

## 2 Cor 3:1-6 How to be a Competent Christian Minister, part 1

There's an old saying that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating." That means that you can't really evaluate something until you try it out yourself. You have to eat the pudding to see how good or bad it is.

Paul's main point in this passage is that the Corinthian people themselves are the "proof of the pudding." That is, the existence of the church in Corinth and their radically changed lifestyle prove that Paul's ministry among them was legitimate. The lives of Christians give proof to the validity of Christian ministry.

In 2 Cor 2:14, Paul begins a discussion of the privileges of Christian ministry. He continues that topic in today's passage. And in the first few verses of chapter 3, he tells us how to be competent Christian ministers.

Every believer should think of himself as a servant of the Lord—that's what a minister is—someone who serves God by serving God's people. We all should be involved in Christian ministry in some way. How do we do that? How do we engage in competent Christian ministry? That's what Paul is going to tell us in these verses.

We have two sections here (vss. 1-3, 4-6), and in each section, Paul is making comparisons. In the first section, he compares human authority with divine action. In the second section, he compares the old covenant with the new covenant.

Let's consider how to be competent ministers of Christ.

- I. .1-3 Competent ministers rely on divine action, not human authority.
  - A. Human authority rests on external influence.
    1. .1a Some commend themselves.
      - a) Paul is probably referring to his opponents in the church. They were false apostles who were promoting themselves over the authority of Paul.
      - b) Paul denies that he needs to promote himself. He's not a self-promoter like others were.

2. .1b Some commend others.

- a) The practice of giving or sending letter of recommendation was very common at this time in history. People would often carry letters like this, especially when traveling.

**Quote:** “Letters of (re)commendation” were given to travelers or emissaries to introduce them to persons in another town or country who could provide them with hospitality and meet their particular needs. Since the person recommended was in good standing with the recommender and the recipient was a friend or patron of the recommender, the “letter of commendation” virtually committed the recipient to comply with the request expressed in the letter.<sup>1</sup>

- b) Paul sent some of these letters of recommendation himself (cf. Rom 16:1-2; 1 Cor 16:10-11), and the Bible mentions other letters like this (cf. Acts 15:25-27; 18:27).
- c) It seems probable that Paul’s opponents in the church presented letters of recommendation when they showed up in Corinth, probably from someone at the church at Jerusalem. These false apostles were accepted by the church because of these letters of recommendation.
- d) Paul didn’t need a letter of recommendation either to the church or from the church.

Remember that Paul had established the church at Corinth; he was their father in the faith. The people there knew him very well.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 259–260.

3. .3 Human commendation is purely external.

He describes here the materials typically used to write a letter.

- a) “written ... with ink”—of course, in the ancient world, scribes would use a reed pen and the material would be either papyrus or parchment.
- b) “on tables of stone”—some writing would be etched or inscribed on stone.
- c) But such writing was external; it was not on the heart. Parchment and stone are not alive. That kind of writing had no inherent power to transform anyone’s life. The ink and the stone have no power; they don’t affect the human heart.

[So on the one hand, human authority has some external influence, but, in contrast, ...]

B. .2 Divine action is proof of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul is going to contrast human influence against the work of the Spirit.

- 1. .2 The Spirit causes heart-felt love. “written in our hearts” – Paul and his co-workers had a genuine love for the Corinthian church; he loved them; they were dear to his heart; they were written on his heart. Cf. 7:3 “you are in our hearts.”
- 2. .2end The Spirit causes transformed lives. “known and read by all men”
  - a) That church had become an open letter to the entire world. Everyone could see how God had transformed the lives of the people of that church. A bunch of pagans at Corinth had converted to Christ. Their belief and behavior had radically changed. Paul had spoken widely about the faith of the believers at Corinth. They were a well-known church.
  - b) In spite of all the problems at Corinth, they still had a good testimony as a legitimate church. Others could see that the Spirit of God was active there. God had radically changed the lives of those people.

