

THE CURIOUS CASE FOR CONFIDENCE

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Steve Zeisler

Ray Stedman's book, *Authentic Christianity*, is essentially a commentary on 2 Corinthians 2-6. We're going to look at some of that material in this message. Below is a quote from Ray's preface about this section of Scripture and about the ministry of the new covenant:

This is the book I have wanted to write above all others. It deals with the very heart of the gospel...that truth is the new covenant of which the Lord Jesus spoke when He passed the cup at the Last Supper.... When we understand the full implications of that new covenant, we discover the most liberating secret in the Word of God! It is the secret, as Paul put it, of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." All God's plans for present victory over evil...and future glory rest squarely on that fundamental union with Christ! (1)

The universal experience of human beings is of the old covenant. We are all born into it. It operates in both the secular and the religious world, and it is the one that seems so normal to us that we very often can't imagine another. Life proceeds on this bargain: performance leads to reward, and failure leads to rejection and punishment. You're paid off for how well you do, how good you look, your success in understanding what's valued, your ability to control your own destiny, your ability to win the competition. This arrangement applies everywhere: economics, athletics, international relations, the social order at the local junior high, relationships among siblings. It is everybody's common experience. Sadly, it's true of most religious experience as well. Most people wish for more from God, but practically, when they consider religion, they discover that apparently God rewards ethical performance. Good people are his favorites, and status within the religious community is gained by religious achievement.

But what Ray wrote about in *Authentic Christianity*, and what the passage before us is about, is what he termed "the most liberating secret in the Word of God..." (2) We wish there was a different way to live. We long for an experience of God and of life that is of grace, in which our performance is not the only measure of who we are, in which love is greater than the measure of how well we do in the competition. And the liberating secret is that our hopes come true.

The secret of unfailing success

From the opening chapters of 2 Corinthians, we realize first of all that Paul was writing amidst personal suffering and humiliation. We read in the opening verses of the book that he despaired of life itself. He was subject to tremendous physical pressure and threats. In addition he was being rejected by people who had once loved him and followed him. When he left the church in Corinth, others had come along and begun to undermine his authority, saying that he wasn't a valid apostle, and the believers shouldn't listen to him.

Yet after he's told us of these difficulties, in 2 :14-16 we read,

But 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. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

The image he draws is that of a Roman triumph. It was the habit of caesars to have an enormous parade and pageant to reward generals who had taken territory in great victories in foreign wars. They were given a chance to march through the streets of Rome in procession with slaves and soldiers behind and bands playing and people cheering. That was called a triumph, or triumphal procession.

What Paul is saying, curiously, amidst all the hard things that were happening to him, is, "...Thanks be to God, who always

leads us in triumphal procession." There's an extraordinary, almost ridiculous optimism about the man. Despite everything that's obvious to him and everybody else, he assumes triumph, that God is winning, that his life is influential. Every place the knowledge of Christ is spread through our influence, we always win. Triumph is inevitable. Then he asks that obvious question at the end of verse 16: "Who is equal to this? How is such a thing possible? Who is adequate or competent for inevitable victory?" Because if the old deal remains in force, it means you have to perform to be rewarded. Who is capable of everlasting victory? Who always comes out on top? Who is smart enough and strong enough and quick enough and driven enough to never have a losing streak? No one. And clearly, Paul is saying, there has to be some other basis for this optimism, some other way to understand that God is leading us and triumph takes place. How does such a thing come about?

Let's read 2:17-3:4:

Unlike so many, we do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God.

Again he's speaking of this amazing miracle of confidence that is without obvious basis that we can discover. Verses 5-8:

Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as 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 that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

In 3:5-6, the Greek word translated "competent" is the same one Paul used as in 2:16: "And who is *equal* to such a task?" Who is capable of this remarkable triumph that rises above the difficult circumstances? Now his answer is that it doesn't come from us; it comes from God. There is a "new covenant," a new deal, a new way of life, a new basis on which God gives himself away: not our performance, but a gift because of his love.

The new covenant vs. the old

Paul is arguing that everything changed when we were united with Jesus, when God accepted us in his Son and made us ministers or servants of the new covenant. There are many contrasts that are sown throughout these chapters, and time doesn't permit us to even read them all. But let me just tell you of some of them.

There's a contrast between the old and the new covenant regarding how you gain authority to speak. Under the old covenant you had to have letters of recommendation, degrees from important universities, some human institution's bestowing power on you and granting you the standing to speak. You had to work your way up the ladder. You achieved in education, then you achieved in your profession, you were given higher status, and so on. Paul says that in the new covenant the credentialing happens on the inside. It's an issue of character and of God's presence. It's authority that comes from the Spirit. He might choose the unusual voice. He's very likely to give authority to the poor, the misunderstood, the left-behind.

