**Commendation and confidence in Christ** 3/10/21 dkm

Read: John 5:31-47, 2Corinthians 2

Text: 2Corinthians 3:1-6

Psalms:

Jesus of Nazareth was rejected by the religious leaders in Jerusalem, especially the Pharisees. The Pharisees were teachers of the law- Paul was a Pharisee before his dramatic conversion. They revered Moses as the giver of the law but they did not understand the limitations of the law, and the promises of fulfilment in the new covenant. The prophets, and Moses himself, spoke of a new covenant. So when Jesus came along preaching the fulfilment of ‘the law and the prophets’ in himself, the Pharisees rejected him. They accused Jesus of bearing witness of himself or of self- commendation.

The Law of Moses required two witnesses to establish the truth, so who was bearing witness to Jesus (John 8:13, 17). What man, or two men, would give Jesus a letter of commendation. The Pharisees gave Saul (Paul) letters to hunt down Christians in Damascus but Jesus had no such letter (Acts 9:2). Jesus answered that he did have two witnesses but they were not men. Jesus appealed to his works as bearing witness that God the Father sent him, and his own witness as also being valid (John 8:18).

The apostle Paul faced similar scepticism, and indeed rejection, from some in the church at Corinth because he did not have letters of commendation. He had spent over eighteen months preaching the gospel, and establishing this church, and no one questioned his credentials during that time. It was only after other teachers came to Corinth, including false teachers from the church in Jerusalem, that they began asking Paul for his credentials. These men, these ‘peddlers of the word of God’ (2:17), brought letters written by supposed leaders in the church at Jerusalem.

How would Paul defend his apostolic authority, and the ministry of himself and his associates, in the face of questioning from his detractors in Corinth? His detractors had sided with the man living in incest to undermine the authority of the apostle Paul and the newcomers were quick to support this group. Our subheadings are: ‘Commendation letters’, ‘Christ’s letter’, ‘Competence is from God’ and ‘New Covenant ministers’.

**1. Commendation letters**

In the realm of science, truth was once established by repeatable experiments. One hundred and fifty year ago the theory of evolution was proposed by Charles Darwin; it was and is a theory because it was not based on true science. Nowadays this theory is accepted as truth by the majority, truth established by majority opinion. The theory of man-made climate change is following the same trajectory, truth established by majority vote. Moreover, there are people who think that theological truth is also established by popular opinion. Some scholars support their opinions, not by referring to Scripture, but to the writings of other scholars.

Jesus criticised the Pharisees for receiving honour from one another and not seeking honour that comes from the only God (John 5:44). Paul was critical of those peddling the word of God in Corinth, men who were ‘measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves’ (10:12). They came with letters of commendation written on paper or papyrus by other men. Paul was disappointed that the church received these men on the basis of their letters alone, letters that may well have been phony. Their teaching and their lives were certainly phony.

Paul was not condemning the practice of carrying letters of commendation when people went from one church to another: Apollos was given such a letter, and Phoebe also it seems (Acts 18:27, Rom 16:1). But this practice was being abused by these newcomers to Corinth. Just who these newcomers were and who was giving them letters of commendation, is not clear. We know they were Hebrews (11:22), meaning they were probably from the Jerusalem church. We read of a group of converted Pharisees in this church demanding that believers get circumcised and keep the law of Moses; other converted Jews were joining this group (Acts 15:5, 21:20). Although there is no mention of circumcision, Moses and the law get mentioned later in this chapter.

The apostles had fled Jerusalem by this time, leaving James as leader of the Jerusalem church. He had to deal with this group that was zealous for the law. It is hard to imagine him giving a letter of recommendation to these false teachers that had come to Corinth, men working to destroy the ministry of the apostle Paul. Since these ‘peddlers of the word of God’ wanted letters of commendation from the Corinthians also (3:1), their letters might have been a list of anyone they could persuade to sign; were they akin to the product reviews you get with online shopping- do you really believe these reviews?

**2. Christ’s letter**

Paul came to Corinth with no written letter of recommendation, but he had such a letter now! ‘You are our letter written in our hearts and read by all men’ (3:2 -some translations have, ‘written on your hearts’). What was the apostle talking about? Letters of commendation were to assure the church of the newcomer’s faith and ability to preach the gospel. Paul needed no such letters because, in the first place, he was not a newcomer. He had lived with them for a year and a half. They heard him preach and saw how he lived. Do you ask for a letter of commendation from a person you have known for such a length of time?

The apostle counters this criticism about having no letter of commendation by saying the people themselves were such a letter (3:2).They had heard the gospel preached by Paul and believed in Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord. The Holy Spirit had come upon them and changed their hearts and their lives. Recall that some of them were idolaters, thieves, adulterers, drunkards, or homosexuals. The change in their hearts was obvious to everyone. They were, in effect, Paul’s letter of commendation (3:2).

Paul quickly qualifies what he just said by declaring that he took no credit for their change of heart. He calls them an ‘epistle of Christ, ministered by us’ (3:3). Christ, by the Spirit, was in effect the author of the letter. They were a letter ‘come from Christ, for apart from Christ and his gospel they would not exist’. Paul was but a ‘minister’ or servant of God, used by God in conveying the gospel to the ears of these people. The picture of a letter written on the heart continues, with the Holy Spirit being pictured as the ink by which the letter is written (3:3). The Holy Spirit was active in their new birth or justification, and also in their sanctification, the new life they were living in Christ.

