

## STUDY ON THE BOOK OF CORINTHIANS

### Second Corinthians – Chapter 3

#### Paul & Validation

*“Are we beginning to sound like those who speak highly of themselves? Do you really need letters of recommendation to validate our ministry, like others do? Do we really need your letter of endorsement? Of course not! For your very lives are our “letters of recommendation,” permanently engraved on our hearts, recognized, and read by everybody. As a result of our ministry, you are living letters written by Christ, not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God—not carved onto stone tablets but on the tablets of tender hearts.” (vv1-3 TPT)*

Paul is dealing with perception here. He asked a series of questions:

- Are we beginning to sound like those who speak highly of themselves?
- Do you really need letters of recommendation to validate our ministry, like others do?
- Do we really need your letter of endorsement?

He answers his questions with an affirmative answer: “Of course not!”

Q: Should we bother with people’s validation or perception of ourselves?

*“For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.” (Galatians 1:10)*

*“But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.” (1 Thessalonians 2:4)*

We should not depend or seek men’s approval however difficult that might sound, and it is difficult in certain instances. We should always seek the approval of God and allow Him to validate us.

#### True Evidence of Ministry

The true evidence of ministry is the lives that the ministry touches in the name of Jesus either leading to salvation, increased sanctification, growth in the Spirit, and/or expression of godly love etc... The pride of any ministry is the result of that very ministry in the lives of the beneficiaries of that ministry as a shining example of gospel. Paul said:

*For your very lives are our “letters of recommendation,” permanently engraved on our hearts, recognized, and read by everybody. As a result of our ministry, you are living letters written by Christ, not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God—not carved onto stone tablets but on the tablets of tender hearts.”*

See, read, and examine the life of the church in Corinth and these are the “letters of recommendation” for Paul’s ministry. Paul could proudly boast that because of his ministry, these Corinthians are living letters written by Christ.

Q: What do you think Paul means by saying the church in Corinth are “living letters written by Christ”? Are you a “living letter written by Christ”?

#### The Sprit & Not Letter

*“Such is the confidence and steadfast reliance and absolute trust that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficiently qualified in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency and qualifications come from God. He has qualified us [making us sufficient] as ministers of a new*

covenant [of salvation through Christ], not of the letter [of a written code] but of the Spirit; for the letter [of the Law] kills [by revealing sin and demanding obedience], but the Spirit gives life.” (vv4-6 AMP)

**“Such confidence (Greek: *popoitheseos*) we have through Christ toward God”.** The Greek word *popoitheseos* means trust or confidence or conviction. To read about Paul’s experiences as he travelled widely proclaiming the Gospel is to see a determination that could spring only from his conviction that the message he was proclaiming was the source of life to all who would hear and believe.

**“not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God”** Paul’s confidence is not self-confidence, but is instead confidence in the God whom he serves and who enables him for the task to which he has been called.

**“not of the letter (Greek: *gramma*), but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”** A *gramma* is something written, such as a letter of the alphabet or a book or an epistle.

Paul contrasts the written law (presumably meaning the Torah) with the Spirit (Romans 2:29).

- The written law is external to the person and is rigidly prescribed. It requires almost infinite study and interpretation to determine how it applies in every circumstance. It always has the potential to calcify (harden by deposition) —to harden into a substance that no longer exhibits the characteristics of life. It has, in fact, the power to kill, even as a calcified aortic artery has the power to kill.
- The Spirit, on the other hand, dwells within the person, guiding the person through the almost infinite ethical decisions that life requires us to make. Divinely driven, it is dependable, and fits all circumstances. It gives life as it steers the person through the potholes and treacheries that threaten to undo us.

### Glory of the New Covenant

*“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.” (vv7-11)*

Paul has just introduced a contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, between the letter of the Mosaic law and the leadership of the dynamic Spirit of God in verse 6 and continues in the same light from verse 7.