Cf. 1 Cor 6:9-11 “... such were some of you...”

**App:** Life transformation—i.e., sanctification/Christian growth—is one of the major proofs of the validity of the Christian faith. The Gospel has the power to transform every believer. Cf. 2 Cor 5:17

If no Christian growth is happening, then there is little evidence that one's faith is genuine. Again, the "proof of the pudding is in the eating." A transformed life is proof of competent Christian ministry.

3. .3 The Spirit causes genuine conversion. "You are an epistle of Christ."

a) The believers at the church at Corinth were his letters. The existence of those people, former pagans and idolaters, but now followers of Jesus, spoke very eloquently and loudly for the validity of Paul's ministry among them. They were an eloquent letter of recommendation testifying to the grace of God and to Paul's status and authority as an apostle.

b) He says the same thing twice (vss. 2, 3): "you are our epistle," "you are an epistle."

As someone said, Paul's credentials "are not on paper but in persons."<sup>2</sup>

c) .3c The Spirit did this work—"written ... by the Spirit of the living God." Paul and his colleagues brought the Gospel to these people, but the Spirit of God brought them to conversion and empowered them to change.

**Quote:** The divine penman, Christ, writes his letters by means of the Spirit, whose person and work are imperishable.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, vol. 29, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 157. Quoting C. F. D. Moule, "2 Cor 3:18b," in *Neues Testament und Geschichte*, ed. H. Baltensweiler and B. Reicke (Tübingen: Mohr [Siebeck], 1972) 232.

<sup>3</sup> Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.; Paternoster Press, 2005), 264.

- d) “on tablets of flesh... of the heart.” Unlike purely human influence, written with pen and ink on paper or inscribed on stone, the Spirit of God had written on the hearts of these people.

Paul could point to the people at Corinth as *living* letters; they could testify to the legitimacy of his ministry.

**Quote:** The transformed lives of the Corinthians were Paul’s most eloquent testimonial, better than any secondhand letter. Their changed lives were like an open letter that could be seen and read by all men as a testimony to Paul’s faithfulness and the truth of his message.<sup>4</sup>

.3a This testimony/proof is known “clearly,” or manifestly (φανερῶς); the work of God was obvious among the believers at Corinth. The invisible work of the Spirit of God had become visible in their outward behavior and attitude. Their lives had changed in response to their faith in Christ.

**App:** This should be true in the lives of any genuine believer. The inner work of the HS<sup>p</sup> should be “evident” or obvious—clearly seen by all. One of the main proofs of Christianity is its power to enable change in the lives of Christians. If that change is not there, then it’s questionable whether the Spirit is there.

**There is really no such thing as a “secret” Christian.** If the Spirit of God has done a work in your heart, then it’s going to become manifest/obvious to others. Others are going to know and read your letter.

**App:** I hope that all of us are eloquent letters testifying to the grace of God. I trust that each of us is the “proof of the pudding.” As people look at us *individually*, they should see the truth of the Christian faith demonstrated in our lives. As people look at *our church*, they should see evidence of the Spirit of God working among us.

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<sup>4</sup> John F. MacArthur Jr., *The MacArthur Study Bible: New American Standard Bible*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2006), 2 Co 3:2.

**I wonder if anyone could say that of you.** “I know that Christianity is true because you demonstrate that it’s true.” I wonder if anyone would say that of our church—“I know Christianity is true because of the work of the Spirit in that assembly.”

4. .3b The Spirit uses people to do this work.

a) “Ministered (διακονέω) by us” – Paul had given birth to that church; the people there had been converted through his ministry. But Paul doesn’t really take credit for their conversion. They are “epistles of Christ,” probably in the sense of belonging to Christ. Paul claims only a secondary role in the conversion of these people.

b) .3 But also notice the words “by the Spirit of the living God.” The Spirit of God “writes” in the hearts of the people through the ministry of pastors and teachers. As the ministers serve, the Spirit works.

