

Letters of Commendation

2 Corinthians 3:1-6
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When someone works in a pencil factory, it's easy to assess his work. If he makes a thousand more pencils today than he did yesterday, he's probably doing a good job. And even more so, if he consistently makes more pencils than his coworkers.

But how should we assess the gospel ministry? Should we base our judgment on the number of new converts we have? That won't work because conversion is the Holy Spirit's work, not ours. Should we base it then on the number of visitors we get? If this were our criteria, we would have to say that the most successful ministries are megachurches. Rick Warren and Joel Osteen would be our role models, regardless of how faithful they are to Scripture. And we certainly can't base our judgment entirely on each member's spiritual growth since we can't read each other's hearts.

In Reformed Churches, we've sort of adopted the idea that success should be measured by our faithfulness alone. It's almost a sixth 'sola' in some circles. As long as we preach the Word of God and don't stray from our doctrinal standards, the Lord is blessing us regardless of discernible growth. But this doesn't seem to be a Biblical standard either. Doesn't the book of Acts say that the Lord added three thousand souls to the church and that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, the breaking of bread, fellowship and prayer (Acts 2:41-42)?

So, what exactly is the right measure of success for the gospel? How do we know if we're doing the right thing?

Letters of Commendation

Our text for this evening begins with Paul mentioning letters of commendation. Having started the church in Corinth and having ministered to it for some time both in person and by letter, he asked the congregation if he needed to prove again that he was an authentic preacher of the gospel. Did the Corinthians need something to verify his ministry? Or perhaps other churches needed the Corinthians to confirm his ministry to them? These might seem like strange questions to ask, but they're not. They were vital to the apostle's work.

Letters of commendation, such as those Paul alluded to here, were common in the first century. The New Testament mentions several of them. Before the Lord Jesus called Paul to be an

apostle, he had letters of commendation from the Sanhedrin, authorizing him to arrest Christians in Damascus. Acts 9 says, *And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem* (vv. 1–2). Likewise, Acts 18 reports that the church in Ephesus gave Apollos a letter, commending him to the saints in Achaia (v. 27). And Paul himself wrote letters of commendation for Phebe (Rom. 16:1), Timothy (1 Cor. 16:10–11) and Onesimus (Philemon 10–12).

But why did Paul mention letters of commendation here? He was going along just fine in 2 Corinthians, talking about how the Lord had taken him captive to make him a savor of life unto life and death unto death, when suddenly he started talking about commendatory letters. Why? What was his point?

Well, the answer to this has to do with the last verse of the previous chapter. Describing his own ministry, Paul wrote, *For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ.* Paul wasn't a peddler or huckster. He didn't manipulate the Word of God for financial gain. But others did, and this became a major problem in Corinth because the real hucksters opposed Paul's ministry and raised questions about his qualifications. They said he wasn't one of the original apostles. So, where did he come from? Why was anyone giving him the time of day? He wrote letters to the Corinthians that sounded mean and tough, but could he back up his demands in person? Or would he show himself to be a weak and pathetic figure? Just who was he? The hucksters insisted that he produce some kind of authentication for himself — maybe a letter from Peter or the Jerusalem Council.

Really? Paul started the church in Corinth. He ministered there for eighteen months, and it wasn't a Sunday school picnic. The Jews rejected him. The Greeks beat him and hauled him before the judgment seat. And even when things were relatively quiet, he supported himself by making tents instead of asking the church to assume his care. Yet, he remained faithful to the Lord. Luke noted the character of his ministry in Acts 18:11. Although Luke wrote Acts a few years after Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, his words confirmed the character of Paul's ministry for every Bible-believing church since then. He wrote, *And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.*

Paul's ministry was all about preaching and teaching the Word of God. Thus, he described his work in the previous chapter as sincere, God-initiated, God-judged and Christ-focused.

Heart Epistles

Nonetheless, Paul could produce the letters of commendation that his adversaries demanded. But his letters weren't written on paper and covered with ink. They were written by *the Spirit of the living God*. God himself commended Paul. Nor were his letters written on *tables of stone*, like the inscription of the law that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. Why would Paul even want a formal document like this? In Romans 7:10, he wrote, *And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death*. And in verse 6 of our text, he said that *the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life*. Instead, his commendation was written on *fleshy tables of the heart*. As such, they fulfilled God's promise to Ezekiel. The prophet wrote, *And I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them an heart of flesh* (Ezek. 11:19; cf. 36:26).

What were the letters Paul had in mind — those that were written on the heart? Paul answered this in verse 2: *Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men*. The Corinthian congregation was Paul's letter of commendation. And look where it was written — not in Corinth, not even on the hearts of the Corinthians, but on the hearts of Paul and Timothy. And because it was written on the hearts of God's ministers, it was accessible to everyone because Paul and Timothy preached the gospel wherever they went. Every time Paul opened his mouth, he testified to the same grace of God that saved the Corinthians.

