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# The New Covenant in Ministry Perspectives

## 2 Corinthians 3:1-18<sup>3</sup>

*Russ Kennedy*

Why do people quit? Oh we have lots of reasons...

Paul faced all of this in dealing with ministry at large and the believers at Corinth in particular...

The Corinthian church is thinking about ministry in Old Covenant terms. Paul is pressing home the New Covenant realities that give perspective and power to New Covenant ministry. The focus then is on the true work and ministry of the Spirit in this New Covenant age.

Paul then is going to give the proper, New Covenant emphasis on the work of the Spirit in ministry. This is a counter to and corrective of their emphasis on the supernatural and their embracing of legalism.

### **Serving without Commendation (v.1-3)**

*The Spirit commends us in the work of the ministry.*

<sup>1</sup> Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered 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.

#### ***A Common Demand (v. 1)***

The Apostle's authority does not rest in the approval or commendation of people. The church at Corinth was very concerned about Paul's lack of credentials. He carried no letters with him authorizing his ministry. Though he had been sent from the church at Antioch and had been commended by the church at Jerusalem, that did not seem to satisfy them. So was Paul going to bend to their desire for prestige and position and commend himself? Yes, he was. But not at all in the way they thought.

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### ***The Biblical Response (v. 2-3)***

Paul had been called by God to be an Apostle. He was carried God's authority. That should be all that he needed. But in their case, where the demand for commendation was relational, he does not use God's call (as he does to the church at Galatia).

The Apostle's authentication is by:

The people who are saved. Paul's thoughts and speaking about them out of his care and concern is all the commendation they should need. Rather than dead letters on a piece of parchment, he was commended by the living souls of Christian people. What a wonderful way to put it. I don't people to write letters. I have people who are my letters.

The Spirit of God has written a letter in the people of God, in their hearts. Paul is the mailman who is delivering that letter to the rest of the church. They have shown this to be true in the past.

Paul's conclusion is clear. Why are you demanding something now that is contrary to who you were in the past?

This leads me to a question. Has the church in general also become too dependent on credentials? Is this particularly true for those whom we set aside for the pulpit ministry?

Why and on what basis do we *require* and advanced theological degree in order to serve as a preaching pastor/elder?

Why have we made formal theological training a qualification for ministry? It is a disgrace that the Biblical qualifications are sometimes if not often set aside because the man is highly accredited and superbly competent.

Why is there this track and trajectory for preaching pastors to move from church to church and always to one larger or more significant?

### **Serving with Spiritual Sufficiency (v. 4-6)**

*The Spirit makes us sufficient for the work of the ministry.*

<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

### ***With Godward Confidence (v. 4)***

That they are God's spiritual letter written on the heart by the Spirit is Paul's confidence. His confidence in ministry is through Christ towards God. The fact that God has saved people through his ministry gives him confidence in serving the people God has saved. Yes, Paul has confidence in spite of their sins and struggles that God is at work in him and in the Christians there.

### ***With Divine Provision (v. 5)***

Paul's confidence is not merely human arrogance, self-importance or self-reliance. His confidence in God's work in him and in them is grounded in God. His confidence, his ability to do what he is supposed to do in ministry – what Paul calls, *sufficiency* – is not in himself. He is competent in his ministry as an Apostle, pastor and servant of Christ.

Because the church is a mess does not mean that Paul is incompetent or not qualified to deal with their issues. Ministry competency is not always challenged by the difficulties in the church. The failure of believers cannot always be laid at the door of leaders. The results in believers' lives is the work of God through the work of the servant of God. God may make the servant very competent while granting the transforming grace on God's own agenda and timing.

### ***With Life-giving Spirit (v. 6)***

By the life-giving, grace-enabling work of the Spirit, the Apostles are sufficient for the work. This is because we are in the New Covenant. God's people come into existence through the regenerating work of the Spirit. God's people are transformed by the ongoing inward work of the Spirit. So the Law and any form of legalism is not competent or sufficient to transform God's people. Only the inward life of the Spirit changing and growing God's people makes the competent work of ministry effective.

