

**“You Are a Letter”**

**2 Corinthians 3:1-6**

**February 20, 2022**

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*“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts...”*

**2 Corinthians 3:2**

**Prayer of Preparation**

In the name of the living God we pray, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Sermon Message**

Over the last several weeks we have focused on discipleship from the angle of all four Gospels and on the ways each Gospel depicts the challenges and opportunities of following Jesus. The lessons were a reminder of how Jesus calls ordinary people like us to continue his work in the world.

I make that statement because it is hard to know exactly what the nature of the apostle Paul’s problems were at Corinth, as the people there seemed to be ordinary folks too, but ones who were facing all kinds of issues; it was one of the congregations Paul had started. However, over time, the feuding among factions, the power plays among members, the theological conflicts among evangelists – all seemed to plague the church.

One of the key problems was among those who questioned Paul’s authority and who challenged his legitimacy as a minister of the gospel. He seemed to have people who were always calling into doubt his ministerial credibility.

In fact, we can almost overhear folks in the church there ask, “Who is this guy, and what gives him the right to tell us what to do?” Indeed, some folks criticized Paul for being too lenient with Gentile converts; he just didn’t make them follow the letter of the Jewish law; others thought his preaching was boring, his personality dry. In addition, there was a group that thought he would do better at

First Church Philippi than First Church Corinth. It was multiple things. Paul was going through a difficult time as his competence came under scrutiny.<sup>1</sup>

### **Letters of Recommendation**

When questions arise about a person's competence today, we typically have protocols or procedures to check a person's background or expertise. In many cases, there is a letter from someone in authority or a diploma from an institution that can set the record straight or who can speak with confidence about a person's skill level.

One of the traditional ways we find out about a person's expertise is by letters of recommendation. Typically, they come from someone who can vouch for us if we are trying to find a job or if we are seeking a role somewhere. We often write them to help people. Perhaps you have written a few. Hopefully, we know enough about a person to give an honest appraisal.

It is an important point to keep in mind; keep it in mind because Paul is wondering why he needs a letter of recommendation to prove his authority. To be sure, unlike the other apostles, Paul did not know Jesus in the flesh the way Peter and James and Mary and Martha did. But Christ had appeared to Paul and called Paul to preach too; he was an apostle as well. In fact, as far as Paul is concerned, having a friend write a glowing recommendation is a bit self-serving. What is the point?

But that's how this chapter begins, with a wisecrack. "What do you mean, letter of recommendation? Give me a break! Why do I need to show you a letter? The only recommendation that matters is the one God writes, on our hearts." Hence, his comment: *you* are the letter of recommendation, when other people see the kind of life you lead according to the Spirit, more so than any ink on a piece of paper or a checklist conjured up by your friends. After all, Paul writes, it is the letter of the law that kills, not the Spirit. What Paul wants to see are lives filled with the Spirit. That's what he is trying to get his critics and the Corinthians to see.

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### **Reflection**

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, *Lectionary Sermon Resource: Year B/Part 1* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 156.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

And yet, I suppose we are no different when it comes to wanting to see if a person has competence or authority. I mean, if we walk into a doctor's office, we probably would like to see diplomas and certificates that tell us that this physician knows what he or she is doing. An institution of considerable recognition has validated them.

Or if the police come and tell us to vacate the building, we would probably want to see some identification that they are acting in some official capacity.

The same might be true of ministry: what kind of authority or credibility do we have? I know many folks have spent years in college and seminary gaining knowledge about serving the church; they have gone through a laborious ordination process; but I also know you can go online and get credentials to be a minister. Do it yourself religion!

Again, Paul has another take on this matter. He tells the Corinthians that he doesn't need a letter of recommendation from Peter or someone else. There is something deeper. Rather, he tells them, and this is an astonishing claim that, "You Corinthians are the best evidence I have that my ministry is truthful and has not been in vain, by how you live into the new covenant."<sup>3</sup>

It is like Pastor Jenothy and I saying that the best way people will know that our ministry is true is by how you act! What you do, what you say – tells the world about Jesus; that's the best recommendation to a pastor's credibility or authority, by how you behave.

