

How Can We Gain A Sense Of Competence?

by Ron R. Ritchie

Have you ever noticed how we hunger to feel adequate in the situations that life hands us? As life goes by, however, we soon discover there are so many areas which we are quite incompetent to handle. My car broke down yesterday. I just looked at it with contempt. Faced with that problem, others simply open the hood, touch something and the car works again. I never get to experience that. All I can come up with is how soon I can sell it. I went skiing once with Paul Winslow. At the top of the ski run he said, 'Let's spend the day together,' but I spent the whole day looking for him! We hunger to be the perfect husband, the perfect wife, the perfect son or daughter, the perfect student. We really want to be competent and self-sufficient, but life doesn't work out that way.

When we face these situations we are made to feel very uncomfortable. We have the choice to avoid particular situations so we will never again look weak, or we can decide to deal with our lack of confidence or self-adequacy. At this point many among us are ripe for the picking by the human potential movement or the self-help groups that are so plentiful in Silicon Valley. Who can turn down an appeal to the ego such as the one I read just recently: 'Man is made or unmade by himself. By the right choice he ascends. As a being of power, intelligence and love, and lord of his own thoughts, he holds the key to every situation...' How I wish life were like that! I can't even find the key to my house half the time. The world offers this kind of thinking to the world. But since we are all created out of the same stuff, how do we answer the Christian who asks, 'How can I gain a sense of competence'!

In the section to which we have come in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians we will look at two answers to that question. First, the apostle says, trust in the work of the Holy Spirit; and secondly, trust in the work of the Father. Paul had already written what we call his 'painful letter' to the Corinthians which dealt with the issue of sexual immorality in the church. This letter was carried by Titus to Corinth. Worried about their response, Paul awaited their reply (which was to be brought to him by Titus) in the city of Troas. But Titus failed to appear. Then, although the Lord had opened a door of ministry for the apostle in Troas, finding no rest in his spirit because Titus did not meet him there he went on to Philippi, in Macedonia. There, however, to his joy he found Titus, who told him that the Corinthians had responded very well to the 'painful letter.' Finding that the presence of the Lord and the power of God were more than adequate to defeat 'spiritual forces in the heavenly realm,' and the false apostles who were misleading the flock in Corinth, Paul cried, 'Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him.' (2 Cor. 2:14)

'Who is equal to such a task?' The apostle asked following his cry of thankfulness to God. How can we be competent to live on earth as God intended us to live, to his honor and glory? How can we achieve that? Let us look at the apostle's first answer to that question.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

1. Trust in the work of the Spirit 3:1 -3

In the midst of his joy Paul stops himself and asks, 'Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?' 'Does it sound like we're bragging, like we are trying to produce credentials because of our comments?' No, for he writes later in this letter, 'Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord, for it is not the man who commends himself who is approved, but the man whom the Lord commends.' So the answer to the first question is 'No.' Paul was not commending himself.

'Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?' he then asks. First century travelers had to carry letters of recommendation with them whenever they left their own areas. This practice was quite common in the Christian church because of the number of false apostles who tried to infiltrate the church. Paul had written such a letter for the men who carried the offering to Jerusalem during the famine there. (1 Cor. 16) Christians in Ephesus wrote a letter of introduction for Apollos when he traveled to various cities in Greece. But here Paul gives five reasons why he, Titus and Timothy would never need letters of introduction when they visited the church in Corinth again.

First, he says, 'You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts...' We can discover what Paul means by this statement if we look at I Corinthians 6:9-11 : 'Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.' Why would Paul and his associates need letters of recommendation to the Corinthians when the Corinthians themselves were living testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit through the apostle? They could not deny the reality of their own changed lives. Though they were once 'dead in their trespasses and sins, they had been made alive in Christ,' and that transformation was written on the apostle's heart. Paul didn't need a letter of recommendation; all he needed to do was point to the changed lives of the Corinthians.

On New Year's Day this year I called to say 'Happy New Year' to a man who had just recently come to know Christ in one of our Bible studies. 'Isn't this a great year?' I said to him, as he had come to know Jesus Christ as his Lord. He said to me, 'This is not a great year, this is the best year of my whole life.' That is the kind of change the Holy Spirit can make in a life. No, Paul didn't need any letters. All the Corinthians had to do was look among themselves for living testimonials to his ministry.

