

CREDENTIALS & QUALIFICATIONS

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

By Doug Goins

Today we celebrate the triumphal entry of the Lord Jesus Christ into the city of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. The people of Jerusalem sang from the Psalms: "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord..." (Psalm 118:26a). They shouted for him: "Hosanna to the Son of David" (Matthew 21:15), "Hosanna in the highest!" (Mark 11:10). But the gospel accounts tell us that by Friday morning the same crowds that shouted "Hosanna!" were shouting "Crucify him!"

The apostle Paul reflects on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 13:4, "...He was crucified because of weakness, yet He lives because of the power of God." God's plan and purpose in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is more powerful than the vacillating movement of public opinion in Jerusalem. In some degree, the apostle Paul might identify with Jesus in terms of his victimization by public opinion. He experienced a similar reversal in his relationship with the church he planted in the Greek city of Corinth. Their attitude toward Paul was as fickle as the crowds in Jerusalem were toward Jesus during Holy Week. Although Paul had brought the gospel to Corinth, and the believers there were his spiritual children, seven years later they challenged his credentials and qualifications for ministry. Much of the 2 Corinthian letter addresses the painful issue of their mistrust of Paul. In 2 Corinthians 13:3, Paul refers to their demand for evidence that he represents Jesus among them: "...since you are seeking for proof of the Christ who speaks in me,..."

Second Corinthians 3:1-6 addresses two specific issues. The first three verses deal with the matter of Paul's for life and ministry. Secondly, verses 4-6 cover the issue of adequacy or qualification for life and ministry.

From our study of the 1 Corinthian letter (Discovery Papers [#4508-#4541](#)), we know that the church in Corinth seemed to suffer from terminal adolescence. In this letter, however, we find that their immaturity is reinforced by self-appointed spiritual leaders, strangers who came to Corinth after Paul left. They offered false options in terms of maturity and growth in Christ. Paul mentioned them briefly in 2 Corinthians 2:17, "For we are not like many, peddling the word of God...." In 2 Corinthians 11:4, he says that they preach another Jesus, encouraging the believers to receive a different spirit and a different gospel. The strangers apparently carried an impressive letter of introduction from a member of the mother church in Jerusalem, so they were received into the confidence of the church on the basis of that letter. After ingratiating themselves to the church, they were critical of Paul's lifestyle and approach to ministry. They asked if Paul also carried a letter of recommendation with him when he arrived seven years before, implying that Paul was an apostle without proper credentials.

Credentials for life and ministry

Verses 1-3 deal with the issue of credentials for ministry. Paul argues that the only credentials he needs is the undeniable reality of the changed lives of the Corinthian believers:

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.

No self-condemnation

Paul asks two questions in 3:1. The first can be paraphrased, "Does what I've written to you in this letter seem like I'm bragging?" From 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 (Discovery Paper #4633), it might seem that Paul commends himself because he says he is always grateful for his circumstances. Paul lives out of great optimism, confident that God leads him in triumph to impact people. His life is like an aroma that makes a difference wherever he goes because God works through him. He asks a question about resources in 2:16b: "And who is adequate for these things?" Paul replies that he does not trust his own resources, but only spiritual resources available from God. He then gives the basis of his life's commitment. It is a life built on integrity, lived with purpose and focus. He is transparent and vulnerable before people. Finally, he is confident about his authority to live, speak, and relate to people because of his confidence in Jesus Christ.

What he says could be perceived as having a tone of self-congratulation. The Message paraphrases the question as, "Does it sound like we're patting ourselves on the back?..."(1) From the apostle Paul's other writings we know that such an attitude would have been abhorrent to him. Later he writes to the Corinthians, "BUT HE WHO BOASTS, LET HIM BOAST IN THE LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends" (2 Corinthians 10:17).

No letter of recommendation

The second question in 3:1 could be paraphrased, "Do we actually need to show you an introductory letter of reference so that we can now serve among you? Do you really mean that?" The reality is that even legitimate letters of introduction have their limitations. William Barclay's commentary on this passage points out that in the ancient world, just as today, written testimonials on somebody's behalf might not mean much. He gives an example of the philosopher Diogenes, a cynic who lived in Corinth around 340 BC. When asked by one of his friends to write a letter of recommendation for him, Diogenes wrote, "You are a man, he will know at a glance. But whether you are a good or bad man, he will discover if he has the skill to distinguish between good and bad. And if he is without that skill he will not discover the facts even though I write to him a thousand letters." (2) The Corinthians had not figured that out. Paul's clear statement in these three verses is that no human letter of reference is needed. Rather, he points them to the spiritual reality of their own changed lives. J.B. Phillips calls them "an open letter." As a church family, their lives, collectively, are a divine letter of commendation.