But why is Paul explaining such things to an overwhelmingly Gentile church? Probably because his opponents in Corinth had Jewish connections and were trying to "out-Hebrew" Paul himself. Later in this letter, Paul argues against these false apostles:

*"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I." (11:22)*

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul offers a similar defence, for the same reason to counteract the Jewish or Jewish-Christian opponents there:

*"... circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee...." (Philippians 3:5)*

Paul, the trained Pharisee, corrects these Jewish-Christian opponents with a typical Rabbinic argument from the lesser to the greater.

1. Ministry of Spirit is more splendid than ministry of death (3:7-8)
2. Ministry of righteousness is more splendid than the ministry of condemnation (3:9-10)
3. Permanent ministry is more splendid than that which passes away (3:11)

Paul was referring to Exodus 34:

*“Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony were in Moses’ hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him. So, when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the Lord had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. But whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses’ face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him.” (Exodus 34:29-35)*

Paul argues, that however glorious its origins, the law did not bring life to God's people as the Spirit does. In Paul's analogy, the glory of the law fades or passes away, while the Spirit of God continues with us to this day.

### **Great Boldness:**

*“Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech” (v12)*

Having such great promises and expectation in the Spirit encourage himself and therefore, us. Moses' ministry in bringing the Old Covenant was indeed glorious. But the era of the Spirit and the New Covenant is even more glorious, and because of it we have a great expectation for the future.

### **The Veil**

*“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.” (vv13-16)*

Paul likens the veil to blindness to the revelation of God or His word. To this day, that veil is unlifted in those who read the Old Testament without Christ as only Christ (or being born-again living in the Spirit) will remove that veil. This is the damning statement:

*“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”*

The Spirit of God is the One who takes away this blindness. It is clear that the Holy Spirit is the bringer of spiritual light, revelation, and freedom from the Law.

*“Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” (v17)*

Paul is careful to distinguish between the Lord (Christ) and the Spirit, "but dynamically they are one, since it is by the Spirit that the life of the risen Christ is imparted to believers and maintained within them.

**What kind of freedom is this?** It is freedom from the letter of the law that comes when a person begins to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In his discussion of flesh vs. Spirit in Galatians 5, Paul observes:

*"Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage..." (Galatians 5:1)*

*" But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." (Galatians 5:18)*

Q: Why is the Holy Spirit essential to help people see truth clearly and be able to grasp it? What enables people to come to Christ at all? What kind of freedom does the Spirit give us when we become Christians?

### Beholding the Glory of God

*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. (v18)*

*"We can all draw close to him with the veil removed from our faces. And with no veil we all become like mirrors who brightly reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus. We are being transfigured into his very image as we move from one brighter level of glory to another. And this glorious transfiguration comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." (v18 TPT)*

Paul concludes this section with a wonderful verse that describes Christian sanctification, the process of Christ's character being formed in us.

The Greek verb is *katoptrizō*, formed from the noun *katoptron*, "mirror." Two possible renderings have been suggested:

1. "to behold as in a mirror" (NRSV, NASB, NKJV),
2. "to reflect like a mirror" (NIV, NJB).

So how do we behold God's glory? We might ask: How did Moses behold God's glory? Why did Moses face glow? I guess because it absorbed just a little bit of God during these times of speaking with him.

As a result of beholding God in communing with him, we are "being transformed" (NIV, NRSV), "being changed" (KJV, RSV). The verb is *metamorphoō*, "to change inwardly in fundamental character or condition, be changed, be transformed." It is a compound verb, formed from *meta-*, "exchange, transfer, transmutation" + *morphoō*, "to form, shape." From this we get our English word "metamorphosis."

This process of change morphs us into God's "likeness" (NIV, RSV), "image" (NRSV, KJV). The noun *eikōn* here means "that which represents something else in terms of basic form and features, form, appearance.

For our character to be changed into God's image is our destiny. Paul taught,

*"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness (eikōn) of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Romans 8:29)*

The word "conformed" in this verse is the adjective *symmorphos*, "pertaining to having a similar form, nature, or style, similar in form," from *syn-*, "participation, together, completely" + *morphē*, "form."

This is sanctification, the gradual process of becoming holy and godly in our character to match our holy standing, which was brought about instantly through Christ's gift of salvation on the cross.