

Our Confidence and Sufficiency

2 Corinthians 3:1-8

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Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. ³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶ who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? – 2 Corinthians 3:1-8, ESV

Introduction: What makes you feel confident?

What is it that makes you feel confident? Is there something that you know you do so well that, when you're doing it, you just feel really confident? Or do you have a special outfit or maybe a particular tie or maybe even a perfume or cologne that when you wear it makes you feel confident because of how you look or how you smell?

Last week, we saw at the end of 2 Corinthians 2 that the Apostle Paul thought there was one thing no one should feel confident or sufficient in and of themselves to do: life-changing, soul-saving Gospel ministry. In 2 Corinthians 2:15-16, he had said, *“For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?”*

The implied answer to Paul's rhetorical question is that, of course, no one is sufficient for these things, for the real and powerful work of the Gospel in the lives of others.

And yet, in Paul's day, as in our day, many people claimed to be quite sufficient, competent, and confident for the Gospel ministry, in and of themselves, because of the extraordinary gifts and impressive education they had. Sadly, church history has always seen these kinds of self-confident, self-sufficient Gospel ministers, and often they have been very outwardly successful, even if their ministry is devoid of the true Gospel of Jesus Christ and the true life-changing power of the Holy Spirit.

In Paul's day, these self-sufficient, self-confident preachers of the Gospel were drawing people away from the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of them were Judaizers, teaching people that they need to keep the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, especially circumcision, in addition to believing in Jesus. On the other end of the spectrum, some of them seemed to have been lawless people who taught that it was okay to eat food sacrificed to idols or even to visit temple prostitutes or otherwise fully engage in the immoral pagan culture of Corinth. So, legalism and lawlessness – rigid required rule-keeping and culture-accommodating rebellious moral

laxity – we still face those same problems in and around the church today, And these things draw people away from Christ today by adding to or taking away from what He calls us to as His people.

1. Letter of Recommendation, vv. 1-3

Many of these hot-shot preachers carried impressive letters of recommendation with them (which were sometimes fake). Some of them challenged the Apostle Paul because he didn't come to Corinth with endorsement letters from the Apostles. Jesus chose twelve apostles during his earthly ministry. One of them was Judas Iscariot. Paul was not one of them. He was personally confronted and called later by the Lord Jesus Himself on the Road to Damascus. But Jesus didn't stop and give him a letter of recommendation.

Paul is stunned that any of the Corinthians would think he needed a letter of recommendation when he had spent over a year and half ministering among them with evident fruit from the Holy Spirit working through him. So, he writes:

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. ³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Now, to be clear, Paul is not opposed to letters of recommendation. The New Testament has some in it, and Paul wrote some himself. In many ways, 1 Corinthians was partly a letter of recommendation for Timothy, as he wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:10-11:

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. (ESV)

3 John is one of the shortest letters in the New Testament, and it is a recommendation letter for Demetrius:

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. – vv. 11-12

And Philemon, another short letter, written by Paul, is a recommendation letter for Onesimus sent to his former slave-master, Philemon, a leader in the Colossian church.

Paul's objection is not to the existence of letters of recommendation but to the idea that he would need one either from or for the Corinthians. The Corinthians had something so much better. They themselves were Paul's letter of recommendation, and he didn't carry this letter in his pocket or in with his leather-working, tent-making supplies, but he carried them in his heart, where they had been engraved by the Holy Spirit Himself.

Further still, the Corinthians believers are themselves a letter from Christ delivered by Paul and his ministry companions – Aquila and Priscilla, Apollos, Timothy, and Titus. Christ Himself authored them by the pen of the Holy Spirit writing Himself on their hearts. In every conceivable way, the letter of recommendation that was the Corinthian believers themselves – carried in Paul's heart and themselves having Christ written in their hearts by

the Holy Spirit, letters delivered by Paul – this is SO MUCH better than a handwritten letter on parchment or even a letter that was carved in stone.

We see two aspects of true Holy Spirit-empowered Gospel ministry in all of this “letter of recommendation” language. First of all, Paul deeply loved the Corinthians, in a way that the hot-shot preachers never would, not because he was so wonderfully loving, but because the Holy Spirit had written them on his heart. Secondly, the real impact of Paul’s Gospel ministry in Corinth had been to deliver Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit to be written on their hearts – the Spirit of God writing on human hearts. Real Gospel ministry has deep heart-changing effects, effects which can only be wrought by the Holy Spirit.

2. Sufficiency from God, vv. 4-6

This powerful working of the Holy Spirit is what gives Paul confidence in His ministry calling and work:

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. – vv. 4-6, ESV

Paul knows that he is not sufficient for the realities of real life-changing Gospel ministry. And so, he is very open about how he is not sufficient in himself to claim anything as coming from himself. He’s writing this letter with Timothy, and so Timothy is saying the same thing about himself, and indeed, all true Gospel ministers make this same claim – We are nothing in and of ourselves. Christ is everything. We cannot change hearts and redeem lives, but the Holy Spirit can change hearts and can write Christ on people’s hearts in profoundly powerful ways.

Like with Paul’s language about letters of recommendation, another misunderstanding can creep in at this point: When he says that we are not sufficient in ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, Paul is not saying that it’s pointless for a minister to study and prepare well for ministry. Paul encouraged Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:15:

Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. - 2 Timothy 2:15 ESV

Part of being commissioned by God for ministry is to be entrusted with a stewardship, and a faithful steward would never be lazy and presumptuous. Jesus Himself said in Matthew 13:52, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.” (ESV) This requires diligent study to bring out of the treasure-house of God’s word both old covenant and new covenant treasures.