Acts 18 recounts the incredible ministry God gave Paul when he arrived in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, he describes the change that occurred in their lives through the power of the gospel: "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, not swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you [Corinthians]; 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." He is clear that it is God who accomplished all the changes they experienced. The freedom they enjoyed, the deliverance from destructive lifestyles all happened because Christ had changed them. The irony in 2 Corinthians is that the people want to discuss Paul's position and authority, his apostolic office and ecclesiology. While Paul is excited about changed lives, the Corinthians want to play church.

The spiritual reality of changed lives

There are five images in verses 2 and 3 that show the absurdity of requiring Paul, and others who ministered with him, to bring letters of introduction whenever they visited:

"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."

The first image is the paper on which this divine letter is written is hearts. Paul calls their changed hearts "tablets of human hearts," a change that even affects Paul's heart: "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men." It is important to note that "heart", used twice in the two verses, is used in a Semitic sense. It refers to the inmost self or the center of the personality in contrast to our popular English usage referring to the seat of emotion or feeling. Biblically, the heart is the core of our spiritual sensitivity, both rational and emotional. It is the place where God begins his work of transformation and renewal. For us, the test of any relationship or influence we might have is qualitative--whether our hearts and lives are spiritually transformed.

Second, Paul says the change of heart will be observed by a watching world. The second phrase in verse 2--"known and read by all men"--literally means to know something well enough that it is recognized, like reading words on a page. It is similar to our modern expression, "You read me like a book. You know what's going on in me." The changed lives of the Corinthian believers were as easy to read as a letter left open on a table. Their families, friends, and co-workers could see the difference in them since they came to Christ.

The third image is in the first phrase of verse 3 in which Paul says the writer of the letter is Christ. It is Jesus Christ who changes lives. He is the one who reaches into our loneliness, forgives our sinful past, and removes the burden of guilt. He is the one who heals our aching heart no matter what the wounding. Paul is clear that he did not write the letter, he is merely the one who delivered it. The fourth image can be found in the middle of verse 3 in which he says the letter is "cared for by us." Other translations say "administered," or "delivered" by us. This living letter in Corinth was a result of Paul's faithfulness in preaching the gospel there.

It was difficult for Paul to carry the message to the people in Corinth. The Acts 18 record tells us that as soon as he arrived and started preaching, there was immediate opposition from Jewish religious leaders and the threat of violence. But Paul says the Lord Jesus himself appeared to him one night in a vision and said, "...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). It gave Paul the courage and confidence to continue carrying the mail, to be a courageous postman in delivering the letter. He stayed a year and a half, teaching the Word of God and seeing many come to faith in Christ.

And, the fifth image in verse 3 is the ink with which the letter is written. Paul says it is "written not with ink, but with the [Holy] Spirit of the living God." Paul appeals to the indelible reality of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the believers. Any kind of ink on any kind of writing surface will blur and fade with time. But the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit inside a believer in Jesus Christ guarantees the indestructibility of the Christian life. In his letter to the Ephesians the apostle states, "It's in Christ that you, once you heard the truth and believed it (this Message of your salvation), found yourselves home free--signed, sealed, and delivered by the Holy Spirit. This signet from God is the first installment on what's coming, a reminder that we'll get everything God has planned for us, a praising and glorious life (Eph 1:13-14, as paraphrased in *The Message*). (3)

Did Paul need letters of commendation? Did he need to pump himself up, to congratulate himself in the presence of these people? Absolutely not! Their changed lives are the only commendation, the only credentials the apostle needs. A powerful example of this way of living can be seen in the life of Azad Marshall, a friend of ours from Pakistan. Azad is the Anglican Bishop of the Gulf States in the Middle East. There are churches in several nations under his care, and he is also the director of a nationally known Christian foundation in Pakistan. I have been with him in several large gatherings both here and in Pakistan, and have heard him introduced in terms of his institutional connections and professional degrees. But I saw the legitimacy of his life and ministry in the Middle East when a team of us was visiting his home in Lahore, Pakistan. At a literacy center and experimental farm he helped build and now helps operate outside Lahore we talked with several folks who have been personally affected by Azad's life. They are men and women who have come to faith in Jesus Christ out of Islam, and are now being protected from angry family members and religious leaders. I spoke with one woman who had been saved out of prostitution in the inner city. There are men who are being retrained vocationally, who have been relocated with their families to another part of the country for the sake of safety. All of the people gave testimony to Azad's

faithfulness in sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are Azad Marshall's "living letters of commendation," his real credentials for life and ministry rather than his degrees and institutional titles. That is what really matters, and we are called to the same thing.

