

NEW COVENANT MINISTRY

SERIES: PBC DNA: WHY WE DO
WHAT WE DO



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2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4
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2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4

Our text today has been an important one for me. It has been especially instrumental in forming my approach to ministry. We are calling this series “PBC DNA: Why We Do What We Do.” In particular, this text informs why I do what I do.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-7:4, Paul defends the approach to ministry that he and the other apostles take. One of the interpretive keys to understanding the passage is to recognize that when Paul uses first-person plural pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “our,” he is, with a few exceptions, not talking about believers per se; he’s talking about himself and the other apostles.

Although Paul distinguishes in this section between the apostles (“we”) and the Corinthians (“you”), it is only to defend his approach to ministry. Presumably, he would recommend this approach to ministry for the Corinthians—and us—as well. After all, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:12, all believers are to be equipped to engage in “the work of the ministry.”

For us, then, the passage is accessed from two angles. First, as we identify with Paul and the apostles, we learn how to engage in this approach to ministry. Second, as we identify with the Corinthians, we learn how to receive this approach to ministry.

I will endeavor to condense more than four chapters into one message. Therefore, we will look at the passage thematically, not sequentially. Also, because I’m covering so much material, I will deal with it selectively, not comprehensively. Nevertheless, we will get to—and spend a considerable time with—the crux of the matter: 2 Corinthians 3:18.

First, where does the power for new covenant ministry come from?

Trust the Spirit

Paul says that he and the other apostles are “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:6). He distinguishes between the old covenant that God entered into with

his people before Christ and the new covenant that he enters into with his people after Christ. A covenant is something like a partnership. It’s a relationship with a purpose beyond itself. In both covenants, God partnered with his people so that they might know him and bring his healing love to the world. The old covenant, however, demonstrated that God’s people weren’t up to the task.

In the new covenant, however, God gives his Holy Spirit to his people to nurture their relationship with God and to empower them for his purposes. Therefore, Paul calls new covenant ministry “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:8). The section that we are exploring is shot through with references to the Spirit. The apostles have the Spirit. The Corinthians have the Spirit. All believers today have the Spirit.¹

Dependence and faith

In that new covenant ministry is a ministry of the Spirit, it is a ministry of dependence. We depend not on ourselves; we depend on the Spirit, who works both in us and in those to whom we minister. It’s not only a ministry of dependence, though; it’s also a ministry of faith. We not only depend on the Spirit we are confident that the Spirit will work, even in ways beyond our imagining.

Martin Lloyd-Jones, the famous British preacher from the twentieth century, told a story of a spiritist that illustrates the power of Spirit:

She was sitting in her house and she saw people passing by on their way to the church where I happened to be ministering in South Wales. Something made her feel a desire to know what those people had, and so she decided to go to the service, and did so. She came ever afterwards until she died, and became a very fine Christian. One day I asked her what she had felt on that first visit, and this is what she said to me, . . . ‘The moment I entered your chapel and sat down on a seat amongst the people, I was conscious of a power. I was conscious of the same sort of power as I was accustomed to in our spiritist meetings, but there was one big difference; I had a feeling that the power in your chapel was a clean power.’ . . . This is a mysterious element. It is the presence of the Spirit in the heart of God’s children, God’s people, and an outsider becomes aware of this.²

Yes, we depend on the Holy Spirit, and we believe that the Holy Spirit will work in the lives of people.

What sort of method do we employ?

Present Christ

What do Paul and the other apostles do as ministers of the new covenant? They spread “the knowledge of him everywhere”—that is, the knowledge of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14). They “speak in Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:17). They proclaim “Jesus Christ as Lord” (2 Corinthians 4:5). They “give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). They are “ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 4:7: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” What treasure does he speak of? Notice how Paul begins 2 Corinthians 4:1: “Therefore, having this ministry . . .” In the immediate context, 2 Corinthians 4:1-6, Paul is speaking about new covenant ministry, which features the Spirit-empowered Gospel message concerning Christ.³

The “jars of clay” are the bodies of Paul and the other apostles. Jars of clay are weak and subject to decay. Paul himself appeared unremarkable to the Corinthians, especially in light of the suffering that he endured, which caused some consternation for them. Paul is saying that it’s not about the messenger; it’s about the message, which comes with the power of the Holy Spirit.

A glimpse of Christ

New covenant ministry, then, focuses on the person and work of Christ. Therefore, we proclaim Christ; we offer Christ; we tell the story of Christ. We present Christ. This ministry is a priceless treasure.