There's a difference in outcome. One covenant leads to condemnation; the other to righteousness. Is the writing of God inside us, on our hearts, or is it exterior to us in ink or on tablets? Is it a living person or a lifeless code?

There's a difference in value. One covenant brings a fading, lesser glory; the other is lasting and more glorious.

There's a difference regarding our understanding of ourselves. Under the old covenant we have to mask and hide our failure. Under the new covenant our understanding of ourselves is anchored in who we will be; and because we know where we're going and who we are in the future, we live a life of freedom. We are described as clay pots that on the outside appear to be nothing but the most ordinary of substances, yet within them they contain an enormous treasure.

There's a contrast between the face of Moses and the face of Christ.

All these contrasts between the new and the old use imagery from the world, as we've already said. One example was the Roman triumph, in which the military power of the greatest empire the world had ever known to that time was brought into view. Paul says that we are led in triumph greater than that of any Roman general. Another example is the towering figure of Moses, perhaps the greatest figure in the Old Testament, who went up on the mountain of God and brought back out of the cloud that was over the mountain, out of the lightning and thunder and smoke and earthquakes, tablets written by the finger of God. Yet the new covenant, life in Christ, is greater than Moses' covenant. We've been given something that is so remarkable it defies description.

I'd like us to take up three concepts in all this description of the ministry of the new covenant: integrity, boldness, and perseverance.

Integrity

The contrast between the new and the old covenants is displayed in integrity. There's nothing new about religious phonies. They've existed for a long time. There are people who will take your hunger for God, your sorrow over your failure and sin and brokenness, your longing for God to receive you, and use that to take advantage of you financially.

That's what Paul is talking about in 2:17: "We do not peddle the word of God for profit. On the contrary, in Christ we speak before God with sincerity, like men sent from God." Look at 3:1: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?" He is asking, in essence, "Is the latest poll important to us? Do we have to lean on human credentials? Do we do demographic studies to find out exactly how to phrase things to have maximum impact for the moment? Or do we rather give priority to saying what God wants us to say for his sake, in his sight, being true first and foremost to the one who sent us, speaking about our experience of the truth that has changed us, meaning what we say? Do we declare that you can have an experience that we've never experienced ourselves, for instance? Is our speech manipulative?"

In 4:2 he makes the same point about integrity:

Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

There's no distortion, no manipulation, no marketing strategy developed to get around your conscience. We appeal to every man's conscience in the sight of God, knowing that God is listening and observing.

Everyone has some experience with emotional manipulation that attempts to capture us without persuading our minds of the viewpoint being advocated. I remember such efforts when our kids were little. Some days it was the best way to influence a determinedly negative little one. Forbidding the eating of broccoli was the surest way to ensure it would be consumed. We got around them rather than persuading them.

But what happens of course is that kids grow up, and eventually that trick won't work. If all they know is that parents manipulate without gaining their agreement, without their ever understanding any basis for their actions, then eventually they'll assume that there is no basis.

I remember a half-time speech that an assistant football coach gave when I was in high school. He was yelling at the top of his lungs, and he picked up a helmet and started banging lockers with it. It was a small locker room with metal lockers, and the banging reverberated loudly as he yelled, "We're gonna go out and kill those guys in the second half. And they hate your mother, and we hate their mother. And they kicked your dog...." He went on and on. The whole thing was completely incoherent. He wasn't saying anything that was true. But it was filled with emotion. The whole team got revved up, and there was an adrenaline rush that resulted from this incoherent speech. It lasted for only about two plays.

It's possible to do that with "God words" too, to say every teary thing that you can think of, to use beautiful poetry that has no meaning. But in the long run, people finally wake up and say, "Is there anything to this? Do you mean what you say? Do you live by what you proclaim others should live by?" Paul is saying that as ministers of the new covenant, we have integrity. We aren't interested in just the short-term response; we are interested in telling the truth because we believe the truth sets people free. What we say of ourselves and of God is true today, and it will be true next week, and decades hence. It's not a passing fad or a marketing ploy.

Boldness

The second concept we're going to examine is boldness. In 3:12 Paul says,

Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold.

He goes on to talk about the difference between the face of Christ and the face of Moses. In the old covenant there was the giving of the law, the requirement that we act in a certain way in order to please God. The better we do, the more pleased he is. Paul refers to the Old Testament account of how Moses went up on the mountain and met with God. When he came back, because he had been in God's presence, his face was so bright it was like looking into the sun (Exodus 34:29-35). He had to put a veil over his face to talk to people, because they couldn't look at him. Eventually he realized that the brightness had faded away, but he continued to wear the veil. He wore it not because he was still hard to look at, but because he didn't want anybody to know that the brightness had gone away. He liked the idea that people thought of him as being so godly that he was unapproachable. He was pretending to be something he wasn't.

