

# I FEAR YOU THINK TOO HIGHLY OF ME

*by D.A. Carson*

Most of us go through life quietly fearful that people think too little of us. In odd moments of shame or guilt, of course, we recognize that so much evil still clings to us that we are surprised that anyone can think well of us. But by and large we devote a disproportionate amount of time wondering if we are being bypassed, slighted, or ignored, or if the people we admire have noticed our fine words or our excellent deeds.

The problem is often acute in one's teenage years, when somehow we labor under the impression that the whole world is watching us. But this nervous passion to be revered can emerge in various forms in mature adults. Many an assembly of ministers is quietly cursed with large doses of ministerial jealousy. How many small group parties betray an indecent desire for each person to outstrip the previous story? Desperate to be cherished or valued or respected, we fear people will think too little of us.

By contrast, Paul conducts himself in such a way, he writes, "lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me" (2 Cor. 12:6). Transparently, Paul worries that people will think too much of him.

The precise flavor of Paul's comment is decisively shaped by the context. Apparently the triumphalists he is combating in the Corinthian church have been boasting about the revelations and visions they have received. Paul does not want to get into a contest about who has had the most or the better visions (12:1), but if he says nothing then some believers in Corinth will write him off. Perhaps he is nothing but yesterday's man: he had that wonderful vision on the Damascus road, of course, but that was more than twenty years ago, and we all know that yesterday's grace isn't enough for today. Paul simply will not stoop to a bidding war in the spirituality stakes. The most he is prepared to do is talk about his experiences *in the third person*. "I know a man in Christ," he says – that is, a Christian, simply a Christian – "who fourteen years ago... was caught up to the third heaven" (12:2). Some Jews spoke of three heavens: the first was the atmosphere, the "heaven" in which birds make their home; the second is what we would call the universe, the sphere in which stars and planets are found; and the third is the abode of God.

Whether this "man in Christ" was in the body or out of it when this occurred, Paul neither knows nor cares. What he knows is that he was "caught up into Paradise" (12:4). Jews

commonly thought of three paradises: the first paradise, Eden, before sin entered into the world; the last paradise, the new heaven and the new earth, where there is no more sin; and between the two, the “hidden paradise,” where God now dwells, even though we have no direct access to Him. For wherever God is, there is paradise. So by the expressions “third heaven” and “paradise” Paul is saying that this “man in Christ” was caught up into the very presence of God. There he heard things both inexpressible and private: that is, not only does this “man in Christ” not have the categories to communicate what he heard to people who have not experienced similar things, but he was forbidden to communicate them.

This “man in Christ,” of course, is Paul. That is why in v. 7 he writes, “And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me...” Paul is willing to revert to the first person singular when he talks about his weaknesses and his thorn, but not when he is talking about this revelation. He makes the point explicit in vv. 5-6: he will boast about this “man in Christ,” but when it comes explicitly to himself, he will boast only about his own weaknesses. “For though I might desire to boast” – i.e., as if I were talking about myself – “I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth” – i.e., I would not in that case be making a fool of myself, because in fact that “man in Christ” is none other than I, Paul. “But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me.”

Thus Paul is not only worried that people will think too highly of him, but, more explicitly, he is worried lest people should think too highly of him on the grounds of visions and revelations that he claims to have had. If he is to be assessed at all, it must be on grounds that are in the public arena: what he says and what he does.

Of course, Christian leaders recognize that in the final analysis the only opinion about us that matters at all is God’s (1 Cor. 4:1-5). But in a relative sense churches must evaluate Christian leaders: that is why Paul exposes the “false apostles” who are leading the Corinthian believers astray, and clearly expects the church to do something about them before his next visit. But if Christian leaders are to be evaluated at all, even in this relative sense (for the final books are kept by God alone), let it be on the basis of what they do and what they say, not on the basis of an assumed authority gleaned from claims to private revelation not open to the public arena.

*We are thankful for Dr. Carson’s year-long theological reflections on Corinthians.*