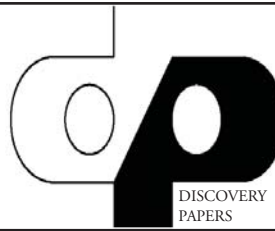


A LETTER

**SERIES: IDENTITY CHECK:
LESSONS IN AUTHENTIC FAITH**



Catalog No. 4943
2 Corinthians 2:16b-3:6
2nd Message
Steve Zeisler
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There's an old joke about an evangelical church that was looking for a new pastor. It placed an ad describing the kind of person they were seeking. After reading this description, it dawned on some that none of the apostles would meet the requirements, and even Jesus himself was not sufficiently qualified. It read something like this: "Our church is seeking a pastor who is young and vital, with long years of ministry experience. He should have a godly family, a winsome manner, a dynamic personality, yet fit in easily with everybody else. He must always be available to church members while remaining committed to rigorous study and long hours of intercessory prayer. We are seeking a powerful leader who is drenched in humility."

These are impossible qualifications, but when we read the New Testament carefully, we realize that they're impossible for the wrong reasons. Humanly impossible outcomes are actually at the heart of Christian ministry and Christian living for all of us.

Peninsula Bible Church has its deepest roots in the section of 2 Corinthians that we're studying in this series. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4942) we recognized that God has made us a fragrance of Christ; that is, He has made us influential even though life is hard and filled with pain, and we seem to have nothing much to offer.

Paul's description of what the Christian life should be like gets more remarkable. Followers of Jesus, He asserts further, are confident in the face of hardship, assured of the power of invisible realities. They refuse to succumb either to falsehood or despair, but insist on truth, remain anchored in the certainty of the glory to come, are overcome with the beauty of Christ, and are swept up with love for others. In 2 Corinthians 2:16 Paul asks, "Who is adequate for things like this? Who can live this way?" The implied answer is no one. Paul now tells us where our adequacy comes from.

2 Corinthians 2:16b-3:6:

¹⁶And who is adequate for these things? ¹⁷For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

^{3:1}Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? ²You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³being 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.

⁴Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, ⁶who 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.

Who is adequate for these things? Nothing in us qualifies us, but we have a sufficiency from God that sweeps us up into a life that is extraordinary, a life of the Spirit who is changing the world, a life of eternal significance, of unseen authority, and of immeasurable power. None of our credentials suffice for these things. Yet the living power and presence of God in the Spirit makes us adequate as servants of something new.

Chapters 6-13 of 2 Corinthians have an interesting tale to tell. It's clear that there were opponents who came to Corinth after Paul's time there, and they were saying that Paul had little to commend him compared to their credentials, standing, and authority. This letter is written in large measure to answer their accusations. Paul quotes these opponents in 10:10 writing "His [Paul's] personal presence is unimpressive and his speech is contemptible." They were trying to persuade the Corinthians to follow them rather than the apostle.

Now, most of us, when accused in this way, might say, "Well, I'm a lot smarter than you think! And when I really work at it, I can give a good speech. What you say is not true!" Or we might say, "You're not so great either! If I were to look into your background, I could find negative things about you." But Paul does neither. You can see that he struggles with these accusations in the closing chapters of 2 Corinthians. But the way he finally answers them is, "I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of

Christ may dwell in me ... for when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9b, 10b). In the final analysis it is the power of God displayed in him that makes any difference, not what he can count on in himself. This perspective is difficult, but it is central to the message of the gospel.

There are three denunciations in our text. Paul is trying to help us see how important it is to say no to our tendency to marshal our talents and promote our abilities.

Sincerity as from God

2 Corinthians 2:17:

For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.

The Greeks loved rhetoric, drama, flourish, and style—the kind of peddling that Paul has in mind here. It's employing the psychology of persuasion, marketing things in such a way that people are captured by what is said. And it's easy for religious leaders to use marketing techniques, sales ability, psychological manipulation, if you will, to get people to respond. But Paul said, "We refuse to do that. We don't peddle the word of God."

Remember what Jesus said about those who wash the outside of a cup, but not the inside or whitewash tombs that are filled with dead men's bones (Matthew 23:25-28). Marketers work on making things look good on the outside but care very little about the actual content of what they are advocating.

Religious marketers don't need to believe what they say. By use of body language, intonation, and tears on cue they use an actor's skill to imitate conviction. Paul says by contrast, "But as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God." Sincerity is the hallmark of authentic ministry. We believe what we say.