But the alternative to that is what Paul talks about in verse 12: boldness based on hope. It's not bravado, it's courage. It's expressed for different reasons and in a different way. He says, "We know what we will be someday. Since we have such a hope, we're bold." Someday we're destined to be like Christ, and everything about us that is honestly the case now—all the disappointments, the feet of clay, the inadequacies that we wish no one would know about—we confess. But we're nonetheless bold and confident and decisive. We will speak of Christ. We will claim his love. We're not withdrawn, because honesty doesn't create withdrawal; it creates enthusiasm, excitement, a sense of adventure, because we know that we are being changed. That's why 3:17 says,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

Wearing a mask is an enormous burden. Promoting a version of yourself that you know in your heart isn't true is a prison. But where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Verse 18:

And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The word "reflect" suggests that we're looking in a mirror. Beyond the reflection of our earthly existence we see the transformation that is taking place on the inside. We are becoming more and more like Christ. We are reflecting more and more who Jesus is. We know who we will be, where we will be someday. We can claim the future now: "I will be bold. I have gifts and opportunities. I will walk through open doors without fear. I am an unmasked, honest person, but nonetheless more courageous and undaunted than ever."

Perseverance

The third concept is perseverance. These contrasts between the new and the old covenant are clear with regard to finishing the course, not quitting. Chapter 4 twice makes the statement "We do not lose heart." Verse 1 says,

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.

How can you live a life of being in love with Christ that perseveres through anything, that doesn't get tricked or dissuaded, that doesn't give up, that doesn't crack under pressure? Most of chapter 4 is about persecution and pain and suffering, being crushed, being misunderstood, being abandoned. Having written as clearly as he can about suffering, Paul says, "Even so, we don't lose heart." How is it possible to not lose heart? Let's read the last three verses of chapter 4:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

On the inside, as temples of the Holy Spirit where God himself lives, we're being renewed day by day. The way to persevere is to look not at the obvious evidence, but at what is invisible and future to us, to see what is even more true than our

experience of deprivation and difficulty. What is more true is that God loves us, and we are destined for an eternity spent with him. Even now we are royal children, beloved of the Lord. We never take a breath or spend a moment apart from his tender care and his infinite concern. His nearness and his power available to us are unailing.

Paul declares that optimism, enthusiasm, confidence, the ability to rise above struggles, the assumption that God is at work when we can't see him, all come as a result of apprehending that the bargain has changed. It's based on love, not on performance. It's based on what God has already accomplished for us, on gifts he has already given: a new arrangement, a new covenant.

An angel's-eye view of ourselves

I don't know about you, but I like the accounts in the Bible in which angels are prominent.

Consider this: "In the sixth month God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin who was pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary." (Luke 1:26-27.) Nazareth was a bit of a backwater. Galilee was not the place of God, Jerusalem was. Galilee was miles to the north. It was country, and Nazareth was a country town. And here was a young girl about whom we know nothing except what we've just been told. She was the most ordinary of souls. Yet Gabriel said to her, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." (Luke 1:28.) The angel could see what Mary couldn't see of herself. She was the one on whom the eyes of heaven were now focused. Something dramatic was about to happen. She was greatly troubled at these words and wondered what kind of greeting it was. She didn't get it yet. The future was more remarkable than she could conceive of in her wildest imagination. Because angels can see what is invisible to us, they believe things about us that we can't believe of ourselves: the value we have to God, the love with which he regards us, our importance to his plan.

Consider another angel visit from Judges 6 in the Old Testament. Verse 11: "The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites." During the time of the judges, the children of Israel were a beaten people. A wave of Midianites would come at the end of the harvest and take everything. Gideon would later say, "I'm from a small house in a small tribe in a small place, a nobody." He had saved a few handfuls of grain and had sneaked into a little winepress to thresh it in secret.

Verses 12-13a: "When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.' 'But sir,' Gideon replied, 'if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about....?'" The response of Gideon was like the response of Mary. "What in the world are you talking about? Here I am in a winepress, starving! What do you mean, 'The LORD is with you, mighty warrior?'" But the angel could see what Gideon couldn't see. The angel could see the future. The angel could see the plans of God, of which Gideon was the center.

That's what Paul is writing about in 2 Corinthians 4. "We fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen." We need to see what angels see—ministers of a new covenant: women and men who live expectantly, optimistically, triumphantly. "Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God."

NOTES

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*, © 1975, 1996 Elaine C. Stedman, Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 9.
2. Ibid.

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