

Over 2500 hours of fellowship in the foyer before and after worship services. In the old building we did not have a foyer for fellowship. (1300 Sundays times one half hour before and after the morning and evening services plus Wednesday nights)

This is what God has done to manifest Himself in this building. And of course, there was cost involved. What did it cost to make all this possible?

- \$350,000 approximately for lights heating air-conditioning etc. (that's \$14,000 a year times 25 years; budgeted utilities for this building will be around \$20,000 for the 2016 budget)

- Investment of untold man hours, including 500 hours in board meetings by deacons trustees and pastors (300 monthly meetings averaging 90 minutes each).

- Approximately 5000 hours of cleaning (at four hours per week)

All this in fulfillment of the promise we considered 25 years ago. “Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of Him.”

And as we did in 1990, so in 2015. We need to see the promise.

II. We need to see the potential (15-16).

There is great potential for ministry. As we take the good news of Jesus Christ to a needy world, the potential is vast. According to our studies, two out of three people in our area have no real association with any church (let alone a church that teaches the Word of God).

Having said that, we need to realize that when we seek to make Christ known we'll encounter two different responses.

READ verses 15-16, “For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. ¹⁶To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?”

For we are, says verse 15. Yes, there's potential out there. But there's also potential right here in us, in the church. According to verse 15, what are we to God? To God, we are the "aroma" of Christ. A sweet savor.

The imagery again grows out of the Roman Triumph. The eighth party in the procession were the priests. They carried their scensors burning with incense. The smell reached the nostrils of everyone in the area.

How did the people respond to the smell? There were two responses. To some, the aroma was a *fume*. Who was that? The captives. The ones in chains. The smell reminded them of their hopeless condition. It was a smell of death.

But to the rest, the aroma was a *fragrance*. A sweet smell that reminded them of their victory. It was a smell of life.

That's the way it is in ministry. Our task is to make Christ known--and the potential is great. But as we minister, what can we expect? Two very different responses.

A. To some, the message of Christ is a *fume*. To whom? Verse 15 says to "those who are perishing."

Beloved, the gospel is good news. But it's also bad news--to those who reject it. To those who persist in rebelling against God, and refuse to repent of their sins and believe in Christ, the gospel is a message of death. It's a reminder that they are condemned, and doomed to spend an eternity apart from God. To those who are perishing, the message of Christ is a horrid fume.

Take note of this. We won't be popular with everybody when we tell them the message of Christ. To some, the message is a fume.

But thankfully...

B. To some, the message of Christ is a *fragrance*. To whom? Verse 15 says "among those who are being saved."

No, not everybody will reject the message we proclaim. By God's grace, the Spirit of God will bring life to some. To some our message will be a sweet fragrance.

Do you remember the day you smelled the fragrance? I was eleven when the fume became a fragrance. I'm so glad for those who helped me to know Christ. Aren't you?

Who are you helping to know Christ right now? Who are you spending time with for the purpose of sharing the aroma of Christ? There's a world of potential out there. Do you see it? Do you see your neighbors? Your classmates? Your family members? Do you see that fellow at work?

This envelop has been tucked away in the Communion table Bible since that New Covenant Ministry series in 1990. I challenged the congregation at that time, and they responded by submitting names. The outside of this envelop reads as follows:

Wheelersburg Baptist Church

12/9/90 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

Lost people matter to God. They matter to us as well. Enclosed are the names of people presently lost, with minds blinded to the Light of Jesus Christ. By submitting these names, I (as the individual who submitted the names) will do the following:

1. Pray for these lost people regularly
2. Ask God to allow me to build a relationship of integrity with these individuals, with the purpose of allowing them to see the Light of Christ in me.
3. Give God the glory for what He does in these lives.

Perhaps you've been discouraged. Perhaps you've shared Christ with someone who mocked you, or ignored you. And you've clammed up.

I'm sure Paul felt that frustration. Notice how he concludes verse 16, "And who is equal to such a task?"

Beloved, when it comes to potential, here are the simple facts. Sure, to some the gospel is an offensive fume. But keep spreading it. Why? Because to others it is a sweet smelling fragrance.

So ministry involves a *manifestation*, making something known. What does it take to do that? First, a clear focus on the promise--God's promise--He will lead us in triumphal procession and spread the fragrance of Christ throughout the world. Second, a clear focus on the potential--we are the aroma of Christ. As we make Christ known, to some we'll be a stench, but to others--thank God--we'll be a savor. Thirdly...

III. We need to see the people (17).

Who does God use to make the knowledge of Christ in the world? Angels? Gospel blimps? Cloud formations? No. He uses people.

But here's where it gets messy. Why? Because people are driven by different motives. In fact, in verse 17 Paul informs us that there are people doing ministry with two types of motives.

A. First, there are people ministering with wrong motives. "Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit." In Paul's day as in ours, there were peddlers who used deceptive means to make an extra buck. They would use false weights to mislead their buyers. Another trick was to adulterate their wine with water. These hucksters tried to make a profit by selling shoddy goods.

