Counterfeit Gospels
2 Corinthians 11:1-15

We're into the last few chapters of 2 Corinthians, and Paul faces a challenge. New leaders have appeared in the church and Paul calls them - sarcastically - v5, 'super-apostles'. Because they're engaging speakers, and can draw a crowd, and they make much of their spiritual power.

But how's Paul to deal with them, and the church's attraction to them, without doing what they do? Without promoting himself, and making himself look like an even better super apostle, and 'you should listen to me and not to them for all *these* reasons'.

But there's another question: why bother tackling them at all? Why not just let the Corinthians listen to and follow whoever they want? Because it's a free world. And if these new teachers feel good to the Corinthians, and their stuff works for them, why not just let them?

Because Paul knows what you know: that ideas, and the people you listen to, and the culture you swim in, have this power to shape you. They change the way you see things. Like the things you think are right or wrong, or the priorities you place on things. And the things that shape you make you, and the things you feed on form you.

Back in October Peter Wehner, who's senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Centre and a former speech writer for Presidents Reagan and the two Bushes, wrote an article in the Atlantic entitled, *'The Evangelical Church is Breaking Apart'.* And in it he documents the unprecedented level of tension within US churches. And he writes, 'culture catechises'. 'Culture teaches us what matters and what views we should take about what matters. Our current political culture… has multiple technologies and platforms for catechising - television, radio, Facebook, Twitter, and podcasts among them. People who want to be connected to their political tribe - the people they think are like them, the people they think are on their side - subject themselves to its catechesis all day long, every single day, hour after hour after hour.'

And his point is, the media we consume, the personalities we listen to, the culture we swim in, are forming us, catechising us, more than the Gospel does, with devastating effects on churches.

But that doesn't just matter for churches, but for families and friendships and societies. The messages we listen to, the 'preachers' - in and out of church- we give our attention to, shape us and make us.

And Paul knew that better than anyone. And he could see these Corinthians being formed by a message that was not the gospel and he wanted to do something about it. So he says to them, v1: "Bear with me!" I'm going to say some stuff that might be hard to hear, but you need to hear it.

The Devotion of our Hearts
Look at v2: 'I feel a divine jealousy for you.' Now, jealousy is not something we tend to think positively about, is it? Someone eaten up with jealousy is not someone it's generally fun to be around. Because jealousy does exactly that - it corrodes you, it has this power to stain all our interactions. And we can be jealous of what someone else has: their stuff; their relationships, their looks; their success. And the resentment gnaws away on the inside.

But that's *human* jealousy. But what Paul says he's experiencing is *divine* jealousy. And when God gave the people of Israel the Ten Commandments he said, "I the Lord your God am a jealous God" (Ex 20:5). And he said that in the context of the second commandment: don't make, don't worship idols. Don't go running off after other gods. Be faithful to me.

Because there's a right jealousy that comes from a love that's devoted, that's exclusive. A love that grows angry at the thought of the one it loves falling for fake imitations of love, that only wants the best for the one it loves.

And that's how Paul feels towards these Corinthians. But not because he wants their love and loyalty for himself. He's not jealous for his own sake, as if he's their lover, and these leaders are taking them away from *him*. Instead, he says, he's like a father taking his daughter down the aisle to her real lover, to her true bridegroom.

Verse 2, 'Since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.'

And that's the relationship between a church and the Lord Jesus; between us as individual Christians and Christ. A relationship of love and faithful intimacy, where Christ is the one who has our hearts. A relationship, v3, of 'sincere and pure devotion to Christ.'

Which means that either Christ will have your heart or something else will. Because Christ has his competitors, his rivals for your affections. And either he will be the one forming and shaping you, or someone else, some other ideology, some other world-view will be doing that. And what the experience of these Corinthians tells us is that those rivals for your heart may look and sound very much like the real thing, but like a man who tries to seduce another man's wife, however much they look like the real thing, they're not.

But, if that happens, and something other than Christ has the first place in your heart, it'll be that that forms you. It'll be that that shapes your attitudes and ambitions and priorities in life; the way you speak and behave and respond. Because we always see life through the lens of the thing we're devoted to.

The Danger of Seduction

And Paul is clear that the world we live in is not spiritually neutral. We face danger. Verse 3, 'I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ.'

And in the Garden the serpent took God's words and twisted them to persuade Eve that Eve would be much better off if she decided for herself what was right and wrong and that God and God's boundaries were not good for her.

And by making what was wrong look right, he lured her away from God. Fly fishermen use the same tactic don't they - they even call it a lure. They use something that looks like a fly or an insect, something that looks like the real thing, that makes the fish think, 'that is going to taste so good', but it's hiding a hook.