## **Serving in New Covenant Glory (v. 7-11)**

*The Spirit is working doing the work of the ministry.*

<sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, <sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? <sup>9</sup> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. <sup>10</sup> Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. <sup>11</sup> For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Paul then shows, in a series of contrast, why the ministry in the New Covenant is superior to that of the Old Covenant.

### ***A ministry of the Spirit, not the letter of the Old* *(v.6)***

True New Covenant ministry will understand that growth and change is now a matter of the Word and Spirit in a new and transforming way.

### ***A ministry full of greater glory than the Old* *(v.7-11)***

True New Covenant ministry will have a distinct glory about it. As it works to help people grow and change, it will be God-centered and God-magnifying.

The Old Covenant ministry...

...was of the Law.

...had a fading glory.

...was to condemn.

...came to an end.

The New Covenant ministry...

...is of the Spirit.

...has a greater glory.

...brought true righteousness.

...has a permanent service.

## Serving with Transforming Power (v. 12-18)

*The Spirit is transforming people through the work of the ministry.*

<sup>12</sup> Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, <sup>13</sup> not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> 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.

### ***A ministry that unveils the fading glory of the Old*** ***(v.12-16)***

New Covenant ministry will help people to live by and in the New Covenant and not to return to the Old as a way of life.

### ***A ministry that transforms in a Christ-centered way*** ***(v.17-18)***

New Covenant ministry affirms the transforming power of beholding Christ and therefore will hold him up to people's gaze and will rest in that transforming work. Our hearts will become like what the gaze at.

### ***A ministry that gives freedom from the slavery of the old*** ***(v.17-18)***

New Covenant ministry will free people from heart and behavior slavery both to the Old and to what the Old could never set us free from.

Without the work of the Spirit, people will not see the reality of the Old Covenant's fading away (v. 12-15). But, through the work of the Spirit, people see the greater glory of the New Covenant as they are able to see the Lord (v. 16-18).

## **Serving with Hope (4:1)**

*The Spirit encourages us in the work of the ministry.*

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

### ***By God's Mercy***

Paul does not have a right to his ministry. He has been chosen and appointed by the mercy of God. Why does he say it this way? He speaks of ministry by God's mercy because the church at Corinth has extended little mercy to him. They have judged him based on worldly standards. Their understanding is one of ownership and rights. Paul is humbled in realizing that he serves only by God's mercy. Could the church then not extend him some grace and mercy as well?

### ***In Deep Hardship***

We have seen all through the book the deep difficulties and heavy hardships Paul has borne. They have brought him at times to despairing of life. Losing heart and becoming discouraged and thinking of quitting is what we do when things seem unbearably hard. Sometimes we are ready to quit because it seems that nothing will change. No matter what good and wise thing we do to help others, they continue in sin and folly. That is when we are tempted to want to give up.

### ***With Lasting Encouragement***

But like Paul we will not give up. We repent of our false beliefs and worldly desires in ministry. We embrace with humility the sufficiency God gives through the work of the Spirit. We declare with faith that we are sufficient for the work God has given us.

I am going to say this as kindly and clearly as possible. If you are discouraged, if you are losing heart, you want to quit it may largely be because your view of ministry is wrong. God has set you in it by His deep mercy. God has equipped you for it by His Holy Spirit. God has brought you hardship and trouble in it by His wise providences. All may not be well. All may not be successful. People may not be changing. But that is up to God. Do not lose heart. Stay faithful. Serve well. Why? Because you believe what God says about the New Covenant ministry. And because you desire it above all things.

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## Reflect and Respond

How we do ministry and the way we go about it are profoundly affected by the glory of the ministry of the New Covenant.

As a Commissioned, New Covenant church we must rely on the work of the Spirit in the doing of all our ministries. We must not allow the errors and excesses of Charismatics to lessen our affirmation of and dependence on the work of the Spirit.

We learn then why we must be Spirit-enabled and Spirit-dependent:

The Spirit commends us in the work of the ministry.

The Spirit makes us sufficient for the work of the ministry.

The Spirit is working doing the work of the ministry.

The Spirit is transforming people through the work of the ministry.

The Spirit encourages us in the work of the ministry.

Therefore, no matter how small, how difficult, how painful, how challenging ministry is, we will not – we will not – lose heart. We will not be discouraged. We will not quit. We will persevere in serving the Lord and serving God's people.