Secondly, they were 'known and read by everybody.' They were known not by hearsay, not even by various facts about them, but because their families and friends knew them to be different than they were before they came to Christ. While they had formerly been homosexuals, drunkards, thieves, etc., they had been washed, sanctified and justified in Christ. Their lifestyle was as plain as an open book. People had read that book both before and after they had become Christians and they were amazed at the changes they saw in these Corinthians, how they reacted under stress and tension, their obvious Christ likeness, etc.

A few years ago I was invited to speak at the 75th anniversary of the orphanage where I had spent eight years up to the time I was 19. As I was actually thrown out on my ear from that place I could hardly believe the invitation when I received it. I had to double check it to make sure it was for me. I had a marvelous time speaking there, but I felt a lot of stress because my best friend from high school, Dale, was sitting in the back of the auditorium, reading me during the three days of the celebration. I wondered over and over if he was reading the old me or had he seen something new about me. I prayed, 'Lord, please let him see you in me. The old me is dead. I'm a new creature. Let him see that.' After the last session Dale came up to me and said, 'Ritchie, it's real.' then he walked away. '...Known and read by everybody.' He hadn't seen a perfect man, but a man in the process of becoming like Christ. He had seen enough to convince him there was a difference in me.

Thirdly, Paul says to the Corinthians, 'you show that you are a letter from Christ.' In other words, when people read their lives they clearly saw the life of the resurrected Lord housed in their bodies. That is why Paul could say in Galatians, 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.' (Gal. 2:20)

Fourthly, '[you are] the result of our ministry.' The Corinthian Christians had, in a spiritual sense, been 'delivered' by the apostle. Paul had been tempted to leave the city because of pressure from the Jews but the Lord appeared to him in a vision and told him, 'Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.' The apostle stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God, thus the Corinthian Christians were the 'result' of his ministry.

The fifth reason Paul did not need written letters of recommendation was that they themselves were a letter from Christ, 'written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.' They became letters of Christ because of the work and the power of the Holy Spirit, who was given to the church by Christ on the Day of Pentecost.

Here is how J.I. Packer describes the work of the Spirit in his book, 'Keep In Step With The Spirit':

The Holy Spirit of God, the Lifegiver, who hovered over the waters and spoke in history by the prophets, was poured out on Christ Jesus' disciples at Pentecost to fulfill the new Comforter role that Jesus had defined for Him in his character as the Second Comforter (Paraclete), Jesus' deputy and representative agent in men's minds and hearts. The Spirit ministers today...as Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so is His Spirit; and in every age since Pentecost, wherever the gospel has gone, the Spirit has continued to do on a larger or smaller scale the things Jesus promised he would when sent in his new capacity.

The lives of these Corinthians had been changed by the Spirit of the living God. Paul did one thing--he showed up in Corinth. That is what the Lord wants us to do--just show up and he will have the Holy Spirit function in us and through us.

The Holy Spirit has five main ministries in the lives of believers in this 'age of the Spirit.' (This began at Pentecost and it will continue until Christ returns again.) First, the Holy Spirit has a ministry of conviction. According to John 16, the Spirit through believers convicts the world of sin, righteousness and judgment, placing the truth of the gospel in a clear light before unbelievers so that it is acknowledged as truth whether they receive Christ or not. Last night I had an opportunity to talk to a girl whom I was told was in the process of becoming a Christian. I asked her what was holding her from committing her life to Christ. She said, 'I just can't be that good.' 'Neither can I,' I told her. 'God is not asking you to become a Christian so you can try to be good. Jesus Christ will empower you with his Holy Spirit to provide all the power necessary to be like Christ. What you have to work hard at is resting in that truth,' I said. She told me she had to think further about it, and I encouraged her to keep probing and asking until what she needed to know became clear to her. There is an example of how the Holy Spirit can use both you and me to convict people of righteousness, judgment and sin.

