

# HOW CAN WE GAIN A SENSE OF COMPETENCE?

*SERIES: FREE AT LAST! THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE*

**By Ron R. Ritchie**

---

Have you ever noticed how we hunger to feel adequate in all manner of life situations? As life goes, however, it doesn't take long to discover just how incompetent we really are. My car broke down yesterday. I just looked at it with contempt. Some people faced with this problem can simply open the hood, touch or jiggle something and the car works again, but that's never been my experience. Actually, my first thought is usually how soon I can sell it. I went skiing once with Paul Winslow. At the top of the ski run he said, 'Let's spend the day together,' but I spent the whole day looking for him! We hunger to be the perfect husband, the perfect wife, the perfect son or daughter, the perfect student. We really want to be competent and self-sufficient, but life doesn't work out that way.

When we face these situations we are made to feel very uncomfortable. If given the choice, we avoid particular situations that make us appear to be weak, or we decide to deal with our lack of confidence or self-adequacy in our own way. That has left many of us "ripe for the pick'in" by those of the "human potential" movement or the self-help groups that are so plentiful in Silicon Valley. Who can turn down an appeal to the ego such as the one I read recently: "Man is made or unmade by himself—by the right choice he ascends. As a being of power, intelligence and love, and lord of his own thoughts, he holds the key to every situation..." How I wish life was like that! I can't even find the key to my house half the time. This, of course, is worldly thinking, but how do we, as Christians, gain a sense of competence?

In this next section, 2 Corinthians 3:1-11, we will look at two answers to that question. First, the apostle says, trust in the work of the Holy Spirit; and secondly, trust in the work of the Father. Paul had already written what we refer to as his "painful letter" to the Corinthians which dealt with the issue of sexual immorality in the church. This letter was carried by Titus to Corinth. Worried about their response, Paul waited for their reply (which was to be brought to him by Titus) in the city of Troas, but Titus failed to arrive there. Then, although the Lord had opened a door of ministry for Paul in Troas, finding no rest in his spirit because Titus did not meet as planned, he went on to Philippi in Macedonia. There, however, to his joy he found Titus, who told him that the Corinthians had responded very well to the "painful letter." Finding that the presence of the Lord and the power of God were more than adequate to defeat "spiritual forces in the heavenly realm," and the false apostles who were misleading the flock in Corinth, Paul proclaimed, "Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

"Who is equal to such a task?" the apostle asked following his cry of thankfulness to God. How can we be competent to live on earth as God intended us to live, to his honor and glory? Let's look at the apostle's answer to that first question.

## **Trust in the work of the Spirit**

**Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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. (2 Corinthian 3:1-3)**

In the midst of his joy Paul stops himself and asks, “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Does it sound like we’re bragging, like we’re trying to produce credentials because of our comments?” He says, “No”, for he writes later in this letter, “But HE WHO BOASTS IS TO BOAST IN THE LORD. For it is not he who commends himself that is approved, but he whom the Lord commends” (2 Corinthians 10:17-18). Again, Paul was not commending himself.

“Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?” he then asks. First century travelers had to carry letters of recommendation with them whenever they left their own areas. This practice was quite common in the Christian church because of the number of false teachers who tried to infiltrate the church. Paul had written such a letter for the men who carried the offering to Jerusalem during the famine there (see 1 Corinthians 16:3). Christians in Ephesus wrote a letter of introduction for Apollos (see Acts 18:27) when he traveled to various cities in Greece. But here Paul gives five reasons why he, Titus and Timothy should never need letters of introduction should they ever visit the church in Corinth again.

First, he says, “You are our letter, written in our hearts...” In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul wrote: “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.” Why would Paul and his associates need letters of recommendation to the Corinthians when the Corinthian church was a living testimony itself to the work of the Holy Spirit through the apostle? They could not deny the reality of their own changed lives—“...even when we were dead in our transgressions, [God] made us alive together with Christ...” (Ephesians 2:5)—and that transformation was written on the apostle’s heart. Paul didn’t need a letter of recommendation; all he needed to do was point to the changed lives of the Corinthians.