You will find in our preaching on Sunday morning an emphasis on the person and work of Christ. The Scriptures as a whole constitute a story that climaxes in Christ. Therefore, even when teaching from the Hebrew Scriptures, we’re looking for how they anticipated Christ and lead us to Christ. If you were here for our recent series in Ezekiel, for example, you rarely left here on a Sunday morning without hearing about Christ. If you were here for our series on David two years ago, you rarely left here without hearing about Christ. Jesus himself told his opponents, “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me . . .” (John 5:39).

I said two weeks ago, in my sermon on expository preaching, that there is only so much a sermon can do. There is only so much that I can do as a pastor, no matter how well I lead, preach, and counsel. (It’s about Jesus, not the messenger of Jesus.) But there is no end to what Jesus can do. So what do we do? We send Jesus your way. We preach him and pray him into your lives and into our church. What people need most is Jesus, so I, as a minister of the new covenant, aspire to give him to you.

At this point, it’s important to acknowledge that the Spirit gifts every believer differently and that all the gifts, both speaking and non-speaking, contribute to making Christ known (1 Corinthians 13:8-12).

Larry Crabb tells about a man who approached him after he had preached at a conference:

*He put both hands on my shoulders and told me a story: “Dr. Crabb, I am eighty-four years old. Five years ago my wife died after fifty-one years of a good marriage. I cannot express the pain that I feel every morning as I drink my coffee at the kitchen table alone. I have begged God to relieve the terrible loneliness that I feel. He has not answered my prayer. The ache in my heart has not gone away. But . . .” and here the gentleman paused and looked past me as he continued “. . . God has given me something far better than relief of my pain. Dr. Crabb, he has given me a glimpse of Christ. And it’s worth it all. Whenever you preach, make much of Christ!” He turned and walked away.*⁴

That is what we do: we make much of Christ so that we might all get a glimpse of Christ, because a glimpse of Christ is worth it all.

It matters not simply what we say but also what we do, doesn’t it? Words speak, but sometimes, as the old saying goes, actions speak louder than words. New covenant ministry calls for a certain lifestyle.

Struck down but not destroyed

Paul not only preaches the Gospel message, he also embodies the Gospel message:

2 Corinthians 4:8-12:

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to

death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

12 So death is at work in us, but life in you.

Paul suffered (afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down), but his suffering mirrors the suffering of Jesus ("the death of Jesus"). He has suffered, but he has endured by the power of the Spirit (not crushed, not driven to despair, not forsaken, not destroyed), mirroring the resurrection of Jesus ("so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our bodies"). He speaks in similar terms in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10.

Paul is saying that he is embodying the very message he preaches: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul's suffering for the Gospel therefore does not discredit his style of ministry; on the contrary, his suffering, coupled with endurance, highlights the power of the Spirit. Instead of being obscured by suffering, the Gospel shines through suffering.

Paul also speaks of how he and the other apostles embody the Gospel message in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Again, the first-person plural "we" refers to Paul and the other apostles, who embody God's righteousness, or faithfulness, to rescue the world from evil.

Especially, the Spirit enables Paul and the other apostles to endure suffering by giving them an eternal perspective:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18:

Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal."

Note also how Paul speaks of endurance throughout the passage:

- "Christ always leads us in triumphal procession" (2 Corinthians 2:14).
- "We do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:1).
- "So we do not lose heart" (2 Corinthians 4:16).
- "So we are always of good courage" (2 Corinthians 5:6).
- "Yes, we are of good courage" (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Live the story

Although some will be repelled if we are willing to suffer for the Gospel (questioning our sanity, perhaps), others will receive a better view of the Gospel if we embody the message, if we follow in Jesus' footsteps, if we persevere by the power of the Spirit in the face of suffering. We don't simply tell the story, we also live the story. The story we live mirrors the story we tell: the Gospel story of the death and resurrection of Christ. Know the story. Tell the story. Live the story.

This raises suffering to a different level, doesn't it? It is not just that suffering makes you stronger, that it deepens your relationship with God, or that it makes you more compassionate for other sufferers. For sure, it can do all that and more, praise God! Paul is saying that suffering coupled with endurance participates in and mirrors the death and resurrection of Christ, in anticipation of our actual resurrection from the dead (2 Corinthians 4:13-5:10). We are reflecting the story of Jesus, and Jesus himself, to the world and even to watching angels and demons as we suffer and endure by the power of the Spirit.

My suffering pales in comparison to what most people have gone through. As we prayed through the prayer requests that you submitted for our pastor-elder retreat, I was struck once again by how many of you are suffering but also persevering. Suffering of one sort or another is the human lot, even if my lot has been a small one. The publisher of the weekly newspaper I edited fired me because we had different visions for the publication. Everyone else in the office was shocked and took my side. Everyone else in the office also knew that I was a follower of Jesus.