The second work of the Holy Spirit is that of regeneration. (Titus 2:5) Faith is the human requirement which enables the Holy Spirit to give new life, eternal life. The word of God provides the content for faith. It's not faith in faith, but faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior as revealed by his spoken and written word.

The third work of the Holy Spirit among believers is that of indwelling them. (I Cor. 6:19) Believers are given the gift of the Holy Spirit and his ministry in their life is to empower them for living; enable them for good works and service; and purge their motives and actions--all of this in order that Christ may be known, loved, trusted, honored and praised by believers. The result is fellowship and Christ likeness as Christians learn to draw on his power for everything, and that glorifies Christ. Many Christians are so excited about the Holy Spirit empowering, motivating and purging them they draw attention to themselves: 'Look what's happening to me by the Spirit,' they say. The Holy Spirit is not meant to glorify Christians, however, but to glorify Christ, who in turn glorifies the Father in heaven as Christians, empowered by his Spirit, draw and attract people to Christ by their patience, their love, and their long suffering.

Fourthly, the Holy Spirit baptizes Christians, spiritually placing them into the body of Christ. (1 Cor. 12:13) Christians then acknowledge that fact by being baptized with water.

Finally, the Holy Spirit seals Christians with the Holy Spirit. (Eph. 1) We can't get out of our relationship with God. Once my son became upset with me and told me he was going to go to Africa, change his name and never come home. I told him, 'Just try it! You're still a Ritchie, still my son, and you'll always be that!' The Holy Spirit seals Christians so that they will always be sons of God.

So Paul learned the answer to his question, 'Who is equal to such a task?'--such a task of living and functioning in light of being thankful to God who always leads us in triumph, who always spreads through us the fragrance of Christ, who always finds us acceptable because we are hidden in Christ. How can we as Christians gain a godly sense of competence to be able to function on earth as God intended us to function to his honor and glory? Paul learned to trust in the person and power of the Holy Spirit in his own life, and then trust in the person and power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the Corinthians. We too can gain a godly sense of competence, not in our talents, gifts or ministries, but by trusting in the person and power of the Holy Spirit in and through us to the honor and glory of Christ, who in turn glorifies the Father.

How does this work? Let me try to illustrate. My wife and I were invited to speak to the student body at Westmont College on the topic of marriage--to speak on marriage through our own marriage, in other words. We were scared to death at the prospect of facing a thousand students and being honest with them. We wondered why we had ever accepted the engagement. On the morning of the first session I was really nervous. We prayed, 'Lord, you have brought us this far. We believe you are going to function through us. We want your Spirit to flow through us because my wife and I have no sense of competence or adequacy.' When I look back at our marriage, times were so bad on occasion I can't believe we're still married. But we learned to trust our Lord in those difficult years, and these past few years have been wonderful. Well, to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ the people at the college said it was a wonderful week of spiritual encouragement. 'Who was speaking?' I asked. The Holy Spirit had spoken through us. That's the way he wants us to live.

Paul's sense of competence to live and to minister came from trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to change and keep the lives of his spiritual family in Corinth even during his physical absence. Now he will go on to show that his confidence comes from trusting in the work of the Heavenly Father.

2. Trust in the work of the Father 3:4-11

Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. 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.

Again we come back to the question, 'Who is equal to the task of functioning as God intends us to live and function?' 'Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God,' Paul responds. In Philippians 3:4-5 we discover where the apostle got his confidence before he became a Christian: 'If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.' Then he came to know Jesus Christ and he learned how to put aside the flesh and allow the Lord to flow through him.

Here is what the religious flesh looks like in the words of another 20th century human potential movement writer: 'There must be a better way to live. There is a better way to live. When we were given dominion over the world, we were also given dominion over ourselves. God is not our navigator. It was never his intention to chart a course for each one of us and thus place us all under his bondage. Instead he bestowed each of us with intellect and talent and vision to map our own way, to write our own book of life in any manner we choose.' How would you like to be your own god? What a mockery of the Scriptures that tell us, 'Your life is not your own; you were brought with a price'; 'It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live I live by faith.' We are surrounded by people who are hungry and craving for this kind of human potential salesmanship because they have no sense of adequacy or competence and they can't stand the idea of weakness.