How often do you remind yourself that God is paying attention and that you live your life at the center of His gaze? Whether God is pleased is much more important than how many folks came to the meeting, how much money was raised, how much hoopla was involved, or how much energy was expended. Are we honest in the things we say? Have we received them from God, and do we say them so that at the end of the day He is pleased with what He hears? There are a great many things that please God:

new wine in new wineskins, joy, brokenness, healing, old truths stated well and believed thoroughly, and new visions of the glory of the Lord. Honest ministry can take many forms, but eloquent deception will never please God.

The second thing that Paul says is not true of him in 3:1 is, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?" The obvious answer is: "No." He is not promoting himself, impressed with himself, or putting himself at the center of things. We must not use the guise of worship, prayer, or service to others as a way to gain a following or make ourselves the center of attention.

There is a third thing that Paul says he has refused. "Do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?" (3:1). Again, this question has an obvious answer: "No, we do not."

The letter written on the heart

I've written letters of recommendation for people, and perhaps you have, too. You've probably had others write letters of recommendation for you. Such letters are necessary and useful in some settings. But a letter of recommendation written by some human authority cannot prove or enhance the presence of the living Spirit of God who is doing His work in your life. If Greeks valued rhetoric then Jews loved tradition and the written commendations of academia. Some Jewish teachers had evidently come to Corinth with letters from Jerusalem stating that they had studied with well-known rabbis and they knew other important higher-ups. They insisted on being deferred to. The Corinthians should be impressed.

We, too, find ourselves impressed with connections, with the ability to drop important names, degrees from prestigious universities, membership in elite clubs, awards won, and decorations conferred. Such things do not enhance ministry. That is clearly Paul's answer. There's no correspondence between worldly titles and what is really worth having: integrity, holiness, courage, vision, and the fragrance of Christ. Have you ever wanted to be part of a prestigious group of people, or have a membership card to an important society? Have you ever achieved an important title, gained an important award—and then realized it wasn't worth having? Did you ever join a group of elites only to realize they were boring? Did you ever win a prize and then discover that you had to win another and another? Paul is saying that letters of recommendation conferred by human institutions are not a basis for

effectiveness in God's service.

2 Corinthians 3:2-3:

²You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; ³being 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.

Meaningful letters of recommendation are written by God. They speak of sacrificial love that will not fade, and are read as you live out the truth written by the Holy One on the tablet of your heart. "You have become, by the Spirit of God, very present in our hearts, and you'll be there forever." Real authority comes from a love relationship.

The marketing phonies in Corinth put on high-energy meetings filled with drama, flourish, and electrifying oration. Some had formal documents commending them or eye-popping resumes. They wore the robes of scholarship and made easy reference to obscure branches of learning. But when Paul asks, "What letter should commend us to you?" he answers, "We love you. The Spirit of God has written your names and your hurts and your struggles here in our hearts. That's why we have the authority to speak with power the words of God to you." Who are the people you ought to listen to? The people whose words should have meaning for you are those who love you, pray for you, cry for you, and speak hope to you when you have none.

In a mixture of metaphors the apostle makes a further point: the Corinthians themselves are also letters written by the Spirit. The Spirit has shaped their hearts with his words. Their lives declare the truth. The document that will not fade, where God writes the gospel, is not found on sheets of paper, or even tablets of stone. He writes on human hearts. Every Christian life is a love story that will last forever. Paul is saying that he has participated in the life of the Spirit, in seeing that these Corinthians become who God intends them to be.

It is very difficult to learn the lessons of these verses. It's difficult to believe that nothing comes from us, that everything comes from God. Sarah and Abraham assumed that God needed their best efforts to have a child in or-

der for His promise to be fulfilled (Genesis 16; 17; 21). Moses, when he attempted to deliver the Israelites in his own power, killed an Egyptian (Exodus 2). Peter made a confident assertion that he would never deny the Lord, and he took his sword into Gethsemane (Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 22; John 18). Paul preached in the power of the flesh and ended up being run out of Damascus (Acts 9:1-31). Over and over again, the hard lesson to learn is that God will use us to do the most extraordinary things, but only when we stop assuming that we can depend on ourselves. It is the poor in spirit who inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3). It is when we are weak that we are strong (2 Corinthians 12:10). Paul declares whatever he has gained, he counts as loss for the sake of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:7).

In this text we are faced with three denunciations of conventional wisdom: no salesmanship, no self-promotion, and no human-generated status as the means of serving God.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 2:4-6 once again.

⁴Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, ⁶who 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.

How will God enable us to let go of the things we're proud of, the assertions we make about ourselves, the sales pitches, the status markers, the boosted ego? How can we receive instead what is powerful indeed, this ministry that is new and vital and filled with the presence of the Spirit? We are called to accomplish what is impossible and must begin by being sure that we do not have in ourselves what is required for success.

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