Some time after my departure, a reporter, who had observed me in the ensuing weeks, approached me at a gathering and said, "If I got fired, I would have freaked out, but I saw that you went through getting fired with a confidence that I don't have. When I saw that, I knew there was something to this faith thing you talk about." From my point of view, I didn't endure getting fired with a peace that passes all understanding, but I take it that I nevertheless persevered it by the power of the Spirit. I suffered, however slightly, and I endured. To some extent, I was living out the death and resurrection of Jesus—and an unbeliever noticed! People are watching.

What motivates new covenant ministry?

The love of Christ

Paul preaches Christ, and he endures all manner of hardship to do so. What motivates him? He says this:

2 Corinthians 5:14-15:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15 and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

The “love of Christ” here is not Paul’s love for Christ but Christ’s love for him (the preposition “of” is a subjective genitive). The word translated “controls” has to do with being motivated in a compelling way, as if Paul had no other choice but to do what he does because of Christ’s love for him. Christ’s love for Paul motivates him. Not only that, he also understands that Christ died for all; so Christ’s love for others also motivates him. He loves what Christ loves: those for whom Christ died. He lives for Christ, not for himself.

It is imperative therefore, as ministers of the new covenant, that we open up as wide as possible to Christ’s love for us so that we might live beyond ourselves: that we might live for Christ and his concerns. If we are to present Christ in a compelling way, we must of course find him compelling.

What is the objective of new covenant ministry?

Unveiled face

In one word, the objective of new covenant ministry is “transformation.” Much of what Paul is saying throughout the passage comes together in 2 Corinthians 3:18.

2 Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

What does he mean by “unveiled face”?

When Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the two tablets on which the Ten Commandments were

written, he shattered them, so angry was he because of the people’s idolatry. He went up to the mountain again and returned with two more tablets, but this time his face shone for being in the presence of the Lord. His role as a mediator, given the idolatry of the people, was enhanced, foreshadowing Christ’s role as the mediator of the new covenant. When Christ went up to a mountain, as Moses, did, he beamed with the glory of God, and Moses was there to see it! (Matthew 17:1-8) On an ongoing basis, Moses would meet with the Lord in a tent and then report to the people. Because his face was shining, Moses put a veil over his face when not acting as a mediator. He would take off the veil when meeting with the Lord, he would remain unveiled when speaking to the people, and he would replace the veil when he had finished (Exodus 34:29-35).

But Paul tells us that the glory on Moses’ face was fading, right from the beginning, because he was the mediator of the old covenant, which was destined to be fulfilled by the new covenant. Even so, “the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory.” Moses wasn’t trying to deceive anyone: they could see his face every time he spoke with them as a mediator of the covenant. Paul’s point is this: in the old covenant, the people could only see the reflected, fading glory of the Lord on the face of Moses—and only in limited doses.

Notice that in this verse, Paul speaks of “we all”—not simply the apostles but the apostles *and* the Corinthians. In the new covenant, we can all behold the glory of the Lord without restriction—not the reflected glory of the Lord and not in limited doses. We can behold all of who God is all the time.

Being transformed

The effect of beholding the glory of the Lord is transformation: “we are being transformed.” Notice that transformation is not instantaneous but a process. This is commonly called the process of “sanctification.” We are being transformed into “the same image,” the image that we are beholding: the glory of the Lord. Literally, we are not being transformed “from one degree of glory to another” but “from glory into glory”—that is, from the glory that we behold (the glory of the Lord) into the glory that we become, from God’s glory to our glory, as we increasingly reflect the glory of the Lord.

Finally, all this “comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” The Spirit enables us to behold the glory of the Lord, and the Spirit effects our transformation as we behold the glory of the Lord. After all, new covenant ministry is a ministry of the Spirit.

Where, though, do we behold the glory of the Lord? Paul answers this question in 2 Corinthians 4:6: “For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.” Here Paul uses the first-person plural “we” again without the word “all.” He’s speaking of himself and the other apostles, not the Corinthians. The apostles “give” the light; they give the knowledge of the glory of God. And the knowledge of the glory of God is seen in “the face of Christ.”

Ah, what to the apostles do? They proclaim Christ; they offer Christ; they tell the story of Christ. They present Christ. In the old covenant, the people of God couldn’t behold the glory of the Lord. To see God’s face was not thought to be good for one’s long-term health. The Lord told Moses that “no one may see my face and live” (Exodus 33:20). You couldn’t behold the glory of God—all of who he was—because Christ had not yet come. Beholding the glory of God before the cross of Christ would be utterly incomprehensible. Now that Christ has come, the apostles can boldly present the glory of the Lord as seen in the face of Christ, and the Corinthians are free to gaze upon the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ.

