

BECOMING CHRIST-CONFIDENT IN A SELF-CONFIDENT AGE

SERIES: DEVELOPING A CHRISTIAN LIFESTYLE IN A POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

by Ron Ritchie

Recently I received a support letter from Dudley Weiner (a missionary in Paris, France). He shared with his readers the personal struggles he has been going through as he and his new leadership are seeking to establish a church, the light of Christ in that city of spiritual darkness. He said he began to teach a series from Philippians entitled *Liberty in the Prison of the Circumstances of Life*. He was filled with the hope that he would come to an understanding of what Paul meant when he wrote that in the midst of his Roman imprisonment and suffering he had found joy and liberty in Christ.

The first week he became sick with a bacterial infection accompanied by a high fever for two days, and he arrived at the Sunday service in a state of total weakness. But he was able to preach, and the people sensed that he preached in the presence and power of the Lord. He then said to God, "I think I get the picture, could I be strong now?" The following Friday evening he and Janet got food poisoning and both were sick all night and into Saturday. He again said to the Lord, "I think I really understand now. How about a little break?" Then he discovered that what he had really been wanting was to learn about the idea of liberty and joy in the midst of suffering without getting personally involved, leaving him with the discouraging feeling that he was still a joyless prisoner of the circumstances of life.

As Paul was learning some two thousand years ago about becoming Christ-confident in a self-confident age, so now Dudley is learning. And we also need to continue to learn that basic spiritual truth for our lives if we want to be light in this spiritually darkened post-Christian world; which has chosen to live on a relativistic foundation in which there are no longer any absolutes in truth or morals; thus driving it to gather around the pillars of secularism, antihistoricalism, naturalism, utopianism, and pragmatism (see Discovery Paper 4335). Paul will remind us in 2 Corinthians 3:1-11 that the key to becoming Christ-confident in a self-confident age is to realize that (1) we are a letter of Christ, (2) we are a servant of a new covenant, and (3) we are Spirit-filled.

You are a letter of Christ

2 Corinthians 3:1-3

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.

Paul had already written a painful letter to the Corinthians when they were struggling with the teachings of false teachers who had come into the church seeking to discredit Paul's authority as an apostle, his ministry, and his personality. He was also writing to address the problems of sexual immorality in the church. Titus carried that letter to the Corinthians and then brought the good news back to Paul in the city of Philippi, Greece that they loved him, accepted his spiritual rebuke, and repented of their own sin (see 2 Corinthians 7). Paul immediately sat down and wrote a thankful letter, which we now call 2 Corinthians, and in 2 Corinthians 2:14 he broke out in the joy of the Lord, "But thanks be to God who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life."

Then Paul addresses this problem his spiritual children were struggling with. Questioning Paul's apostleship, some of the false teachers had apparently suggested to the leaders of the Corinthian church that before they

invited Paul back into their fellowship he should, like all unknown spiritual teachers, send them some letters of recommendation. Requesting letters of recommendation was originally designed to block the arrival of false prophets who traveled the Roman world seeking to take advantage the Christian community. So in the midst of his joy he stopped himself and asked, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Does it sound like we're bragging, or like we're trying to produce credentials because of our comments?" No! Paul was not commending himself. "Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?"

Paul then gives the Corinthians five reasons why he and his disciples Titus, and Timothy would never need letters of introduction when they visited the church in Corinth again.

(1) "You are our letter, written in our hearts...." We can discover what Paul means by this statement if we look at 1 Corinthians 6:9, which he had written five years earlier about the time when he had arrived in that wicked city as the only Christian: "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." The Spirit of God had invaded their lives and opened their hearts so that they could invite Christ to come in, and they were immediately changed---washed, cleansed, and justified. Why would Paul and his disciples need letters of recommendation to the Corinthians when the Corinthians themselves were living testimony of how the Holy Spirit was able to change their lives through the preaching of the gospel by these men?

2) They were "known and read by all men." Their families and friends personally knew them to be different than they were before they came to Christ.

(3) "...being manifested [you show] that you are a letter from Christ." When people "read" their lives they clearly saw the life of the resurrected Lord housed in their bodies.

(4) "...cared for by us...." The Corinthians were the undeniable fruit of the ministry of Paul, and his disciples.

(5) Finally, they were "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts." It was because of the work and power of the Holy Spirit, who was given to the church by Christ on the Day of Pentecost, that they became a letter of Christ.

The tombstone of J. Hudson Taylor, pioneer missionary to China, was discovered three years ago in the cluttered storage yard of a museum in Zhenjiang by his great-grandson, James Hudson Taylor III. The graveyard where it stood had been razed years earlier, and local believers had tried to have the stone mounted at another site. Permission was granted, but the museum director demanded that the believers pay for twenty-six years of storage charges, which amounted to some thirteen thousand dollars. Pastors in China overseeing the restoration project recently informed the curator that he could keep the grave marker. In their letter they said that what was etched in the hearts of people as a result of the ministry of the revered missionary was more important than what was written on stone. (This was in *National and International Religious Report*, January 11, 1992.)