Earlier this year I called to say “Happy New Year” to a man attending one of our Bible studies. “Isn’t this a great year?” I said because he had come to know Jesus Christ as his Lord. But he replied, “This is not a great year, this is the best year of my whole life!” Now that is the kind of change the Holy Spirit can make in a life. No, Paul didn’t need any letters; the Corinthians had only to look among themselves for living testimonials to Paul’s ministry.

Secondly, they were “...known and read by all men....” This was not mere hearsay, but because their families and friends knew them to be different than they were before they came to Christ. While they had formerly been homosexuals, drunkards, thieves, etc., they had been washed, sanctified and justified in Christ. Their lifestyle was as plain as an open book. After they had become Christians, they were amazed at the changes they saw in these Corinthians—how they reacted under stress and tension, their obvious Christ-likeness, etc.

A few years ago I was invited to speak at the 75th anniversary of the orphanage where I had spent eight years—from age 8 to age 19. Since I had actually been thrown out on my ear from that place, I could hardly believe the invitation when I received it. I had to double check it to make sure it was for me. I had a marvelous time speaking there, but I felt a lot of stress because my best friend from high school, Dale, was sitting in the back of the auditorium, observing me during the three days of the celebration. I wondered over and over if he was “reading” the old me, or had he seen something *new* about me. I prayed, “Lord, please let him see you in me. The old me is dead. I’m a new creature. Let him see that.” After the last session Dale came up to me and said, “Ritchie, it’s real” and he walked away. He hadn’t seen a perfect man, but a man in the process of becoming like Christ. He had seen enough to convince him there was a difference in me.

Thirdly, Paul says to the Corinthians, "...being manifested [you show] that you are a letter of Christ..." In other words, when people observed their lives they clearly saw the life of the resurrected Lord being lived out in their bodies. That is why Paul could say in his letter to the Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Another reason Paul gives is that they were "cared for by us"—they were the result of Paul's ministry.' The Corinthian Christians had, in a spiritual sense, been "delivered" by the apostle. Early on, Paul had been tempted to leave the city because of pressure from the Jews, but the Lord appeared to him in a vision and told him: "...Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). The apostle stayed for a year and a half teaching them the word of God.

The fifth reason Paul did not need written letters of recommendation was that *they* were a letter from Christ, "...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." The Corinthians became letters of Christ because of the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, who was given to the church by Christ on the Day of Pentecost.

Here is how J.I. Packer describes the work of the Spirit in his book, *Keep In Step With The Spirit*:

"The Holy Spirit of God, the Lifegiver, who hovered over the waters and spoke in history by the prophets, was poured out on Christ Jesus' disciples at Pentecost to fulfill the new Comforter role that Jesus had defined for Him in his character as the Second Comforter (*paraclete*), Jesus' deputy and representative agent in men's minds and hearts. The Spirit ministers today...as Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so is His Spirit; and in every age since Pentecost, wherever the gospel has gone, the Spirit has continued to do, on a larger or smaller scale, the things Jesus promised he would when sent in his new capacity."

The lives of these Corinthians had been changed by the Spirit of the living God because Paul did one thing—he showed up in Corinth. That is what the Lord wants us to do—just show up—and he will have the Holy Spirit function in us and through us.

The Holy Spirit has five main ministries in the lives of believers in this "age of the Spirit" (this "age" began at Pentecost and it will continue until Christ returns again). First, the Holy Spirit has a ministry of conviction. According to John 16:5-11, the Spirit through believers convicts the world of sin, both righteousness and judgment, placing the truth of the gospel in a clear light before unbelievers so that it is acknowledged as truth whether they receive Christ or not.

Last night I had an opportunity to talk with a girl who I was told was in the process of becoming a Christian. I asked her what was holding her back from committing her life to Christ. "I just can't be that good" she said. "Neither can I," I replied, "but God is not asking you to become a Christian so you can try to be good. Jesus Christ will empower you with his Holy Spirit to provide all the power necessary to be like Christ. What you have to work hard at is resting in that truth." She told me she had to think about it some more, and I encouraged her to keep probing and asking until what she needed to know became clear to her. That is an example of how the Holy Spirit works through you and me to convict people of righteousness, judgment and sin.