Behold the face of Christ

A simple spiritual law is that you become like what you worship. The psalmist says this of those who make idols and worship idols: “Those who make them become like them; / so do all who trust in them” (Psalm 115:8). Conversely, if you worship God, you become like him, you increasingly value what he values, and your character increasingly reflects his character. If you gaze upon the glory of the Lord in the face of Christ, you increasingly become “conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). If we become in some ways like people we admire or spend a lot of time with, how much more do we become like the one we worship?

How then do we behold the face of Christ? If you want to know someone, you look at his or her face. You can’t tell who someone is by looking at his elbow. No, you look at his face. Where do we see the face of Christ; where do we see who he is? We see him first of all in the Gospels. Spend time in the Gospels with Jesus. If you really want to know who someone is, you look into his eyes. How can you look into the eyes of Jesus? Imagine looking into the eyes of Jesus as he dies on the cross for your sins. Spend some time doing that, and that will change you.

Beginning February 11, we’ll be spending time with Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. We’ll be preaching on the Passion from the Gospel. I have the awesome privilege of preaching on both the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus this year. Get ready to behold the glory of God in the face of Christ!

God makes us adequate

This is quite a ministry, isn’t it? How do Paul and the other apostles pull it off? They consider themselves adequate for the task, but Paul is clear that they are adequate only because of God. He asks, “Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Corinthians 2:16) He answers in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6: “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant.” God made the apostles sufficient by calling them and giving them a new covenant ministry that features the Spirit. Jesus said he would send his Spirit to help them, and he has done precisely that (John 14-16).

When I was serving in a junior high ministry as an intern at a church in Idaho, the pastor of the ministry met with me once a week for lunch. Across the table from me at a restaurant one day, Wayne discerned that I was troubled, and he attempted to draw me out. He asked several probing questions, which I attempted to answer, but I could do no better than “I don’t know.” Finally, Wayne said, “What is it?”

At last, I excavated an answer. “I’m incompetent,” I said.

It turned out that I had more than words to say; I also had tears to shed. Once the words came out of me, so did the tears. Wayne’s questions and my eventual answer unlocked what I was feeling—what I didn’t even know I was feeling. I felt incompetent—inadequate for the ministry that had been given to me.

On the one hand, I take it from Paul that I had every reason to feel inadequate—in myself. On the other hand, God has made me adequate to be a minister of the new covenant. Therefore, my feelings of inadequacy, which I still entertain, by the way, are reason for humility, not passivity. In light of what God has done, we should be both humble and confident, or confidently humble, if you will.

In the end, God has made us adequate by giving us the Spirit. God has told us what to do—present Christ—and has given us the Spirit. Because of this, we can feel adequate.

Be transparent

Finally, new covenant ministry is characterized by sincerity, which manifests itself in transparency before both people and God:

—“For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:17).

—“We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God” (2 Corinthians 4:2).

—“We put no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry” (2 Corinthians 6:3).

Paul has nothing to gain from preaching the Gospel, either money or affirmation. He preaches Christ, not himself. He therefore doesn’t need to “tamper with God’s word” to make it more acceptable to more people. Paul can be transparent because he preaches Christ, not himself. Personally, he has nothing to gain or lose.

I have never heard some popular preachers confess any flaws. On the one hand, I understand that there is something attractive about that. People want to believe that there are people out there who have it all together so that they can have hope that one day they can get it all together. They’re looking for a hero.

I was at a church once where a woman went up to the preacher, who during his sermon shared about an argument that he had with his wife, and said she didn’t want to be at such a church and left. And the pastor thought: she’s going to find a church where the pastor argues with his wife but just doesn’t talk about it.

We want to be transparent here. None of us has it all together. Now, it would not be helpful to you if we air all our dirty laundry week after week. Then it would become more about the preacher than it is about Jesus. It would be more like preaching ourselves than preaching Christ. But we want to show you enough of our dirty laundry so that you know we have it and that we need Jesus as much as anyone else.

What we want

It all comes down to this.

At one point, some Greeks who were attracted to the God of Israel and the Jewish festivals that celebrated his deeds of the past and promises for the future, approached Philip, one of Jesus’ disciples, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21). That’s what we want. We want to see Jesus. And we want to present Jesus so that others can see him.

Endnotes

¹ Paul also calls new covenant ministry “the ministry of righteousness”—that is, the righteousness of God—and “the ministry of reconciliation.” God, in his righteousness, sent Christ to reconcile humanity to God.

² Iain H. Murray, *David Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, Volume 1* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1982), 221.

³ Some say that the treasure is the Holy Spirit, but if Paul were speaking of the Spirit, it seems that he would have used the words “we all,” as he does in 2 Corinthians 3:18, because both the apostles and the Corinthians have the Spirit in their jars of clay, so to speak. In 2 Timothy 1:14, Paul uses the word “deposit,” a word similar to “treasure,” when speaking about the Gospel: “By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.”

⁴ Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 169.