

Parson to Person

2 Corinthians 3

(No Letter of Commendation Needed)

“Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious.

Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with

unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3).

Letters, Letters, Letters

During the early church era, it was common to have “traveling missionaries” or “itinerate preachers” move from town to town with letters of commendation. The “letters” would be similar to modern day credentials provided by a college/university/bible school/seminary, or something like a church membership letter provided to one church from another. It was a form of introduction and/or testimony to the gifts, callings, credentials, and credibility of the person they referenced.

Apparently Paul used and/or carried no such letters—and it seems the false apostles did! Their “documents” may have testified of them—but their work spoke for itself. They were false teachers: self-motivated, self-serving and divisive.

By contrast, Paul was self-effacing and self-sacrificial. He and his co-laborers had suffered greatly for the ministry (see 2 Corinthians 11:22–31). Nevertheless, Paul argued for his position among the Corinthians “*again*” (vs. 1). He was the founding pastor and was committed to them—even to the point of telling them the truth when it hurt (see 2 Corinthians 1–2). He served them tirelessly, prayed for them, taught them and was credentialed by their very existence (with no mention of his previous credentials as a Jewish Rabbi). The Corinthians, he said, were his letter of commendation. Their existence was the proof (vss. 2–3).

The Letter of Interest

We should note that amidst Paul needing to answer to the very people who actually knew him, his willingness to own *them* as his

credentials was a staggering testimony to his self-sacrificial/self-effacing disposition. This church was the letter of his credentials?! These were the low bar. These were the worst Christians in the Bible. Yet Paul loved them. They were “in his heart” (vs. 2). He willingly owned them as “his own.”

No Addiction to Time—or Present Evaluation

Paul was able to say “*You are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men*” because he saw the Corinthians through the lens of faith and trust in the Lord. He knew that the work in them was the work of the Lord through him—not his work in the Lord. Thus he wrote, “*And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God*” (vss.4–5). The Corinthians were God’s people and therefore God’s work. He was working in them. Paul saw the final product, by faith, rather than condemning them for their then-present condition. In this confidence he wrote, “*since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech*” (vs. 12), and “*But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord*” (vs. 18). Paul believed that the Corinthians would indeed be transformed into the image of Jesus (see Romans 8:28–30).

The Segue

Paul’s segue from the letters of commendation, to the insufficient “letter” of the Law, to the letter written into the hearts through the absolute sufficiency of the Spirit, transitioned him from self-defense to a defense of the Spirit.

Paul was confident in the work of the Spirit—a work described in Jeremiah 31:31–37 and Ezekiel 36:16–38 among others.

Technically, we are not yet in the New Covenant Era as that is to be fulfilled in the future with Israel during the Millennial Kingdom—when Jesus comes again. However, we (as members of the Body of Christ now in the Church Age) are in the very present early stages of the Holy Spirit’s work through the blessings of that Covenant. The New Covenant we now enjoy is the “soft opening” of the New Covenant (as I have named it) and is effective for all Church Age believers (Jew and Gentile alike).

This is the work Paul trusted and the mission he referred to when declaring himself a “minister of the New Covenant” (vs. 6).

The letter written into the hearts of the Corinthians was all the credentials Paul cared to address. This was the greater glory of the New Covenant.

The Glory and the Veil

The Law (the “letter” engraved in stone) was “*the ministry of death*” (vs. 7). It condemned men and led them to recognize their need for a Savior. Indeed, it was glorious—as it originated in the Lord and for His purposes.

The “veil” (according to Moses) was to provide a shielding from the brilliance of the face of Moses—who had been exposed to the glory of the Lord when receiving the Old Covenant Law (see Exodus 34:29–35). Moses’ brightly shining face terrified the Jews, and rightly so—they had been a disobedient people, and exposure to the Lord (and His Law) would humble them. However, Paul gave us a deeper explanation when he wrote of the extended purpose.

The “veil” served to shield the Children of Israel from the fading glory of the Law. According to Paul, the Jews were prevented from noting the fact that the Law was “vanishing away” in order to make way for the New Covenant (see Hebrews 8:13). Therefore, we see

that Paul used the illustration of a “veil” in double reference: First, to disable the “*hearts and minds*” of the Jewish people from seeing the brilliant but fading glory, and secondly, to obscure the “vision” of unbelieving Israelites throughout the Church Age from clearly seeing the truths found in the Old Testament Scriptures (see 2 Corinthians 3:14). I don’t need to tell you that this was done as an act of discipline (see Matthew 13:14–15).

The Veil Taken Away

Every believer today knows that we read the Old Testament Scriptures from a completely different perspective than the way it is read by unbelieving Jews. Moreover, Paul noted that the “passing away” of the Old Covenant Law has provided a liberty to those who know the Lord. This indeed is liberty from the old laws written in stone, from performance-driven failure, and from the fear of being rejected by the Lord—for “*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*” (vs. 17b). Christ has liberated both Jew and Gentile in order to allow us to enter into His rest (see Hebrews 4:10). Furthermore, those who know the Lord experience ever-increasing “brightness” (clarity) and manifest “glory” (liberty) “*in the face of Jesus*” (2 Corinthians 4:6)—as we are being transformed day by day.

No Letters of Commendation Needed

No letters of commendation were needed. Paul needed to make no defense of himself—or of his co-laborers in the Gospel. However, Paul did write to the Corinthians in defense of his ministry, in defense of the Gospel, and in defense of all to whom the Lord provides grace for grace—leading from “*glory to glory*” (vs. 18). Moreover, although no letters of commendation were needed, Paul wrote this letter in commendation of the Lord—in His defense—in defense of the truth.

May the Lord bless us all as we watch Him work in our lives, in the lives of our loved ones, and in the life of His Church.

I love you all,
Pastor Paul