That's what Paul says some people do in ministry. In fact, he doesn't say "some." He says *many*. Many corrupt the Word. The problem isn't *what* they say, but *why* they say it. Their motives are wrong. They peddle the Word for personal advantage.

Listen carefully. Did you realize it's not enough to make Christ known? We must do it with right motives. Why? Because when we minister with wrong motives, in the long run we do a great disservice to the cause of Christ.

This is convicting, isn't it? Make it personal. Do you want to see your children come to faith in Christ? A good desire, but what's your motivation? Could it be so that it will make *you* look good as a parent?

Are you burdened for your unsaved neighbor? That's good, but why are you burdened for him? Is it merely because you're tired of his beer cans in your yard?

Are you burdened to see our political leaders come to know Christ? That's good, but why? Is it because you don't want to see our country continue to slide down the moral slope, for if that happens we might lose some of the blessings of prosperity we've known in the American church?

When it comes to ministry, motive is key. You ask, "How can I tell if my motives are right?" Take a look at the end of verse 17. Here we see that...

B. There are people ministering with right motives. "On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." How can you tell if your motive is right? Paul gives us four tests. Yes, we must speak for Christ--that's a given. But our ministry must pass four tests. I'll put them in the form of four questions: what, why, who, and how.

1. *Test #1: What?* What's our perspective to be as we minister? "*In Christ* we speak before God..." Our consuming passion for minister is Jesus Christ. We know we are in Him. We're no longer in our sins. If any man is *in Christ* he is a new creation. Old things are passed away; all things are become new (2 Cor. 5:17)."

So what's our perspective as we minister? How do we view ourselves? If our motive is right, as those who are *in Christ*.

2. *Test #2: Why?* Why do we minister? "In Christ we speak *before God*." It's not for personal gain. Our sole ambition is to please God.

When you witness, remember this. There's an unseen audience, and it's the one that matters. The real audience is not the person with whom you are sharing Christ. The real audience, the one that was fixed in Paul's vision, was *God*. We speak *before God*.

That's what should drive us as we seek to make Christ known. God is watching. Do you believe that? Are you glad He gave His Son for you? He's watching to see how glad we really are. Are we glad enough to inconvenience ourselves any? Are we glad enough to tell others about Him?

3. *Test #3: Who?* Who are we seeking to honor as we proclaim Christ? "In Christ we speak before God with sincerity, *like men sent from God*." When our motive is right, we will see ourselves as did the Old Testament prophets. We are people sent from God. We speak because God has burdened our hearts with a message we can't contain.

Do you see yourself that way? Do you see yourself as a "missionary?" A missionary is simply a person who takes seriously the *mission* of the church. Is the

mission of the church *yours*, or just someone else's? Do you see yourself as a person who has been *sent from God*?

4. *Test #4: How?* How are we to minister? "In Christ we speak before God *with sincerity*." Nobody should ever be able to say of us, "What you care about is *yourself*." Yea, you minister, but when you do it's to get something, not to give. You're hungry for power, and thirsty for prestige." That's not true of a person who's speaking *in sincerity*.

It's amazing to be a part of the grand triumphal procession of God in this world. But we need constantly to check our motives.

We finished the message in 1990 by considering two questions that I'd like us to consider today in 2015.

Two Questions to Consider:

1. *Are you ministering with right motives?*

It's one thing to minister. It's another thing to minister with right motives. Ministry that pleases God demands pure motives. Are you ministering with right motives?

2. *Are you ministering?*

Some people are critical of the way others minister. They accuse them of having the wrong motives. But the truth is, the most vocal critics are often themselves not involved in ministry. They're spectators. Pew sitters. And it's easy to complain when you're sitting on the sidelines.

D. L. Moody was once criticized by someone who said he didn't like the way he did evangelism. Moody responded, "Frankly, sir, I prefer the way I do it to the way you don't do it."

Are you ministering? Ministry is a manifestation, making Christ known. Are you allowing God to use you to minister to those who need to know Christ? Are you? Are you in the triumphal procession? You can be. You need to be.

This is the purpose of this building, for the first 25 years, and the next. And if we're to be effective in this manifestation of Christ, we need to see the promise (14), the potential (15-16), and the people (17).

I can envision three potential responses to this message. One, some of you need to come to know Christ today. You can't make known what you don't know. If you don't know Him, you are lost. Jesus died on the cross for sinners, then conquered death, and will save you today, if you ask Him.

Two, some are seeing the need to join the church. Not to get saved, but because you are. You've seen this morning that the local church is the place where Jesus wants His people to be, so they can be equipped for the ministry of manifestation.

Then thirdly, you may be saying to yourself, "I want to be involved in ministry. I don't know how, but I do want to be involved, and I'm willing to be taught." That's great! I encourage you to approach someone who is doing a ministry you think the Lord may want you to try, and ask them, "Could I get involved? And would you show me how?"