But ultimately, our confidence does not rest on studying and preparing well. A true Gospel minister’s confidence is great, and it is this: We are called and commissioned by God. We preach not ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. And the Holy Spirit makes the proclamation of the Gospel effective to change lives and bear real and lasting fruit in the hearts and lives of the people of God. God gives the commission. Christ is the message. The Holy Spirit makes the message effective. The triune God working together for His glory and the good of His people gives us all the confidence and sufficiency we need.

Then Paul draws this sharp contrast between a ministry of letter and a ministry of Spirit. His imagery is still inspired by these hand-written letters of recommendation, but he’s also beginning to think of the difference

between what happened with the Ten Commandments and what God promised to do and was now doing in the new covenant. He and Timothy identify themselves as “ministers of the new covenant.”

What is the new covenant? Well, this is something that was promised by God through the prophets that would be much more powerfully life-changing than the old covenant given through Moses:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

– Jeremiah 31:31-34, ESV

On the night He was betrayed, Jesus took the Passover Meal of the old covenant and transformed it into the Lord’s Supper, the communion meal of the new covenant. When He took the cup of wine after supper, He said, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”*

In the new covenant, God promised to write His law on the hearts of His people. This is the ministry of the Spirit. In the old covenant, He had written His law, the 10 Commandments, on tablets of stone, but they remained external to the people’s hearts.

Why are people drawn to legalism or to lawlessness? Fundamentally, the problem is that God’s moral law of love is not compellingly written on their hearts. Or some false teacher has convinced them that the work of the Holy Spirit in engraving the Ten Commandments on their hearts is not enough.

Earlier this week, I listened to a podcast from Theology Down Under on legalism and Christian liberty as I was preparing for men’s group. One of the speakers told a story that has been told about Charles Spurgeon that may or may not be true. The story is that Spurgeon was listening to a passionate young preacher preach a whole sermon against using tobacco and drinking alcohol. When he was done, he wanted to know what Spurgeon thought, and Spurgeon replied, “I have a hard enough time keeping God’s Ten Commandments without the two more you want to add.”

Spurgeon had the law of God written in his heart, and he was convicted by it. He knew his sin and his need for his Savior from the heart, where the Spirit had both written the Law of God and had inscribed Christ the Redeemer. This well-meaning young man wanted to add to God’s law, but God’s law is sufficient to show us our sin, lead us to our Savior, and then to show us how to live a life of obedience by faith in Christ, trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Ministry of the Spirit, vv. 3, 6-8

Paul goes on to describe the ministry of the Spirit and to further contrast it with the ministry of the letter in verses 7-8. If we take verses 3 and 6 together with 7-8, we get a picture of what Paul sees as the contrast between these ministries:

Remember, he had said in verse 3: *“And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”*

And now he says in verses 6-8: *“our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?”*

Paul begins with the thought of how much better the Corinthians themselves are as a living letter from Christ written by the Spirit of the Living God on human hearts and then he steps from there to the larger picture of how much better it is to have the new covenant, where the Spirit of God gives true life and writes both the Law of God and Christ Himself, the fulfillment of the law, on the hearts of believers.

Paul is not bad-mouthing Moses and the old covenant. In fact, the old covenant came with remarkable glory, and next week we'll dig more into the theme of glory in the last part of chapter 3. The Ten Commandments written on tablets of stone by the finger of God Himself are the very words of God and the very best possible code of morality and righteousness, for God Himself gave it. It is the Law of Love, as it spells out how to love the Lord our God and how to love our neighbors, and it reflects the character of God Himself as the One who is love. Jesus Himself came to fulfill this law in His own person and life. Paul himself said in Romans 7:12, *“the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”*

So, how do we get from the old covenant to the new covenant? How does the Law of God go from being written on tablets of stone by God to being written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit? It all depends on the work of Jesus to fulfill the Law and the Prophets.

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus said, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* God had given His people a very good law and a very good covenant. But they broke it because they were in bondage to sin. So, Jesus came and fulfilled the Law in Himself. He was the perfect embodiment of the Law of God as the Word made flesh.

After Jesus fulfilled the Law, He went to the cross and became sin for us, which we will look at again more closely when we get to chapter 5. Then, He rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven, where He was seated at the right hand of God Almighty as our mediator and representative who has defeated both sin and death by His death and resurrection.

Then, He sent the Holy Spirit to live in the hearts of all of His people on the Day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit comes to us, draws us to Christ, and unites us to Christ by faith. We are in Christ represented before the Father in heaven in perfect righteousness. So, God sees us in and through Christ our righteous representative. The Holy Spirit writes Christ in our hearts, which also puts the Law of God in our hearts, since Christ is the embodiment and fulfillment of the moral law of love summarized in the 10 Commandments.

This is the surpassing glory of the new covenant: That Christ fulfills the Law, takes our sin, defeats death, ascends to heaven to represent us before God, and sends His Holy Spirit, who joins us to Christ by faith.

Most Christians have very little idea or only a very vague conception of the amazing and wonderful spiritual truths of the new covenant in Christ. Knowing and growing in these truths is the key to growing more like Christ and walking more closely in fellowship with Him.

This is why when Paul prayed for the Ephesian church, he prayed like this –

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. – Ephesians 3:14-19, ESV

And after the power and depth of that prayer struck his own heart, Paul replied with this doxology, this word of praise to God:

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21, ESV

Do you know this Christ? This One who has fulfilled and overcome? If you do, do you know Him like this, the breadth and length and height and depth? Do you know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge? When you do, you'll be filled with all the fullness of God.

I pray you would know His love in that way, that we all would, by the power of the Spirit, know the surpassing wonderful glory of knowing Christ Jesus our Lord in this full and rich way.