Then where did Paul get his sense of competence after his salvation? He tells us in these verses: 'Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.' The secret of Paul's life and ministry was a total dependence on God functioning through him for eternal purposes. We normally think that if we give up using our self--confidence, self--determination, self--reliance, talent, skills, personality and strength we will be left in a vacuum, a no--man's land, naked and weak. But Paul says, No! The moment we declare we are inadequate for the task set before us and call on God, God immediately fills us with his total

adequacy, his wisdom, strength, knowledge and love. 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,' is the apostle's hope.

Further, he declares, 'God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.' A covenant is an agreement between two parties which is designed to regulate their relationship. A covenant may be a last will and testament directing the disposition of one's earthly goods upon one's death. A covenant may be an arrangement by one party with unilateral authority and power which the other party may accept or break but not change. Notice that Paul says God has enabled us to be ministers of a new agreement. The key word here is 'arrangement.' The new covenant is an arrangement by God for living with his people, a unilateral agreement with authority and power which the other party may accept or break but cannot change. God made several such covenants or arrangements with his people Israel. He made covenants with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel and with David so that they could live in a right relationship with him.

In the context of this letter we are going to speak about two covenants, two arrangements God made with unilateral authority and power. First, the old covenant. This was the Mosaic law, handed by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Then the new covenant is first mentioned in Jeremiah 31 and 32, in Ezekiel 16, in Isaiah 59, and in the New Testament in Hebrews 8. This new covenant was an arrangement God made with Israel following the Babylonian captivity. (It has not yet been fulfilled but one day it will be, after Christ's return to earth as Lord of Lords and King of kings.) Here is how that covenant was spoken of in Jeremiah: 'Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and Judah...but this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days...! will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it' (they will have a change of heart); 'I will be their God and they shall be my people' (they will have fellowship with God); 'they shall know me, from the least to the greatest' (they will have knowledge of the Lord); 'I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more' (they will have forgiveness of sin). All of this was historical. But now all of these offers have been made to the church as Israel has been set aside for a time because of disobedience. (Romans 9-11)

In the Upper Room at the Last Supper Jesus took the cup in his hands and said, 'This is the blood of the new covenant' (the same words used in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hebrews), 'in my blood which is poured out for you.' (Luke 20:22) The next day that blood was shed; the church was then to experience spiritually all the blessings that were promised to Israel. That is our covenant until Christ returns to this earth again. This new covenant or eternal covenant is called a 'better covenant' in Hebrews. It is better than the old covenant because the old has become obsolete. When Jeremiah, the prophets, Jesus and Paul use the word 'new,' both the Hebrew and the Greek words used do not mean brand new, but 'renewed,' fresh, better in quality but not necessarily new in time. God has always had a new covenant with his people.

Here is how this new covenant is described by David Roper in his book, 'The New Covenant In The Old Testament': 'The new covenant was a restatement of the basic eternal arrangement for maintaining a living, loving relationship between God and man...As we cast our lot with him and lay hold of his life, he will increasingly bestow on us his power for obedience and his forgiveness for weakness and failure.' The new covenant is described in the words of Jesus on the night before his death: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Without me you can do nothing.' The new covenant is illustrated in the words of the apostle Paul, 'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.' The new covenant is, 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.' The new covenant is everything coming from God, nothing from us. It is total dependence on Christ for the power to cope with reality. The result is peace, joy and wholeness in the Holy Spirit.

'He has enabled us to be ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.' The law reveals who God is, and that revelation drives us to the grace of God who provides us with what is necessary in order to keep the law. The law was given to Israel and to man to reveal the holiness of God; to reveal the sinfulness of man; to reveal the steps necessary to have fellowship with God; to be a schoolmaster to lead men to Christ; to unify God's people; to make Israel a kingdom of priests; to make provision for forgiveness of sin; to provide instructions for worship; to reflect into the hearts of men to see if they were godly; to reveal Jesus as the Christ. But this old covenant, with all of its outward institutions, rituals and sacrificial services was but a shadow of better things to come. (Heb. 10:1) 'By calling [the new] covenant new, [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.' (Heb. 8:13) 'The letter kills,' Paul says, because it reveals truth but brings with it no power to help us keep the law. The

new covenant, on the other hand, not only shows us the very heart of God and his desires for us, but it also provides the Holy Spirit who gives life and power.