Paul concludes the picture with reference to the material on which this letter was written. All letters have a writer, who needs ink and paper to write on, and then someone to convey the letter, and in this case open the letter and read it. The apostle Paul conveyed the ‘letter of Christ’ written by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of these believers, such that they became living letters of Christ.

Paul was contrasting letters written with ink on papyrus, which he now compares with tablets of stone (3:3). ‘Tablets of flesh’ and ‘tablets of stone’ reminds us, and most probably reminded the apostle, of what the prophets wrote (Jer 31:33, Ezek 36:26). It also takes us back to the time of Moses and the law being written on tablets of stone. He will make further use of this contrast, the contrast between the law written on tablets of stone and the Spirit given to believers in the new covenant.

**3. Competence is from God**

I have met preachers or evangelists who boast about the number of people they have baptised. Paul never used such a measure for boasting; he hated all personal boasting. Paul was focused on the ongoing ministry of the church, to the glory of God. The church that demonstrates the love of God will attract people to the gospel; ‘By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another’ said Jesus (John 13:35).

Paul spoke in the previous chapter about the triumph of Christ and the aroma of the gospel, which is life to some and death to others. Paul handled the word of God very carefully, knowing its power to give life to one or bring death to another. He declared, ‘Who is sufficient for these things’ (2:16). He now answers this otherwise rhetorical question saying, we are not sufficient in and of ourselves, but ‘our sufficiency is from God’ (3:5- the Greek for ‘sufficiency’ or ‘competence’ refers to attaining a certain amount or measure or qualification). Some translations have competence rather than sufficiency, which reminds us of trade certificates which often refer to the competency of the student.

Whatever competency Paul had, as judged by whatever letter people want to use, this competency was from God, not himself. He was confident in his ministry but that confidence came ‘through Christ toward God’ (3:4). Apart from Christ he was nothing and his ministry one of self-commendation and self-glorification. But in Christ and through Christ they ministered in the presence of God, and to the glory of God the Father. Paul would not be measuring himself against his opponents to declare he was superior. ‘Total inability in ourselves, total ability in Christ- it is doubtful whether anything more important than this can ever be said about our life and work as Christians’ write Geoffrey Grogan.

**4. New Covenant ministers**

It was God who made Paul and his companions sufficient or competent as ministers of the new covenant. Paul usually introduced himself as an apostle of Jesus Christ, but in Romans he adds the qualification, ‘bondservant of Jesus Christ’. He was not peddling the word of God for profit but was compelled to preach Christ and him crucified (1Cor 9:6).

The apostle moves on from defending his personal integrity to explaining what he actually preaches. Reference to the new covenant in verse 6 indicates an understanding of the old covenant, which the false teachers were apparently reviving. Jesus spoke of a new covenant in his blood. He declared he had come to fulfil the Law and the Prophets, to fulfil all that was written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning him (Mat 5:17, Luke 24:44). Jesus did not see himself in opposition to Moses or as an alternative to Moses. He declared a new covenant that superseded an old covenant that was passing away (Heb 8:13). He declared a new covenant that, unlike the old covenant, had power to save; ‘For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sin’ (Heb 10:4).

The false teachers came to Corinth with letters of commendation, with words on paper written by men. Paul defended himself by letters written by the Spirit on the hearts of men and women. This led him to refer to the old covenant in terms of tablets of stone and the letter that kills. The law is good because it is written by God, but we have no power to keep the law. Moreover, the law carries a curse upon the person who fails to keep all of it, and ‘by the works of the law no flesh will be justified’ (Gal 3:10, 2:16). Paul says ‘letter’ not ‘law’ but the meaning is the same: ‘The letter kills’ (3:6). In Romans 8 he writes of the ‘law of sin and death’ from which we are set free by ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom 8:2). Here he writes of the new covenant that it is ‘of the Spirit; for the letter kills but the Spirit gives life’ (3:6).

The new covenant is in the ‘blood of Jesus Christ shed for you’ (Luke 22:20). In the new covenant Christ shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sin, and the Holy Spirit is poured out to effect that forgiveness, to change our hearts from stone to hearts of flesh. Dead, stony hearts are made alive through the word of God and the power of the Spirit (Eph 2:1). Such work of the Spirit was prophesied over four hundred years before Jesus came (Jer 31:31-34, Ezek 36:26), and even earlier in history by Moses (Deut 18:15).

The new covenant was not something invented by Paul or even by Jesus. It is written in the Scriptures of the OT. Paul’s language reflects that of the prophets even if he does not quote them directly. Anyone depending on Moses or the old covenant for salvation, whether Jew or Christian, must consider these words. Anyone thinking that their good works will help save them must consider these words. Legalism of any kind brings death not freedom. It is the Holy Spirit, and him alone, who brings life to hearts of stone. Let us be sure that we are serving ‘in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter’ (Rom 7:6), for ‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’.