And Paul describes the serpent's deception as 'cunning' - because it sounded so plausible. So reasonable. So logical. Because that's where the battle ground for our lives is, Paul says: v3, 'your thoughts'. Your mind. That's where we will or will not be led astray from a devotion to Christ.

And think how that can happen. The circumstances of your life can change and leave you thinking, 'God why have you let this happen to me?' And a voice comes whispering, 'Because he doesn't really love you.' And like Eve you find yourself questioning the goodness of God. And when that doubt takes root in your mind, you might still go through the motions of

religion, all the external stuff is still in place, but your devotion is not sincere, because your heart isn't in it. Your love for God has grown cold.

Or, again, as with Eve, it might be cunning - the thing that draws you away might look like the gospel but, in reality, it's a counterfeit. Verse 4: 'For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough.'

So, the danger is, Paul is saying, that you can look to something other than Jesus for what the gospel offers you: and you look somewhere else for your justification - for what makes you right with God and tells you he loves you and approves of you; or for your sanctification and how you flourish in life.

And Paul doesn't tell us enough to know for sure what the false Jesus was these leaders were preaching. But given their emphasis on power and prestige, and the fact Corinth was this entrepreneurial city, where status and wealth mattered, we can guess. And maybe it was the Jesus of Your Best Life Now. The Jesus who, if you follow him, will make everything better and your life go well and you'll be the head and not the tail. Whereas Jesus himself tells us that things might just get worse, and we're to pick up our cross and follow him.

Or think of some other false Jesuses we might be tempted by.

Like the Therapeutic Jesus: the Jesus who accepts me and affirms as I am, who tells me I'm good, but never asks me to repent.

Or the Add-on Jesus: the Jesus who's a nice addition to your life, but he's hardly essential. He's not the core of your being. He's a Sunday thing, or a go-to-when-life-is-hard thing, but at other times he rarely gets a look in.

Or Jesus the Employer: And I don't deserve God's love. I'm not worthy of it, so I have to earn it. And if I behave, if I perform, if I say my prayers, and read my bible, and go to church, and serve, he'll pay me my wage, he'll keep me safe, he'll bless me. But if I don't he might just fire me.

Or Family-values Jesus: and I can feel righteous, I can hold my head up, I can know God approves of me, because my marriage or my family is good.

Or the Political Jesus. Conservative or liberal, culture warrior or social activist, and we feel justified and right with God because of our politics. And God is on my side because I'm on his side, unlike those people on the other side.

Or the Jesus of my Self-congratulation. And I'm saved by Jesus' grace, but thereafter, it's my devotion to God that impresses him. It's my commitment to the truth, or my acts of service, or my all-engaged worship, that makes me right with God and makes me feel good about myself, not least because I'm better than others who aren't as committed as I am.

And those can be deceptive because in many of them there are echoes of God's word, like the importance of family, and care for the poor, and the rule of law, and our commitment to truth, and sacrificial service, and all engaged worship. But they're still not the gospel.

A few months back we ran out of Nutella, and so Su bought another cheaper brand, Nutoka, and filled the Nutella jar with it, just to see if anyone would notice. It looks like the real thing,

it even spreads like the real thing, but it's *not* the real thing. It's why Paul says in v14 that 'satan disguises himself as an angel of light.' It's the closeness to the real thing, to the true Jesus, that makes it so deceptive.

But look what Paul says: it's not just that you can believe a different Jesus, it's that if you do 'you receive a different spirit' (v4). It's not the Holy Spirit who bears his fruit in your life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Instead, if you think you're to be accepted as you are with no call to repent, instead of love you'll want to cancel those who disagree. If you think you're justified by your politics, you'll find yourself getting angry and factional rather than peaceable. If you think your worth is tied to your success, you'll use people rather than treat them with kindness. If your joy is dependent on your family, or religious effort, you'll be emotionally unstable, because as things go well your joy goes up, but if not, it comes crashing down.

And that's because we buy into a gospel that's not the gospel, Paul says, it's not the message that's really good news.

And it's because Paul knows that that he says, v5-6: 'I consider that I am not in the last inferior to these super apostles. Even if I am unskilled in speaking, *I am not so in knowledge*.'

So clearly people were saying stuff like, 'you know that guy Paul, he's just not in the same league as us, he's sooo second division. I mean, when it comes to commanding a crowd, and speaking in public, he just hasn't got it. So listen to us, not to him.'

Now, today, we may not be in to the kind of overly dramatic public speaking that impressed Corinth, but who do you find more convincing, who do you find yourself listening to, the guy who stutters and stammers his way through a presentation, or the one who's comfortable in his skin and controls the room? What's more likely to turn your head - the tightly printed text of an ancient book or the slick graphics of some advert or social media post? Who captures your attention, the beautiful influencer and the hip pastor, or the plain Jane or balding Bernard.