The second work of the Holy Spirit is that of regeneration (see Titus 2:1-5). Faith is the human requirement which enables the Holy Spirit to give new life, eternal life. The word of God provides the

content for faith. It's not faith in faith, but faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior as revealed by his spoken and written word.

The third work of the Holy Spirit among believers is that of indwelling them (see 1 Corinthians 6:19). Believers are given the gift of the Holy Spirit and his ministry in their life is to empower them for living; enable them for good works and service; and purge their motives and actions—all of this in order that Christ may be known, loved, trusted, honored and praised by believers. The result is fellowship and Christ-likeness as Christians learn to draw on his power for everything. Many Christians are so excited about the Holy Spirit empowering, motivating and purging them that they draw attention to themselves: "Look at what's happening to me by the Spirit," they might say. The Holy Spirit is not meant to glorify Christians, however, but to glorify Christ, who in turn glorifies the Father in heaven as Christians, empowered by his Spirit, draw and attract people to Christ by their patience, their love, and their long suffering.

The fourth ministry of the Holy Spirit is to baptize Christians by spiritually placing them into the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:13). Christians later acknowledge this by being baptized with water.

Finally, the Holy Spirit seals Christians so that they will always be sons of God (see Ephesians 1:13-14). This is a *permanent* relationship with God. Once my son got angry with me and told me he was going to go to Africa, change his name and never come home. I told him, "Just try it! You're still a Ritchie, still my son, and you always will be!" We are sealed forever in Christ.

So, in answer to Paul's earlier question, "Who is equal to such a task" of living and functioning in light of being thankful to God? Only those who learn to trust in the person and power of the Holy Spirit. As Christians we gain a *godly sense of competence*, not in our talents, gifts or ministries, but by trusting in the person and power of the Holy Spirit to work in and through us to the honor and glory of Christ, who in turn glorifies the Father.

My wife and I were once invited to speak to the student body at Westmont College on the topic of marriage. When I look back at our marriage, times were so bad on occasion I can't believe we're still married. But we learned to trust our Lord in those difficult years, and these past few years have been wonderful. Still, we were scared to death at the prospect of facing a thousand students and being honest with them and wondered why we had ever accepted the engagement. On the morning of the first session I was really nervous and prayed, "Lord, you have brought us this far. We believe you are going to function through us. We want your Spirit to flow through us because my wife and I have no sense of competence or adequacy." Well, to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ the people at the college said it was a wonderful week of spiritual encouragement. So, who was really speaking that weekend? It was the Holy Spirit speaking through us, and that's the way we are to live.

Now Paul goes on to show that his confidence also comes from trusting in the work of the Heavenly Father.

### **Trust in the work of the Father**

**Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a 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, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will**

**the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory. (2 Corinthians 3:4-11)**

Again, we come back to the question “Who is equal to the task of functioning as God intends us to live and function?” Paul responds, saying: “Such confidence we have through Christ toward God.” In Philippians 3:4-6 we discover where the apostle got his confidence before he became a Christian: “If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless” (NIV). Then he came to know Jesus Christ and learned how to put aside the flesh and allow the Lord to flow through him.

Here is what the religious flesh looks like in the words of a twentieth-century “human potential” movement writer: “There...is a better way to live. When we were given dominion over the world, we were also given dominion over ourselves. God is not our navigator. It was never his intention to chart a course for each one of us and thus, place us all under his bondage. Instead he bestowed each of us with intellect and talent and vision to map our own way, to write our own book of life in any manner we choose.” We are surrounded by people who are hungering and craving for this kind of human potential salesmanship because they have no sense of adequacy or competence and they can’t stand the idea of weakness.