Qualification for life and ministry

Verses 4-6 answer Paul's question, "And who is adequate for these things?" (2:16). Where do we get the ability for the spiritual impact that Paul or Azad Marshall seem to have? Do we have to go to Bible college or seminary? Do we have to attend special workshops, the right seminars, or the right conferences? Do we need to listen to the right tape series, read certain books, or listen to Christian radio a certain number of hours a week? Paul addresses the issue personally and in terms of his own sense of adequacy for life, his confidence, and empowerment. Notice that the summary is wonderfully Trinitarian. It speaks of the ministry of Jesus, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit:

And 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.

Paul is confident through Christ. He has learned that sufficiency comes from God, and if his life makes a difference, it will be empowered by the Holy Spirit within him.

Confident through Christ

The trust or affirmation that Paul felt in the commendation of his lifestyle and ministry was not based on self-confidence or natural instincts, or on his innate abilities or the good reputation he might have gained through the years. His effectiveness was due only to the activity of the risen Christ Jesus within him. Paul's writings in the New Testament attest to his honest confession. He wrote to the Christians in Philippi, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). To the church in Galatia, he said, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me..." (Gal 2:20). He encouraged the Colossian believers with the reality of Christ in them, the hope of glory (Col 1:27). He says of the Lord Jesus, "...I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (1:29). Paul's basis for living is not self-confidence, but Christ-confidence.

Sufficient from God

Next Paul deals with the issue of sufficiency from God. He makes an absolute statement that cannot be twisted (verse 5):

Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves...

Paul says there is nothing from himself. It is an amazing admission since Paul was a brilliant Jewish rabbi, an Old Testament Bible scholar with an incredible mind and a great facility with words. He tells the Philippians where he placed his confidence before he became a Christian: "...although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil 3:4-6). His ancestry was the best, his orthodoxy was impeccable, and he knew and believed his Bible. Paul was a religious activist. He threw himself into being good for God, and lived absolute moral perfection. As far as his own conscience was concerned, he was blameless as to what the Bible said about personal lifestyle.

In Philippians 3:8, Paul says he eventually learned to count his credentials as worthless rubbish compared to drawing on the resources of God in Jesus Christ for his adequacy. His success in life and ministry would not be based on natural gifting, talent, training and effort, but solely on the grace of God. It was a long and difficult

struggle for the apostle to realize this. It did not happen immediately at his conversion. For probably 14 years Paul tried to be good for God and serve Jesus, but he finally quit trusting his abilities and training, and let God work through him. If nothing is coming from Paul, then the phrase at the end of verse 5 is important: "...but our adequacy is from God."

I heard Norman Grubb⁴ say many years ago, "God alone can do God's work." Paul summarizes this reality in 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10: "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." If there is no awareness or sense of dependence on God to graciously express his life through us, then all of our efforts to live spiritually commendable lives are wasted and useless. It is an internal issue, a heart issue that has to do with spiritual resources.

To the Corinthians who watched Paul through the years, it would have looked like Paul was mobilizing his natural abilities and serving God with all his heart. But if they asked Paul, he would not agree. Paul says that spiritual effectiveness or impact on individual lives is completely dependent on God, and not about our natural skills or resources. Influence that is of eternal value in our families, the workplace, our community, and at church comes from God at work in us. If I didn't believe that, I would resign from the pastoral staff at PBC tomorrow morning. I would despair in terms of my calling to be a loving husband, a godly father, and good friend to people around me. I have learned through the years that my best efforts and natural instincts are not enough. Whatever good happens in terms of spiritual results is due to God at work.

At the end of verse 5 to the beginning of verse 6 Paul says that our sufficiency has been given on the basis of a new arrangement for living: "...but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant." Paul offers a new viewpoint for life that God has provided for his people. It is the new covenant which was promised by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel 600 years before Jesus came into the world. Jeremiah 31:33 says, "'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the Lord, 'I will put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'" This new arrangement for living is contrary to anything our world understands, and is based solely on Jesus' shed blood on the cross. He said the night before he was betrayed; "...this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20). In 2 Corinthians 2:12-17 ([Discovery Paper #4633](#)), Paul introduces the radical nature of the new covenant in our lives, and draws a contrast between the two conflicting lifestyles. Later in 2 Corinthians 3:7-18, Paul compares and contrasts the new covenant lifestyle with what he calls the old covenant. In verse 14, he refers to the Jewish people whose minds are hardened: "...for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ." Christ is the one who lifts the veil of old covenant living so we can see the reality of new covenant living.

