

2 CORINTHIANS: DEFENDING GOD'S SERVANT TO HIS CRITICS

Part V: The Spiritual Commendation Of A Godly Ministry

(2 Corinthians 3:1-6)

I. Introduction

- A. 2 Corinthians was written "to defend the authenticity of " Paul's "apostleship and his message" to a church of believers who were susceptible to heeding false teachers who critiqued him, Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 552.
- B. This state of affairs kept Paul's credibility as a true apostle of Christ constantly challenged by false teachers.
- C. Accordingly, 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 provides the spiritual commendation of Paul's godly ministry that no false teacher could contradict, what applies to all ministries under the fire of criticism even today (as follows):

II. The Spiritual Commendation Of A Godly Ministry, 2 Corinthians 3:1-6.

- A. Paul's opening question, "Do we begin again to commend ourselves?" in 2 Corinthians 3:1a reflects Paul's awareness that his critique of false teachers and defense of his own ministry in 2 Corinthians 2:17 "might be turned against him" by the false teachers at Corinth who apparently complained that Paul always tried to defend himself because he lacked the true credentials of a true apostle of Christ, *Ibid.*, p. 560.
- B. The reference to needing epistles of commendation for Paul's readers or letters of commendation from them to others refers to "a common practice in the first century (cf. Oxyrhynchus papyri 1.32)," *Ibid.*; 2 Cor. 3:1b.
- C. However, letters of commendation could be falsified or come from false sources that were "unavailable to public scrutiny" (*Ibid.*), so Paul needed to refer to a commendation that exceeded what false teachers used.
- D. Thus, Paul had a credible "letter of commendation" that could be viewed by everyone, including the Corinthian believers themselves whose lives had been transformed by the Holy Spirit of the living God when they believed the Gospel, 2 Cor. 3:2-3a. This change had not occurred on tables of stone that could be falsified by false teachers, but in the fleshly tables of the heart where only God could work, 2 Cor. 3:3b.
- E. Paul's reference to fleshly tables of the heart "alluded to the nature of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:33)" that stood in contrast to "the Old Covenant inscribed in stone (Ex. 24:12)," what Old Covenant the false teachers who promoted the Law upheld where Paul taught the New Covenant in Christ, *Ibid.*
- F. This shift from the Old Covenant of the Law written on stone tables to the New Covenant of grace where the Law of God is put into the heart of the regenerate is presented in the Old Testament, and is God's work alone:
 - 1. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 and 32:40, God promised that one day He would make a New Covenant with Israel in contrast to the Old Covenant of the Law that they broke, a New Covenant in which He would put His Law within them, writing it on their hearts, what will be fulfilled for Israel in the Messianic Kingdom.
 - 2. Ezekiel 36:24-27 similarly predicted the time when God would gather Israel's scattered people from the Gentile nations and figuratively sprinkle them with clean water and give them a new heart, putting a new spirit within them, removing their old heart of stone from their flesh that they might truly obey Him. This passage is what Jesus addressed when telling Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews in John 3:5 ESV that he needed to be "born of water and the Spirit" to "enter the kingdom of God." The "water" there does **not** refer to baptismal regeneration as some claim, but to the Jewish priests' ritual of sprinkling an item with ceremonially clean water (Ez. 36:25a), a figurative reference to God's work of regeneration at salvation!
 - 3. This ministry will be ultimately fulfilled in the future Messianic Kingdom, but is applicable to individual believers in the Church era through their Savior Jesus Christ, the Messiah of that coming Kingdom!
- G. The apostle added that he and his missionary team were not humanly sufficient in themselves to claim that any change in the Corinthian believers had come from them, for their sufficiency was of God, 2 Corinthians 3:4-5. The Lord had made them competent to be ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter of the Old Testament Law that was powerless to make men righteous because of their sinfulness, but of the Holy Spirit Who regenerated the Corinthian believers and equipped them to live godly lives by faith, 2 Cor. 3:6 ESV.

Lesson: Paul and his ministry team did not rely on external letters of commendation that could be falsified or not verified as true because they were subject to deceitful human manipulation, but Paul's team rather relied on the evidence of changed lives in his Corinthians readers themselves because Paul's team was composed of ministers of the New Covenant by means of the power of the Holy Spirit of God.

Application: (1) If we need to test the credentials of any Christian worker, we should examine the spiritual effects of their ministry efforts on others to see if they are marked by the Holy Spirit's work. (2) If we serve God but our own credibility is challenged by opponents, may we let God the Holy Spirit certify our workmanship before others.