But scripture tells us, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price...” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Further, Paul says in Galatians 2:20: “...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”

Where did Paul get his sense of competence after his salvation? He tells us in these verses: “Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God....” The secret of Paul’s life and ministry was his total dependence on God to function in and through him for eternal purposes. Normally we think if we give up our self-confidence, self-determination, self-reliance, talents, skills, personality and strength we will be left in a vacuum, a no-man’s land, naked and weak. But Paul says quite the opposite is true. The moment we declare we are inadequate for the task set before us and call on God, he immediately fills us with *his* adequacy, *his* wisdom, *his* strength, *his* knowledge, and *his* love. Paul’s experience with this led him to proclaim: “*I can do all things* through [Christ] who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13, italics mine).

Paul goes on to say, “[God] also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant....” A covenant is an agreement between two parties which is designed to regulate their relationship. A covenant may be a last will and testament directing the disposition of one’s earthly goods upon one’s death. A covenant may be an arrangement by one party with unilateral authority and power, which the other party may accept or break but not change. Notice that Paul says it is God who enables us to be ministers of a new agreement. Basically, we have an *arrangement* with God. The new covenant is God’s *arrangement* for living with his people; a unilateral agreement with authority and power which the other party may accept or break but cannot change. God made several such covenants or arrangements with his people Israel. He made covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, the nation Israel, and with David (just to name a few) so they could live in a right relationship with him.

Now the old covenant was the Mosaic Law which was handed down to Moses by God on Mt. Sinai.

Now the first mention of the new covenant actually occurs in the Old Testament in Jeremiah 31-32 (and also in Ezekiel 16 and Isaiah 59). In Jeremiah 31, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah saying,

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah...But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days...I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it [they will have a change of heart]; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people [they will have fellowship with God]. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more [their sins will be forgiven].” (Jeremiah 31:31, 33-34)

In the upper room at the Last Supper, Luke tells us “[Jesus] took the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood’” (22:20). These are the same words used in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and in chapter 8 of Hebrews. The next day that blood was shed; the church was then to experience all the spiritual blessings that were promised to Israel. That is, until Christ returns to this earth again. This new covenant or eternal covenant is called a “better covenant” in Hebrews because the old covenant has become obsolete. As was discussed in the previous message (Discovery Paper 530), the word “new” in both the Hebrew and Greek does not refer to “new” as brand new, but “renewed,” “fresh.” In other words, better in quality but not *new* in time.

David Roper, in his book *The New Covenant In The Old Testament*, describes the new covenant this way: “[The New Covenant] was, in fact, a restatement of the basic eternal arrangement for maintaining a living, loving relationship between God and man...As we cast our lot with him and lay hold of his life, he will increasingly bestow on us his power for obedience and his forgiveness for weakness and failure.”(1) The new covenant is described in the words of Jesus on the night before his death: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). Therefore, the new covenant is everything coming from God, nothing from us. It is total dependence on Christ for the power to cope with reality, and the result is peace, joy and wholeness in the Holy Spirit.

In his letter, Paul goes on to say, “[God] also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” The law reveals who God is, and that revelation drives us to the grace of God who provides us with what is necessary in order to keep the law. The law was given to Israel and to man to reveal the holiness of God; to reveal the sinfulness of man; to reveal the steps necessary to have fellowship with God; to be a schoolmaster to lead men to Christ; to unify God’s people; to make Israel a kingdom of priests; to make provision for forgiveness of sin; to provide instruction for worship; to reflect into the hearts of men to see if they were godly; and, to reveal Jesus as the Christ. But this old covenant, with all of its outward institutions, rituals and sacrificial services was but a shadow of better things to come (see Hebrews 10:1). “When [Jesus] said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Hebrews 8:13). Paul says “the letter kills” because it reveals truth, but brings with it no power to help us keep the law. The new covenant, on the other hand, not only shows us the very heart of God and his desires for us, but it also provides the Holy Spirit who gives life and power.

Now Paul contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant in three statements, hoping to show the Corinthians the glory of the new covenant. First, “But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with

glory?” He has in mind Jews who have become Christians but were being tempted to put themselves back under the law.