I will briefly introduce what Paul has to say about the old covenant in this passage. Verse 1 says the old covenant is based on self-commendation. In verse 3, Paul says it was carved on tablets of stone, bringing to mind the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Sinai. In verses 4 and 5, the old covenant is based on self-confidence, the opposite of God-confidence. Everything depends on us and our best effort to be good. In verse 6, the old covenant is based on keeping the letter of the Old Testament Law, which is legalism. And, the old covenant is somehow death dealing, "...for the letter kills."

Empowered by the Holy Spirit

Paul deals with the final Trinitarian basis for our adequacy from God through the Holy Spirit in verse 6. He has made us

...servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The two phrases of this closing section can be put side-by-side. The letter of the law, the old covenant, results in death, but the Spirit gives life. It refers to the Holy Spirit of the living God, introduced in verse 3, who is the basis

of new covenant living. The covenant that is letter in nature (some translations say "the written code") kills. It crushes our spirit because it makes external demands for obedience, but it does not give us the internal power to obey. The nature of the old covenant is that we try our best in our own power to do what God wants.

A covenant that is of the Holy Spirit in character gives life because it works inside. It produces a change that is spiritual in nature, so our hearts are softened and tenderized and made receptive to God's influence in our lives. We live receptively, accepting the grace of God and the resources of God. We do not try to work out things on our own. If the old covenant is Paul trying to do his best on God's behalf, then the new covenant is God doing his best through Paul. Paul is confident through Christ, sufficient from God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. It is the secret of Paul's adequacy and his sense of qualification in relationships and ministry.

I would ask that you put yourself in the place of the apostle Paul as you stand before the two issues of credentials and personal adequacy. First, if someone asked you to offer your credentials for a commendable life to what would you point? Secondly, how would you respond if you were asked what you trust for sufficiency, for adequacy, for competence in living effectively? What qualities or characteristics would you describe? We can see the variety of answers out of this passage, but what if you are not living by the power of the Holy Spirit? What if you are living out of your own resources? On what are you tempted to consciously or unconsciously depend? Can you identify with any of the following possibilities?

First, are you qualified because of what people say about you? Is it because of your academic degrees, or religious certifications you have earned? Is it about books or publications you have contributed to? Are you confident in professional positions or job titles or honors that may have been bestowed on you? Maybe it expresses itself in how much you know educationally, how much informational knowledge or biblical knowledge that you have. Maybe it is how much you have accomplished in life.

Or, are you, like the apostle Paul, most excited about spiritually changed lives because you have been a fragrance of Jesus Christ? Most often, that sort of influence is not public. It will not result in job promotions or pay raises or accolades. It will be quiet, it will be secret. Nobody may know but God and the small circle of people represented. But those are the credentials with eternal significance.

Secondly, what do you trust for adequacy in life? Is it the fact that you are good at interpersonal relationships? Are you naturally charming and gregarious so that people respond well to you? Is it about physical appearance or good health or athletic success? Does it depend on your intelligence, or sense of humor, or creativity? Maybe you are depending on your parents' or your spouses' reputation. Are you known for being responsible, for following through on tasks and projects? Do you have business success because you have skills and aptitudes in that setting? Perhaps you are good at making money and you can fall back on that to feel good about yourself.

Most of these are not things to be ashamed of or embarrassed about. If any of these good things are true about you, then thank God for grace. He made you the way you are in terms of your positive attributes. But, with the Apostle Paul, we must embrace the conviction that our adequacy in life and ministry does not rest on our efforts and activity. Whatever effectiveness we enjoy, the credit goes to God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our lifestyle and ministry do not rest on our feeble efforts to do something for God, but on our confidence that God will do something through us. It is a matter of showing up, being faithful, and being responsive and sensitive. Paul's liberating affirmation can be true of us as well: "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."

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NOTES:

(1) *The Message: New Testament*. © 1993 by Eugene H. Peterson. NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 439 (paperback edition).

(2) William Barclay. *The Letters to the Corinthians*. The Westminster Press, Philadelphia: 1954, 207-208.

(3) *The Message*, p. 474.

(4) Norman Grubb (1895-1993). Outstanding Bible teacher; expert on Romans. Several of his books are still in print. Author of the famous book *Rees Howells Intercessor*. For articles written by Norman Grubb, see Lambert Dolphin's web site: <http://ldolphin.org>

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