And Paul is saying, it's not about the charisma of the speaker, it's about the content of the message. It's not about the style, it's about the substance. And these other leaders are eloquent and compelling - but they aren't preaching Christ and him crucified. And Paul may have been short on glitz and glamour, but he had knowledge, he says, - he knew what the true gospel was. Because the power of God, the thing that can really change a life, is not charismatic personalities, or the big speaker; it's not gimmicks or great worship meetings; it's not even strong preaching, it's that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead and now reigns in heaven until the day he comes again.

But, if they thought Paul was a weak speaker, they had another complaint as well: that he refused to accept their financial support. Verse 7: 'Did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge?'

Now, don't you think that's bizarre? I mean, why would a preacher *refusing* to accept money be a problem? On those rare occasions I get asked to speak elsewhere, or when a young couple is getting married, and they ask 'How much do we owe you? How much do you charge?' and I say: 'hey you don't owe me anything, it's my joy to do this for you', I've never once had someone go 'That is sooo offensive. You should be ashamed of yourself.' So why do the Corinthians?

For two reasons. Firstly, in their culture, manual labourers were viewed as little better than slaves. So imagine in a culture like that, where prestige and power were so valued, having as the leader of your church a man who, rather than take your money, made tents, who worked with the skins of dead animals, and probably smelled like it. I mean, how socially embarrassing! Who's going to want to bring their friends to a church like that?

But they also practised patronage. And wealthy people would financially support those less well off, who in turn would give their wealthy patrons honour and deference, and so increase the patron's social standing. And patrons would even give money to travelling orators and philosophers who would then compliment their patrons in their speeches in the public square. All to increase the patron's prestige.

Can you see the danger, the obligation to the one financially supporting you? You see, it wasn't that Paul was too proud to accept financial support. Verse 9 'I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you.' What he wouldn't do was put himself in anyone's pocket. He wasn't prepared to tailor the message to the likes of the patron. Because the real Jesus, the Jesus Paul preached, is not a Jesus who agrees with you. He's not a Jesus who comes into line with you. He's the Jesus who calls us to come into line with him.

Think about that. Because if the gospel is something that confronts us rather than agrees with us, why let it to be the thing that forms you? If the real Jesus refuses to be your puppet, and if he calls you to repent and change, why make him the one you're devoted to? I mean, that totally goes against the culture of our day, doesn't it? 'Don't let anyone else tell you who you are, or what you should do, you be true to you.' Why embrace the opposite of that?

The One Who Truly Loves You

Now it seems that in response to Paul's refusal to take their money, the Corinthians accused him of not loving them. Verses 9-11: 'I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way… And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!'

Now, where does Paul get the idea of refusing to put a burden on them, but instead, out of love, bearing their burden? What world-view, what message has formed *him*? Who's shaped Paul?

The same Jesus and the same gospel Paul preached. Because Jesus said, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). And at the cross, Jesus bore our burdens for no pay. He carried the weight of all those times we've run after other things and allowed them to form us and distort us, rather than him. And he didn't do it because he had to, and he didn't do it for his own selfish gain. He did it because he loved us. Because he was and is devoted to you with a love that's jealous. A love that will move heaven and earth to rescue you from every counterfeit love.

And the true gospel confronts you and tells you, you are so sinful and your heart so wrong, Christ had to die to rescue you. Which kills the pride that other so-called gospels feed. But it also tells you you are so loved by God that Christ did die for you. And that unconditional love gives you a deep security. Because it tells you Christ has made you right with God - you're justified by him, so you don't need to look for that elsewhere. And it means you can face your flaws and confront the areas you need to change, rather than run from them. So the gospel of Christ's love transforms us, like no false gospel can.

And as it does, it's his Spirit who's working in you. Because knowing how much Christ has loved you will fill your heart with love for others. So you'll care deeply about families, and not just good ones; about the poor and how to genuinely help them. And you'll know a depth and

stability of joy in your own heart, so you can come alongside the grieving and bear their pain. And you'll know that when you were his enemy, Christ made peace between you and God, so you'll work for peace and bring people together not divide them. And you'll know Christ was and is abundantly patient with you, so you'll be patient with those who oppose you. And you'll know your worth is not dependent on your success, so you won't feel the need to use people, instead you'll treat them with kindness. And you'll care deeply about the truth - because you know there is such a thing as truth, but you'll hold it and defend it with goodness and gentleness and self-control.

You see, there are a million so called gospels out there. But only one will make you more like Jesus. So embrace it.