The law condemned man. It produced death and killed the spirit because man found he could not keep the requirements of the law. The young woman whom I have already mentioned who is in the process of becoming a Christian thought that Christianity was just a matter of obeying a different set of laws than the ones she had currently set as a standard for herself—and failed to keep! But humanity was never designed to keep the law. On the contrary, the law was given to demonstrate to us just how far we had strayed from the character and standards of God. Here’s another quote I read recently by yet another leader of the “human potential” movement on this subject: “If the truth were known, we humans seldom pay much attention to the columns of instructions, regulations, laws and canons, no matter how important or beneficial they may seem. Consider the most important guides for living we have ever received, the Ten Commandments. Even those sacred laws are frequently ignored, since less than half of all those who piously profess to believe in them cannot recite more than five of them...”

Paul tells us the ministry that brought death, the law, “came with glory...fading as it was.” The old covenant brought death to the spirit, although it came “with glory.” It came with consuming fire, wonderful to behold. It had a glory even Moses could not look at, but it was a fading glory. I was raised in a church that had a lot of glory about it. I took my mother-in-law there recently and waited for her while she completed what is called ‘the stations of the cross.’ As I stood there I thought, “I remember all of this.” As a boy I thought it was glorious, especially on Palm Sunday and Easter. But I would never dream of going back to it in exchange for all I have now. I am no longer part of it because I have seen something much more glorious. Once I felt guilty all the time because I could not keep up with all the laws that church had impressed on me. The glory of it kept fading. In fact, I had stopped going to that church altogether, except for a couple of times a year.

Secondly, Paul says, “For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it.” Again, the law condemns, but the new covenant brings righteousness. Simply stated, it’s like comparing the sun and the moon. The other evening there was a beautiful full moon, so bright that I could even see the “man in the moon.” When I got up the following morning the moon was still visible, but by now the sun was up also so that the moon had lost all its glory. In the same way, Paul is saying that the glory of the old covenant faded in the light of the new covenant.

Finally, Paul says, “For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.” The law was fading away. It was temporary, a shadow of what was to come. But the new covenant is lasting, better, and eternal because the Spirit, not the law, is at the center of it.

How can we gain a sense of competence to be able to live on this earth as God intended us to live? First, we need to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul’s sense of competence to live and minister came from trusting in the person and work of the Holy Spirit to change and keep the lives of the believers in Corinth. So we must also trust in the person, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only is he at work maturing our lives but he is also at work convicting, regenerating, indwelling, baptizing and sealing the lives of others—our families, friends and neighbors.

Secondly, we must trust in the work of our Heavenly Father. Our sense of competence to cope with earthly and spiritual reality does not come from self-effort, self-reliance or self-confidence. Our competence comes from God. Through the shed blood of his Son Jesus Christ he has provided a new, fresh restatement of the basic eternal arrangement for maintaining our relationship with him as we trust him to provide power for obedience and forgiveness for our weakness and failure.

As I was leaving my house this morning I opened up my Bible to a passage in Exodus, which is a conversation between Moses and God regarding Moses' feelings of incompetence to go and face Pharaoh and deliver God's people from Egypt:

Then Moses said to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say." (Exodus 4:10-12)

We have a new covenant in Jesus Christ. Just show up—in your neighborhoods, in your work, in all your relationships—and allow God to work through you and speak through you. He promises to make you "adequate as [a servant] of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life."

---

#### NOTES

(1) David H. Roper, *The New Covenant in the Old Testament*, © 1976 Discovery Foundation Inc., p. 25. Currently out of print.

Where indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ("NIV"). © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. Otherwise, Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE ("NASB"). © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Catalog No. 531  
2 Corinthians 3:1-11  
2nd Message  
Ron R. Ritchie  
March 10, 1985

[Back to the Index](#)

Copyright © 1996 [Discovery Publishing](#), the publications ministry of [Peninsula Bible Church](#). This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the prior written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306-3695.