

What Commends us?

2 Cor 3:1-6

3:1 Does this sound as if we were again boasting about ourselves? Could it be that, like some other people, we need letters of recommendation to you or from you? 2 You yourselves are the letter we have, written on our hearts for everyone to know and read. 3 It is clear that Christ himself wrote this letter and sent it by us. It is written, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, and not on stone tablets but on human hearts. 4 We say this because we have confidence in God through Christ. 5 There is nothing in us that allows us to claim that we are capable of doing this work. The capacity we have comes from God; 6 it is he who made us capable of serving the new covenant, which consists not of a written law but of the Spirit. The written law brings death, but the Spirit gives life.

I was brought up in the Brethren and as many of you know, they had what most Baptists used to have, a closed communion. Only members of the church were allowed to take communion. If you were a visitor, you needed a Letter of Commendation from your church confirming that you were a baptised believer in fellowship with them in order to participate in Communion. It got very legalistic in some churches. People not permitted to take communion had to sit apart from those who were – sometimes in a gated section, or in Baptist churches, in the balcony. If you were not from the right sort of church, you were forbidden to take communion. If you didn't have a letter, you couldn't have communion – even if they knew you well!

I remember the story of one prominent preacher on the Brethren circuit who was invited to preach at a conference at another church. He was welcomed with enthusiasm on the Saturday and people appreciated his ministry. Come Sunday morning, he arrived for the breaking of bread and was asked for a Letter of Commendation. "But you know me. In fact you know me so well that you invited me to preach here." Try as he would, he was refused communion and disgruntled, he walked away. Just as he was leaving the premises he saw a lady from his church who was visiting, where he was an Elder who was going in. She stopped him and said that she had forgotten to ask for a Letter of Commendation back home. Could he write her one? So he did. She went into the church to receive communion on his commendation!

Bizarre or what? That kind of legalistic stupidity has a "distinguished" history – our should I say ignominious! Paul felt that the Corinthians were doing much the same to him. So here was Paul writing to the Corinthians, some of whom were upset with him for not coming back to Corinth, but sending a terse letter (1 Corinthians) to them and others whom had come under the influence of Jewish teachers who had criticised him.

Paul feels he's having to commend himself to them when that should never had been necessary. He had been to Corinth. He didn't need a letter of recommendation from someone else to prove who he was. He'd stayed there for some time. They had come to Christ as a result of his ministry. They had received his teaching and seen the power of God work through him. What more did they need? His record spoke for itself. They are his letter of commendation and he theirs.

Christians have divided themselves from one another for generations. They reflect the human tendency to see difference as division rather than complementary. Division is a very human trait. Whether it is tribal, racial, cultural, gender or whatever, we find reasons, however small to make us associate with people of the same ilk or divide ourselves from others whose faces don't fit.

Division amongst Christians is usually made on the basis of differing interpretations of scripture or "special" revelation that someone claims to have received. Sometimes its because of sin within churches that makes some separate from others without resolving the issues. I know of many churches where division has come due to a fit of pique!

And it took centuries from the reformation until present for Christians of different denominations to recognise each other as part of the body of Christ. Even now you won't find any shortage of people who continue to make judgements against others – usually sweeping stereotypes – to keep

their “spiritual purity”.

But in Christ aren't all believers immersed by one Spirit into one body? Yes, so schism is not part of Christ's plan for the church He is head of? The problem is that there are many sects out there that are not Christian. They may look Christian and sound Christian. So how can we tell the difference between dangerous sect and another expression of the body of Christ?

Paul helps us here. It is the Spirit that gives life. He's the One that makes the difference between excessive legalism or excessive antinomianism. What do I mean by those words. Legalism is where everything is a set of rules and you try to live and do things in a way that you believe will get God's approval. Paul faced Jewish legalists who believed that salvation was through faith in Christ and observance of the law. Legalists are usually exclusive - “we're the only ones going to heaven because we're the only ones doing things the right way”. Legalists even bend the law to make it say the opposite of what I actually says. The Pharisees were good at it but even worse, look at sects such as Westboro Baptist Church whose gospel starts off “God hates...” Exclusivity of this type has to features, it relies of enslavement, fear and condemnation and invariable involves shunning and separation from others whether Christian or the world.

