

THE OPEN STATEMENT OF THE TRUTH:  
A SERMON FROM 2 CORINTHIANS 4:2 ON MINISTRY OF THE  
THE WORD IN A SECULAR CONTEXT

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Our chapel messages this spring semester are built on the biblical principle set forth in Heb. 13:7: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” Every week we are unpacking key passages that have shaped us and are sharing a story of how this is so—all in the hope that you may imitate our faith. My passage is 2 Corinthians 4:2. You can turn there now, and I will get there in a few minutes.

**My Grounding: Study, Practice, Teach**

Many of you know that my life verse is Ezra 7:10: “The good hand of his God was upon him, for Ezra set his heart to study and to practice the Torah of Yahweh and to teach both statute and rule in Israel.” Ezra was a descendant of Aaron the priest (7:5) and was “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” (7:6). Yet when the author wanted to stress why God blessed Ezra’s ministry, he did not point to his proper pedigree or professional abilities. Rather, he pointed to his resolve. Ezra oriented his heart to study, to practice, and to teach God’s Book, and because of this, God’s hand was upon Ezra for good.

Ezra knew the truth; he lived the truth; he heralded the truth—in that order. He led the people not as a king but as a servant. He was a follower of God first, and because of that he was a leader of the people. God was magnified through Ezra’s heart-level commitment to follow and to call others to the same. He would study the Word, which would lead to his applying the Word, and only then would he teach the Word. His proclamation matched his lifestyle, and his lifestyle matched what was called for in the Book. Why? He knew the truth and experienced the truth first hand, giving validation and articulation to his witness. Through study he observed accurately, understood rightly, and evaluated fairly. Through practice he felt properly and applied appropriately. And out of this context he taught, and what he taught was the Word. That is it. He didn’t teach his own fancies; he taught the Word. What came from him was the truth because his teaching was from the Book.

There were no questions where Ezra’s allegiance lied. His audience could evaluate accurately his instruction, for his teaching came out of Scripture. No ear tickling.... Just the truth. No ambiguity where he stood.... Just the truth. Because he had mined the Word, his heart became satisfied in the riches of truth, and he could not help but share such wealth with others. That is the kind of man I want to

be. That is the kind of man I am committed to be. That is the kind of man I have been committed to be for nearly two decades. But I haven't always had a clear vision for how best to express what I am studying through teaching and writing. In fact, some nine years ago something I wrote was considered by some as dangerous for the Church. What exactly happened? Even more, how did I respond, and how has this experience shaped my personal approach to academic ministry?

### **My Story: A Questionable Witness**

I grew up in rural Michigan with aspirations of life-long ministry but no considerations of being a Bible professor. In college, the Lord grabbed my heart and pushed me toward seminary, and it was at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Boston that I began to consider academic ministry as a potential. My mentor had gone to Harvard, and he knew what it would take to get a doctorate, so he began to train me. In his mind, getting a PhD from a Christian seminary was not an option. He thought that for evangelicals to engage secular scholars we need to earn their respect by attaining comparable degrees. He moved me toward what he considered the best Hebrew Old Testament programs on the continent, and studying for my doctorate at a place like Southern Seminary was pushed off my radar.

When the time came to apply for PhD studies, I was accepted into a respected secular school and was granted a full-ride with living stipend. But in the process I met a professor like whom I wanted to become; his worship of God and love for his Church was infectious, and his scholarship was top rate. So I said No to the big name school and went to do my PhD at Southern Seminary, a decision I will never regret. At Southern, my wrestlings were both wide and deep, and my commitment to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples only grew.

However, during those doctoral days I struggled to understand how a believing scholar was properly to engage the secular academy. In the order of Ezra's resolve, my struggle was with how rightly to teach or express the truth I was learning and living. I wanted to write in a way that would gain a hearing and have an impact, even though I was at an evangelical school. How is this best accomplished? Do I raise my conservative banner announcing my arrival, or do I cloak myself in a way that leaves unclear where I stand but opens new doors for discussion?