Paul's sense of confidence to live and to minister came from trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to not only change his own life so that he became a letter of Christ, but via the preaching of the gospel to change the lives of the Corinthians so that they now were a letter of Christ read by everyone. Now he will go on to show that his confidence came from trusting in the work of the heavenly Father for his life, who called him to become...

A servant of a new covenant

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

This brings us back to the question, Who is equal to the task of living and functioning as God intends us to? In Philippians 3:4-5 we are reminded of 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." But then he came to know Jesus Christ, and he learned how to put aside the flesh and allow the Lord to flow through him. The secret of Paul's life and ministry was total dependence on God's functioning through him for his eternal purposes. We normally think that if we choose to give up trusting in our self-confidence, self-determination, self-reliance, talent, skills, personality, and strength we will be left in a vacuum or a no man's land, naked and weak. But Paul tells us that the moment we declare we are inadequate for the task set before us and choose to call on God, he immediately fills us with his total adequacy; his wisdom, strength, knowledge, and love. "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13), is the apostle's hope.

Now Paul continues, "...[God] also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." In this verse Paul is countering the thinking of the Judaizers (see 2 Corinthians 11:4, 15, 22) who had come among the new believers in Corinth and were seeking to teach the Gentile believers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). That is, to become a Christian one must not only have faith in Jesus Christ but one must come back under the law of Moses and do works. Paul, on the other hand, had always taught, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

But God had made several covenants or arrangements with his people so that they could live in right relationship with him. He had made covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. These covenants were unilateral arrangements of authority and power by God. The people could accept or break them, but they could not change them. In the context of this passage we are going to look at two of these covenants.

Old covenant is a term contrasted by implication with the term new covenant in this passage. The old covenant was the law God handed to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was the revelation of God's character, will, and how he desired his people to live. It was embodied in the law engraved on tablets of stone by God's own finger. In Luke 10:25-28 a rich young lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said, "What is written in the Law?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus replied, "Do this, and you will live" (quoting Leviticus 18:5).

But Paul will refer to this old covenant as the "ministry of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7) and the "ministry of condemnation" (3:9); for once it was given to the people of Israel it "killed their spirit," because no man or woman in their own strength was ever able to live up to the character and desires of God as revealed in his moral law. The reason no one can live up to the holy, good, and just law of God is that humanity has no power within itself to do so. The law in fact was designed to drive us to the grace of God as revealed in his Son Jesus Christ, who shed his blood on the cross so God could forgive our sins (see Romans 7:7).

The new covenant was an arrangement that God made with Israel following the seventy-year Babylonian captivity (586-516 BC). It is mentioned in Ezekiel 16:60-63, Isaiah 59:21, and as we shall see below, Jeremiah 31:31-34 (see also 32:37f). Jeremiah starts off with a statement of future hope:

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the

house of Israel and with the house of Judah...."
Then he refers to the old covenant:

"...not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

And here is the new covenant:

"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

The word new in Hebrew and Greek does not mean brand-new; but renewed, restated, fresh, better in quality yet not necessarily later in time. God has always had a "new" covenant with his people. He has always wanted man to live by faith in him, to live in his strength and wisdom. Hebrews 8:16-13, 12:24, and 13:20 call it his eternal covenant, the arrangement he has always wanted to have with his people in every generation since the creation of Adam and Eve.

Now, when was God to put into effect the new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah? Jesus offered the new covenant to the nation of Israel during his earthly ministry, but they rejected it. So on the last evening of his earthly ministry our Lord gathered around him in the upper room his disciples, the spiritual remnant representing the houses of Israel and Judah; and he lifted up a cup of wine before them and said, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20). And this is the central truth of our lives. Ray Stedman wrote in *Authentic Christianity*, "Jesus died for us so that he may live in us. It is his life in us that is the power by which we live a true Christian life." Because of this sacrifice of love Christ became the mediator of the new covenant (see Hebrews 8).

At Pentecost (33 AD) many Jews in the nation placed their faith in him as their Messiah, received the person and gift of the Holy Spirit, and began to spiritually enjoy the terms of the new covenant. Then the floodgates of salvation were opened to the Gentiles who put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, and they were also placed into the "body of Christ" and given the spiritual blessings of the new covenant. The blessings of the new covenant are still available to anyone at this moment who will put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

(What about the promise to Israel? According to Romans 9-11, our Lord will one day gather Israel together out of every corner of the world. Paul wrote in Romans 11:25-27, "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in you own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written [in Isaiah 59:20, 21],

"The Deliverer will come from Zion,
He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.
And this is My [new] covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.")

The blessings of the new covenant are clearly seen in both the Old and New Testaments. When Moses was eighty years old and without any power, authority, or position, the Lord, revealing himself as "I AM," appeared before this humble shepherd in a burning bush and told him that he wanted to deliver his people through him. Moses was fearful and responded by saying, "Who am I?" His final excuse was, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue." But 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."