Antinomians are people who say law isn't important, only belief. They can be a product of a gospel where the principle of love and grace is taken too far. At the basic level it gives rise to people who believe that as long as you have trusted Christ, it doesn't matter how you behave because you are saved anyway. It's a very common view in traditional evangelical circles. At the liberal end it gives rise to universalism - God is such a God of love that He'll save everyone.

The main difference between sects and orthodox Christianity is that invariably they are blatantly un-biblical but even if they are like the Jehovah's Witnesses and say they hold the Bible in the highest regard, there is another vital ingredient missing that makes them dead and not alive.

For Paul here in 2 Corinthians it was the Holy Spirit who gives life. it was the Spirit that gave him the competence to be a minister of the new covenant. It's the Spirit that commends His people to one another and to the world. *You yourselves are the letter we have, written on our hearts for everyone to know and read. 3 It is clear that Christ himself wrote this letter and sent it by us. It is written, not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, and not on stone tablets but on human hearts.*

So when we meet or work with other Christians, we should look for how God is moving amongst them. What fruit do they produce. We should look at what is written on their hearts. How does the Spirit commend them? I'll never forget a video I was given to watch. It was made at a church in Northern Ireland criticising the Toronto Blessing, claiming it wasn't of God. They managed to get clips of the more bizarre things that went on at Toronto to demonstrate as the speaker claimed it was not of God. Mostly the clips contained images of people enjoying themselves. The video then cut to the speaker's Northern Irish audience. They looked impassive. Frankly Toronto looked much more interesting! Actually there were things done at Toronto that to my British evangelical eye didn't seem to fit right. But what I can't deny were the lives transformed by the Toronto Blessing in the 1980s. What I also can't deny are the hundreds of thousands of people - possibly millions - who have come to Christ through Toronto's main product, the Alpha Course.

Before you get left with the opinion that the grumpy Irish church was dead, I suspect it was an excellent evangelical church with a long history of bringing people to Christ.. Blessed be the ties that bind?

The issue is that no-one has the perfect church and no Christian grouping is perfect. I can find fault and failure in any Christian denomination or church. Name the church and I'll tell you what's wrong with it. That's the whole point. We are objects of God's grace. We are saved but the consequences of the fall still lie with us. Praise God, He works in us and through us by His Spirit despite who we are and despite our failings.

I was brought up in a very conservative evangelical environment that condemned certain

Christians for all kinds of reasons. The Bible was used to justify prejudice. So there was condemnation for: those who didn't use the Authorised Version, who didn't pray with Thee and Thou, who shopped on Sunday, who were of other denominations, who attended certain other churches, who didn't use the same Christian language, who used sign gifts, who had guitars and drums to accompany them in church, who "didn't preach the gospel" - well, not like us. But as I looked at people and churches that used all these things, I could see the Spirit moving - people coming to Christ, lives changed, the word of God taught a love for Jesus. What mattered to the people that taught me didn't seem to bother God at all. Quite the reverse - our church was in decline, they were growing and vibrant.

So never reject someone because in your opinion their doctrines and practices don't seem to match our interpretation of the Bible, or our preconceptions. Be sure that neither theirs or our interpretation of the Bible is the same as God's! Ask the question - is there life? Does the Holy Spirit bring life? What is God doing amongst these people? What fruit has He produced? They are a challenge to us and our ways? Over the years, I've learned much from understanding how others worship and teach the word. Learning through our differences can be very empowering. The Holy Spirit brings life.

Having this point of view then we have our our starting point. It was Paul's starting point. *He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (NIV)* We know that Paul's message was not one of rejection of the law, but that the Spirit makes us free to become like Jesus.

We are coming up to Easter: a time when we'll again affirm with all other Christians what's central to our faith - that Jesus has died and risen again! Let's use it as a time to celebrate what joins us and take each opportunity to learn from one another as we see the Spirit moving in our lives and churches.

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