In 2004, during my fourth year of PhD studies, I published my first full-length article, and in it I wrote a footnote that ultimately got me into trouble. The problem with my footnote was not exactly in what I said but in how I said it and in what was left unclear. The footnote addressed the compositional history of the Pentateuch. Those close to me know that I strongly affirm both that Moses was the

substantial author of the Bible's first five books and that the final form of the Pentateuch was completed early. However, when I wrote this footnote, I left my own position intentionally ambiguous, leaving readers to query, Is Jason DeRouchie a JEDP guy? I mean, Does he agree with the liberals? No one could be sure? In fact, I employed the works of secular scholars in a way that suggested to at least some readers that I affirmed both the good and the bad things they held. In what manner should a Christian scholar seek a hearing among liberals?

I was called into the office of the Vice President, and word began to get out around campus that I had written material that was dangerous to the Church. I was encouraged that the Vice President soon affirmed that I was not a heretic, but you must try to grasp how devastating this whole event was to me. I was a servant of Christ with a deep-seated passion for the glory of God. I loved the Church of Christ and wanted my life-long ministry to help and never hinder the Church's growth. However, once words are placed into an article, you can never get them back. If some at Southern Seminary read my lack of clarity as compromise, what would it mean for my students and others around the world? Would my words lead others astray? When approaching issues that must be addressed, should we leave our wording open to multiple interpretations?

I contacted my former mentor from Gordon-Conwell. I was ashamed and wanted to clarify for him what had happened. The irony in this call is that, after working on his own doctorate at Harvard for 10 years, my advisor was initially denied his degree because in his oral defense he refused to remove a footnote that explicitly stated Moses was the most likely author of the Pentateuch. He was at a secular school, feeling the fires of persecution because he refused to let go of Mosaic authorship; I was now at a Christian school, feeling the fires of persecution because I had been ambiguous regarding my views on Mosaic authorship. Something was wrong in the way I was trying to impact culture. While my mentor understood that my intention was to gain a broad hearing and not to lead others astray, he challenged me not to go down the path I had taken. He said that in these early days of my writing career I was setting a trajectory for my academic ministry and for how others would perceive me. When others read my work would they know that I was a conservative Christian passionate for biblical truth and for the fame of God's name or would they view me as one whose own beliefs are unclear? In that moment, I knew deep in my soul that I wanted Christ to be made much of and his truth to be heralded through my ministry, and I never again wanted to let my own views become masked through clever words, just to get a hearing.

### **My New Resolve: The Open Statement of the Truth**

Soon after this time, I came across 2 Cor. 4:2, which has become for me a light, guiding my steps in academic ministry. Paul writes: "But we have renounced

disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God."

Now in 2 Cor. 12:16 we learn that some in the Corinthian church were accusing Paul of framing his words in crafty ways in order to deceive: He spoke in a way to get their hearing, but ultimately he was leading them astray. In 11:3 Paul associates the practice of cunning or craftiness with how the devil deceived Eve in the garden, and here in 4:2 he says that he will have nothing to do with such schemes. Operating in underhanded, deceitful, or hidden ways is by nature disgraceful or shameful, says Paul, so his ministry of the Word is not performed in this way. He avows that he does not tamper or distort what is taught in God's Book, but rather "by the open statement of the truth" he commends himself "to everyone's conscience," and he does so "in the sight of God" (cf. 2:17).

In this verse, there is only one main verb: "*We have renounced*.... We have renounced hidden things of shame—disgraceful, underhanded ways." What follows are descriptive participles, clarifying what the renouncing looks like in both negative and positive terms. Renouncing disgraceful ways means "not practicing cunning or tampering with God's word but by the open statement of the truth commending ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God." Not practicing or tampering but commending.

Commendation.... In 2 Corinthians, Paul is faced with the challenge of defending his apostleship. He has been accused of adulterating the Gospel, probably due to his insistence that Gentiles need not follow the Old Covenant law, which is the context of the present argument. Paul stresses that his commendation is "in the sight of God," whose judgment alone matters (cf. 1 Cor. 4:4). His words here echo 2:17 where he writes, "We are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ." Also in 12:19, he writes, "Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding." At the foundation level, all Christian teaching and writing is done before an audience of One! We seek to please God rather than people. Our goal is not to please people but to persuade them.