So, yes, seminary education is good, and it can grant a person credentials; and the hands of the bishop can communicate support, but the best recommendation we can have, is how the people we lead will live.

It might be like putting little signs on each person with something like the signs we see on the back of semi-trucks that say, "How's My Driving? Call 1-800-999-9999." Have you ever seen those? The signs we would make would say, "How's my living? Call 317-736-7962." And we would get calls – or Amber Whitman would get phone calls – that say, "Hey, I saw one of your members serving a person today..." "Did you know so and so did this to help..." Hey, I

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

know Mrs. Smith did this wonderful thing.” From “How’s My Driving?” to “How’s My Living?”<sup>4</sup>

(As a footnote: I did read that there is a company called Fleetsafe that does collect about 1,000 calls or more each week about truck drivers. Apparently, 80 to 90 percent of drivers never receive a complaint. But there are those who do get into trouble with phone calls like, “You say the driver cut you off at the rest stop?” “Exactly which finger did he wave at you?”)<sup>5</sup>

What makes the apostle Paul confident is how, despite the struggles of the Corinthians, they are making a positive witness to Christ: the gospel has changed their lives, and he sees their fruit.

### **Recommendations**

This is what Paul means when he talks about competence in our passage. Competence takes place when the Holy Spirit changes our lives, and when we begin to act according to the new covenant. That’s competence. It is a heart no longer formed by the letter of the law, but by the Spirit of the living Christ. A competent Christian, then, understands forgiveness and grace. Devotion and patience. Service. Humility. When other people see such competence, they see how the Spirit is writing on our hearts attitudes and dispositions that are life giving. Hopeful. Faithful. It might be like that adage that says folks don’t really care what we know until they know that we care. They see competence.

Therefore, it is not just about a written code, or a letter of recommendation, or a resume of accomplishments. There is more. There is a life fully alive to God: to be Christ-like! I feel there is an affinity here to what the early Methodists did in class and band meetings when they asked each other, how is your soul? How are you living? What are you doing to grow in obedience?

What I find fascinating about all of this is Paul himself. Remember that when we read Paul’s letters, we are reading someone else’s mail. And so, when we read Galatians, for example, we read an angry Paul, or when we read Philippians, we read a joyful Paul. Here in Corinthians we read how Paul deals with those who didn’t like his manner or his theology. And yet, here Paul is telling the

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<sup>4</sup> See “How’s My Living?” (Sunday, February 27, 2000) at [www.homileticsonline.com](http://www.homileticsonline.com).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Corinthians, “You are the letter Christ is writing to the world.” That is who you are.

If the world wants to know Jesus, folks ought to be able to look at us and see evidence of Jesus. They ought to be able to read us and read Christ in us, just as they do a letter. We are all “living human documents” after all, with stories and experiences, of all kinds. We are, whether we realize it or not, always communicating – good and bad. In fact, there is a book in my study called “When Bad Christians Happen to Good People.” It is a play on Rabbi Kushner’s famous book “When Bad Things Happen to Good People.” I think you can tell by the title that the author wants to discourage negative witnessing and communicating among Christians.

### **Closing**

And so, here at the end, I am wondering how you see yourself. Often, we hear how we are members of the body of Christ, or how we are a temple of the Holy Spirit. We are salt. We are light. We are the branches. We are sheep. We are disciples. Here, in Corinthians, we are letters, written by Christ. We are the only sermon some folks will ever see or hear. Ordinary people like you and me, broken, wounded, as Christ’s main witnesses.

The good news is that God wants to keep on writing on our hearts, with forgiveness, with love, with the Spirit. God wants to form Christ in us. That’s the good news.

And it is both a fearful and a wonderful thing, to know that Christ is waiting to write another chapter in your life as part of the new covenant.

It is why I would like to invite you, if I may, to allow Christ to do so, to allow the living Christ to keep on writing on your heart, to let the Spirit of God to come, and so let others read your mail too. That is my prayer. Amen.