Now, this was a truly remarkable thing for Paul to say for three reasons:

- First, it showed that Paul's letter of commendation was extremely powerful, much more so than if it had been written on paper. The Lord saved the members of the church in Corinth despite intense Jewish and Gentile opposition. He saved them from the great wickedness that plagued their society and culture. And he held onto them even when they foolishly returned to the filth from which they had come. There's no better example of the effectiveness of Paul's gospel.
- Second, the Corinthians illustrated the fulfillment of God's promise of a new covenant. The prophet Jeremiah foretold a day when God would write his law on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33–34). Paul said that the Corinthians were *the epistle of Christ ministered by us*.
- And third, it meant that the Corinthians testified to Jesus Christ because that's the message Paul preached. But how can we say this? The church in Corinth was a mess. It had problems like no other church. Yes, it had overcome some of its problems by the grace of God, but not all of them. So, how can a church riddled with problems exemplify a great Savior? But isn't this a problem for every church to one degree or another? An elder who went to be with the Lord a

few years ago used to tell me that he thought his church was perfect when he first joined it; but as soon as he joined it, it ceased to be perfect because it let him become a member; and after he had been in the church for a while, he saw how imperfect everyone else was. Yet, the Corinthians — even with all their faults — testified to our Savior. Paul made a judgment of charity in their favor.

And further, the fact that the Corinthian church was Paul's epistle of commendation should encourage us to strive to be what a real letter of commendation should be. And what is that? It's a church that conforms entirely to what Paul wrote in the New Testament. It looks to Jesus Christ alone for redemption and righteousness. It's filled with love and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Every commandment of God's law is obeyed. God's glory is its highest goal. It devotes itself entirely to truth and righteousness.

This is what it means to be a living epistle. Every living epistle commends the ministry of the gospel. It shows what God has accomplished by the preaching of his Word.

Able Ministers

In the last two verses of today's text, Paul went back to the question he raised in the sixteenth verse of the previous chapter, viz., *Who is sufficient for these things?* He answered it in verse 5: *Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God.*

When Paul first raised this question, his concern was the fact that the gospel cuts two ways, being both a savor of life unto life and a savor of death unto death. He realized that the Christian ministry was serious business. But in today's text, he wasn't concerned about the gospel being a savor of death unto death. His only focus was the Corinthians, whose lives illustrated the power of Christ. Who can bear this? Whose ministry lives up to the charitable judgment Paul made of the church in Corinth?

But the answer is the same, no matter how he phrased the question. No one is sufficient, i.e., as long as he thinks he does it on his own. Ministers of the gospel must humble themselves before the Lord. This past Wednesday, I led the opening devotion for our Spiritual Council from Psalm 131, an often ignored psalm but one that teaches true humility — the humility of Christ. David wrote, *LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me. Surely I have behaved and quieted myself, as a child that is weaned of his mother: my soul is even as a weaned child. Let Israel hope in the LORD from henceforth and for ever.* When we humble ourselves before God like this, we find great comfort in God's sufficiency. He makes us able ministers of the new covenant. Ministry isn't a formal thing like following ten steps to success. It's all

about trusting the Lord to do his work in his own time. As Paul wrote, the letter only kills, but the spirit gives life.

So, how should we assess the gospel ministry? It's not any one thing, but everything. Is the Word of God preached faithfully? Does it exalt Jesus Christ and rejoice in his finished work? Are God's people hearing it? Is it sanctifying them? Is it transforming them from grace to grace and glory to glory? Does it encourage a real, vital humility before the God of all creation?

Let me remind you that the answers to these questions may not be immediately obvious. On first contact, a church might look absolutely terrific, having all kinds of ministries and programs. It might even claim to preach Christ. But it could also be a façade. Yet, another church — the church at Corinth, for example — might look dead, perhaps unsalvageable. Yet, it might be the very place where the work of God's grace is taking place behind the scenes in ways we can't understand.

We can't avoid assessing churches and ministries, including our own. Jesus never prohibited making judgments, but he insisted that we make righteous judgments, i.e., judgments based on the Word of God.

With all of its problems, a living church like the one in Corinth is better than a dead one whose peace is nothing but the silence of death. The church of Laodicea was dead. Jesus said to it, *I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked: I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich; and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear; and anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see* (Rev. 3:15-18).

Let's never be like the church of Laodicea. Rather, let's strive to be even more faithful and more obedient than the church in Corinth ever was, so that we can be Paul's letter of commendation, written on his heart. Amen.