Now Paul contrasts the old covenant with the new covenant in three statements, hoping to show the Corinthians the glory of the new covenant. Here is the first of them:

Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved on letters of stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?

'Now if. . .', Paul begins. He has in mind Jews who have become Christians but were being tempted to put themselves back under the law. 'Now if that ministry [of the law] brought death...', Paul says. The law condemned man. It produced death and killed the spirit because man found he could not keep the requirements of the law. The young woman whom I have already mentioned who is in the process of becoming a Christian thought that Christianity was just a matter of obeying a different set of laws than the ones which she had set as a standard for herself--and failed to keep! But humanity was never designed to keep the law. On the contrary, the law was given to demonstrate to us just how far we had strayed from the character and standards of God.

I was interested to read this quote from one of the human potential movement leaders on this subject: 'If the truth were known, we humans seldom pay much attention to the columns of instructions, regulations, laws and canons, no matter how important or beneficial they may seem. Consider the most important guides for living we have ever received, the Ten Commandments. Even those sacred laws are frequently ignored, since less than half of all those who piously profess to believe in them cannot recite more than five of them...'

But that ministry that brought death, the law, Paul says, 'came with glory...fading though it was.' The old covenant brought death to the spirit, although it came 'with glory.' It came with consuming fire, wonderful to behold. It had a glory even Moses could not look at, but it was a fading glory. I was raised in a church that had a lot of glory about it. I took my mother-in-law there recently and waited for her while she completed what is called 'the stations of the cross.' As I stood there I thought, 'I remember all of this.' As a boy I thought it was glorious, especially on Palm Sunday and Easter. But I would never dream of going back to it in exchange for all I have now. I am no longer part of it because I have seen something much more glorious. Once I felt guilty all the time because I could not keep up with all the laws which that church impressed on me. But the glory of it for me kept fading. Finally I began to skip going to church at all except for a couple of times a year.

Here is Paul's second contrast:

If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.

The law condemns, but the new covenant brings righteousness, not condemnation. Simply stated, it's like comparing the sun and the moon. The other evening there was a beautiful full moon, so bright that I could even see the 'man in the moon.' When I got up the following morning the moon was still visible, but by now the sun was up also so that the moon had lost all its glory. In the same way, Paul is saying that the glory of the old covenant faded in the light of the new covenant.

The third contrast:

And if what was fading away came with glory, how much greater is the glory of that which lasts!

The law was fading away. It was temporary, a shadow of what was to come. But the new covenant is lasting, better, and eternal, because the Spirit, not the law, is at the centre of it.

How can we gain a sense of competence to be able to live on this earth as God intended us to live? First, we need to trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul's sense of competence to live and minister came from trusting

in the person and work of the Holy Spirit to change and keep the lives of believers in Corinth. So we also must trust in the person, the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. Not only is he at work maturing our lives but he is also at work convicting, regenerating, indwelling, baptizing and sealing the lives of others in our families, among our friends and neighbors.

Secondly, we must trust in the work of our Heavenly Father. Our sense of competence to cope with earthly and spiritual reality does not come from self--effort, self--reliance or self--confidence. Our competence comes from God our Heavenly Father. Through the shed blood of his Son Jesus Christ he has provided a new, fresh restatement of the basic eternal arrangement for maintaining our relationship with him as we trust him to provide power for obedience and forgiveness for our weakness and failure.

As I was leaving my house this morning I opened up my Bible to the book of Exodus, to a verse that has always brought a smile to my face--the passage where Moses tells God he feels incompetent to go and face Pharaoh and deliver God's people from Egypt:

Moses said to the Lord, 'O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.' The Lord said to him, 'Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go; [show up!] I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'

There is the new covenant. Just show up--in your neighborhoods, in your work, in all your relationships and allow God to work through you and speak through you. He will make you 'competent as ministers of a new covenant--not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.'

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