The means of Paul's commendation is "by the open statement of the truth." The footnote in my essay failed on this point. Rather than making the truth clear, I rendered it cloudy, or perhaps better foggy, and where there is fog, accidents can happen. While my intentions were not to deceive, the results were the same. I can say that my intentions before God were pure and that the words I wrote were not in themselves compromising, but I did not speak in a way that persuaded others toward the truth. In contrast to the way I handled things, Paul's pattern is unpacked

in 5:11: “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.”

In 4:2, Paul says, “By the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God.” Paul is painting a distinct picture regarding the manner by which believers should undertake the ministry of the Word. The goal is not to please but to persuade, to openly and boldly proclaim Scripture’s teachings in a way that forces others to make a decision. For some, the good news we proclaim will remain veiled. That is, they won’t perceive our statement of truth as good news, and Paul says it is because “the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (4:4). For others, however, our open statement of the truth will be like lining shining out of darkness, as God uses it to bring life and understanding where there had been death and ignorance (4:6). But it won’t happen without an open statement of the truth.

This unhindered and uncloaked profession of the truth does not negate the call to winsomeness and wisdom, for when sheep hang out among the wolves they must be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16). Importantly yet challengingly, the open statement of the truth also does not negate the need to “become all things to all people that by all means [we] might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). But how is this done? How do we balance being all things to all people with the open statement of the truth? Remember, while Paul, for the sake of mission, was willing to circumcise Timothy, who came from Jewish descent (Acts 16:3), he was not willing to circumcise Titus, who was fully Gentile by birth (Gal. 2:3). Why? Because circumcising Titus would have compromised the Gospel or at least rendered it unclear. When engaging religious secular culture, we as Christians must be intentional to meet them right where they are when the clarity of truth is not at stake, but we must be uncompromising and clear where Scriptural teaching demands assent.

So how have I grown.... Two examples: I began learning biblical Hebrew seventeen years ago, but in my early years, vocalizing quickly and clearly was never made a priority. So for about a decade and a half my reading was slow, and my vocalization choppy. What I have seen, however, is that when engaging secular scholars, they will stop listening to me when they recognize that I can’t pronounce Hebrew well out-loud. So, three years ago, for the benefit of my ministry among the liberals, I started working on my Hebrew reading speed and pronunciation. To the good Hebrew vocalizers I have tried to become a good Hebrew vocalizer that I might win some. Through my effort in developing my Hebrew reading skills, one obstacle is removed that may allow the liberal to listen more intently to the truth and clarity of my persuasion.

Another example is in the way I recently handled the amazing portrait of the Messiah in Genesis. Critical, liberal scholars link the Messiah only to kingship, which means Israel had no Messianic anticipation until the monarchy. So when I recently wrote an article that I hope to have published in a secular journal, I never used the term Messiah in my discussion. Instead, I spoke of the male, royal offspring of the woman and the anticipated curse-destroying, serpent-overcoming deliver, who would perfectly image God, live dependently on God's blessing, and serve as a channel of blessing to the world. If the liberals don't like the word Messiah, I don't need to use it in a book that never employs the title. However, I will boldly and joyfully exalt my Messiah wherever I see him, and leave it up to every man's conscience whether he will accept the portrait or not.

### **Conclusion**

In Gal. 1:10 Paul asserts: "If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ." May your friends, children, future students, and future congregants be able to say of you what the Pharisees say of Jesus in Mark 12:14: "Teacher, we know that you are true and do not care about anyone's opinion. For you are not swayed by appearances, but truly teach the way to God." In 2 Tim. 4:2, Paul anticipates that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions." May we at BCS never be accused of being ear-scratchers, but may we be known as those who make an open statement of the truth in the sight of God for the glory of Christ and the expansion of his Church through persuasion.