**App:** That’s how it should be working in our church—we want the Spirit of God to work in us and through us. The Spirit of God uses competent ministers to accomplish his work among his people.

What a great privilege it is to be used of God in this way. One of the blessings of Christian ministry is seeing people change under the influence of the Gospel and through biblical teaching.

Perhaps there are some here this morning who would see the value of doing that vocationally, as a full-time occupation. Young people especially should consider pursuing Christian ministry. If you would like to be used by the Spirit of God to bring about conversion and Christian growth, then ministry is a good choice.

5. .3 And this spiritual transformation occurred in the hearts of the people there at Corinth.

- a) Note here the “tablets of stone” vs. “tablets of flesh” language here. Paul likely has in mind a very well-known passage from Ezekiel here

*Ezekiel 36:26–27 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*

- b) A heart of stone is unresponsive. The heart of flesh responds to the word of God. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and applies it to the human heart—that resulted in conversion and sanctification in the lives of the believers at Corinth.
- c) Pen and ink can make characters on a surface, but they cannot affect the human heart. Ink and tablets cannot do anything by themselves. External characters written in ink cannot change internal human character.
- d) But the Spirit of God can change internal human character. And that’s what has happened in Corinth. The Spirit of God has written Christ into the hearts of the believers, and their lives will never be the same.

**App:** For many people, religion is an external thing; it never penetrates the heart. It’s empty formalism—they do the rituals and they obey the rules, but their heart is never transformed.

Genuine conversion transforms the heart, and it leads to a transformation of behavior. If the Spirit of God has not written his word on your heart, then you are simply not converted. If you are not a “new creation in Christ,” then your religion is merely words written on paper and stone.

6. The proof of the validity of Paul’s ministry was in the hearts of the believers at Corinth. They were “the proof of the pudding.” The Spirit of God had used the ministry of Paul to produce this great change in the people.

**App:** Generally speaking, the spiritual quality or atmosphere in a church is a reflection of the pastor. That's a rather intimidating thought for me, but in a certain sense, it's true. If a church is weak and shallow, and if the pastor has been there long enough to make a difference, that weakness and shallowness is, at least partly, due to the weakness and shallowness of the preacher. On the other hand, if the faith of the people is robust and resilient, that is in some degree, a reflection on the work of the pastor.

**Of course, the HSp is also at work in the lives of believers.** So if the Word of God is preached and taught, and if the people are responding to the work of the HSp, then the church should be strong.

In a certain sense, the spiritual quality of the people in the church stand as either a *recommendation* of that pastor or a *rebuke* to that pastor. He obviously can't take all the credit, nor is he fully to blame for the spiritual quality of the people. But there is a connection.

The Corinthian church had a lot of problems; but the majority of the people were genuine believers, and many of them were mature, godly, committed people. They had heard the Gospel message, been converted to Christ, and grown spiritually under the ministry of Paul and his associates. That reflected well on Paul. That church was almost like a letter of recommendation for Paul and his ministry.

### **End of part 1:**

The "proof of the pudding" for a church is the lifestyle of its members. Paul could look at the people of the church at Corinth with certainty that the Spirit of God had done a work in their hearts. They had a vibrant testimony that everyone could see.

I trust that that is true of our church as well. I trust that our church is like a letter that everyone can read, and the letter testifies to the reality of the Gospel.

Maybe for someone here today, religion is mostly external. It's writing of pen and ink on paper or stone, but it's not written on the heart. Perhaps you need your heart of stone replaced by a heart of flesh. If that's true with you, you need heart-felt repentance and genuine faith in Jesus.

Perhaps some of us need a reminder that it ought to be obvious/clear (.3) that the Spirit of God has done a work in our hearts. That truth should be obvious to all.

If you and I are like living letters, what are people reading? What is the message coming out of our lives? I trust that the letter give proof that the Spirit of God has written the Word of God on our hearts.