King David, another shepherd of the Lord, understood this spiritual principle. David as a man of God living under the law of Moses but experiencing a new-covenant relationship with the one and only living God, said in Psalm 40:

"How blessed is the man who has made the Lord his trust...
I delight to do Thy will, O my God;
Thy Law is within my heart."

He understood the principle that he couldn't keep the law. He asked God by faith to change his heart, and so God put the law inside his heart.

Jesus, the "good Shepherd," described the new covenant to his disciples on the night he was betrayed: "I am the vine, you are the branches; apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). As we have already seen, the apostle Paul later wrote, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). The new covenant is everything coming from God, nothing coming from us, in order for us to live in righteousness before him. It is total dependence on our risen Lord for the power to cope with our present realities.

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."

Paul understood that his confidence to be a letter of Jesus Christ and to be a minister of the new covenant came not from a deep inner self-confidence, but from depending totally on God in Christ, making him Christ-confident in all areas of his life and ministry. Based on that spiritual reality, he appeals to the Corinthian believers to choose to live by the power of the Holy Spirit rather than to come under the Law again.

You are filled with the Spirit

2 Corinthians 3:6-11

...who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

Remember, the Judaizers were trying to get the Gentile Christians to live out their new relationship with Jesus Christ under the law of Moses. But the law reveals who God is, and that revelation is designed to drive us to a place of spiritual bankruptcy where we realize that we are not capable in ourselves to keep the requirements of the law. At the same time our hearts should be filled with the hope that if we choose to call out for the grace of God, he will provide us with power of his indwelling Holy Spirit to live within the requirements of the law, which he has placed in our hearts. The old covenant with all of its outward institutions, rituals, and sacrificial services was but a shadow of better things to come (see Hebrews 10:1). "By calling this covenant 'new,' [God] has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear" (Hebrews 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.

Notice that Paul draws three contrasts here. First, he contrasts the ministry of death versus the ministry of the Spirit. "But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel

could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how shall the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?" Paul has in mind Jews who had become Christians but were being tempted to put themselves back under the law. "That ministry of the law condemned man and brought death," Paul is telling them. It produced death by killing the spirit because man found he could not keep its requirements. The law was given to demonstrate to us just how far we had strayed from the character and standards and will of God. And the ministry that brought death, Paul says, "came with glory...fading as it was...." It came with consuming fire, wonderful to behold. It had a glory even Moses could not look at---but it was a fading glory. The coming of the person and power of the Holy Spirit has even more glory.

Secondly, Paul contrasts the ministry of condemnation to the ministry of righteousness. "For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory on account of the glory that surpasses it." The law condemns, but the new covenant brings imputed righteousness. 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 then the sun was also up, so that the moon had lost all its glory. In the same way, Paul is saying that the glory of the ministry of condemnation was lost in the light of the glory of the ministry of righteousness.

Thirdly, he contrasts the temporal quality of the old covenant with the permanence of the new covenant. "For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory." The old covenant was fading away. It was only a shadow of what was to come. The new covenant is lasting, better, and eternal, because the Spirit, not the law, is at the center of it.

What is the key to becoming Christ-confident in a self-confident age? (1) We are a letter of Christ written by the Spirit of the living God. As we move out into our families and communities by his power, we need to know that those around us not only can smell the perfume of Christ, but they can read about him in our "letter," which may bring them in turn into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. (2) We are servants of a new covenant. We need to learn to trust in the person and power of our heavenly Father rather than in the temporary power of self-effort, self-reliance, or self-confidence. Our confidence should come from God. For through the shed blood of his Son Jesus Christ he has provided a new, fresh restatement of the basic eternal arrangement for maintaining his relationship with us, as we trust him to provide power for obedience and forgiveness for our weakness and failure. It is within this spiritual framework that we can enjoy being confident servants of the new covenant. (3) We are Spirit-filled believers who need to daily trust him to keep us from falling back under the Law that can produce only death.

Let's return to Dudley Weiner's letter. He continued, telling how on that Saturday evening after their bout with food poisoning, a bit weak and emotionally drained, he went out to walk in the park and get his head clear with the Lord. As he went down the steps he said to the Lord, "What is going on? What do you want me to learn from all of this?" Outside he met a young girl from the neighborhood who played with his daughter Hannah. She asked Dudley about Hannah, and he wrote, "Then the words simply left my lips as if detached from me, and I asked her if she ever went to church or believed in God. And she said 'no.' I then started sharing with her about Jesus and how she could know Him." He gave her a tract that he happened to have in his pocket and they parted. Then Dudley closed by saying, "As I walked around the park it became more clear. Often God is not able to use me because I am in the way. Even with the best and purest of motives, at times it is simply me and not him. Only when I am weak and tired and all my desires and passions and ambitions are unable to rise to the surface, is my LORD able to naturally and clearly flow through me."

Catalog No. 4336
2 Corinthians 3:1-11
Second Message
Ron Ritchie
March 7, 1993

Copyright (C) 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This

data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Rd. Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.