

## Are You an Epistle? Are You a Testimony?

*From the Epistle: II Corinthians iii. 4. ff.*

*[1 Do we begin again to commend ourselves? or need we, as some others, epistles of commendation to you, or letters of commendation from you? 2 Ye are our epistle written in our hearts, known and read of all men: 3 Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.] 4 And such trust have we through Christ to God-ward: 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think any thing as of ourselves; but our sufficiency is of God; 6 Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. 7 But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not stedfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away: 8 How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? 9 For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.*

St. Paul seems to love word play. He makes abundant use of it, especially in this 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians. He was well familiar with the Grecian pride in rhetoric, and their pantheon (to use another word play!) of philosophers and great minds who were employed full-time merely to provide the ignorant world with pearls of wisdom. The simple preaching of the Cross of Christ invariably caused offense to its haughty audiences, and the apostle often employed sarcasm and irony to deflate self-regard.

In the verses just prior to today's Epistle (vv. 1-3, above), the Apostle compares the Corinthian Christians to written letters that validate his ministry among them, letters *written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God*. So clearly is the message of their new faith displayed that it is a message *known and read of all men*. No other evidence is necessary to provide *commendation* to anyone of St. Paul's work in their lives.

In the Old Testament, the great Law of God was also called *the Testimony*: *And thou shalt put into the ark the testimony which I shall give thee* (Exodus 25:16). The Old Testament scholars Keil & Delitzsch note:

“This is the name given to the two tables of stone, upon which the ten words [Hebrew lit. for “commandments”] spoken by God to the whole nation [of Israel] were written, and which Moses was to receive from God. Because these ten words were the declaration of God upon the basis of which the covenant was concluded, these tables were called the tables of testimony, or tables of the covenant”. (*Commentary on the Book of Exodus*).

But Paul is a *minister of the new testament* [or, “covenant”] *not of the letter, but of the spirit*. The testimony of God's authorship which Paul offers to the world is spiritual. He cannot point to a display of thunder, lightning, a trumpet blast, and an earthquake, as could Moses, when God descended upon Sinai to give the Law. He did not leave the presence of God bearing the Law inscribed in God's own handwriting on rock. Paul can only direct attention to spiritual evidence which, nonetheless, should have been more than sufficient to convince any inquiring heart of a

divine work so great and glorious that it even *exceeds in glory* the magnificence of the Old Covenant.

If it be so, that truly apprehending the reality of God's work under the New Covenant requires as much faith from those who witness it as those who were its *ministers*, there are some challenging conclusions we must draw. The Israelites at Sinai, after all, had been the passive audience to a show: they merely had to stand there and watch. Judging from their subsequent history, one must sadly conclude that for most of them, the level of their involvement with the great Covenant to which they had been introduced was in inverse proportion to the amount of time that had elapsed from its incredible inauguration. Neither Moses' subsequent warnings, nor the prophets, nor divine chastisement in its worst forms, served as an ultimate corrective to the waywardness of the people. Thankfully, a faithful remnant invariably stayed true to God and to His revelation, but their lives were never easy. Their allegiance came at a great price. They kept striving to remember God's works, while so many of their peers repeatedly abandoned faith for oblivion.

Allow me to be personal with you. My own conversion to Christ was for me a bit of a Mt. Sinai visitation, in that a dramatic change was begun in my life. I could truly testify to that famous verse: *Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.* (2 Cor. 5:17). My preChristian past and the wonderful alterations wrought in me remained with me as a reminder in times of spiritual dryness and doubt. I knew where I had come from, and what I had been. But is it different, perhaps, with those among you who have known nothing other than the church, its traditions, and the familiarity of its worship, from your very earliest days? How will you keep in mind the *glory* of the *ministration of the spirit and righteousness*? On you is laid the great burden of making sure that this great treasure of your faith remains as real and alive for you as Scripture constantly declares that it is. How will you be sure to continue to perceive a *glory* that must be seen spiritually?

Here are some possible solutions. Don't take anything for granted. Resist the temptation, as must we all, to cease striving to make your worship an intense expression of your own love for God. That's really the heart of it. It's easy to fall out of love, whether with God, or with man: *I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love* (Rev. 2:4), were among Jesus' somber words to the Laodicean church. The saying "Familiarity breeds contempt", according to Aesop's Fables, was the consequence of the Fox seeing just a bit too much of the regal Lion, and parting from him finally, as the story goes, "without much ceremony"! Because our liturgy is repeated weekly, it could easily become something that merely proceeds like a train on a track, moving through its own momentum, instead of being "God-breathed", inspired adoration.

We must also put our faith to work. Nothing we have mail-ordered, when left unopened in its shipping box, can possibly demonstrate its capabilities! How can we do this? By praying for our needs, and bringing them before the Lord continually. Taking the risk of asking the Lord to call us out of our respective comfort zones, obliging us to serve Him sustained by faith alone. What does that amount to practically speaking? Could it mean a financial investment in a ministry, or a noble cause? Could it mean the forgoing of a pastime, a self-directed pursuit, some cherished opportunity we had long awaited, to wash the feet of friends and family by loving them, visiting them, listening to them, sharing with them, and thus reaping eternal rewards?

Try reading Holy Scripture, and feasting on the lives of the faithful! Even if we cannot equal their good works, nor even come close to the rigor of their faith and commitment, we can at least fill our hearts and minds with their examples, and be transformed by them. Such is true, of course, with the biographies and stories of the saints of every age.

*But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away : How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory.* The brightness that shone from Moses' face was blindingly physical in nature, but even though that which irradiates from the New Covenant is merely spiritual, it *exceeds in glory*, according to our text. It is far more brilliant because its divine light reveals something that not only encompasses the glory of the Law of Moses, but provides —independently of the will and power of man— absolutely every stipulation of the Law that it requires of man! What is contained within the New Covenant? The ultimate, final, irreversible, payment in full for our sins through the death of Christ; eternal life, through His resurrection; the power to live out the Christian life, through the indwelling Holy Spirit; the fulfillment of the Commandments on our behalf, through Christ's perfect obedience to His Father; peace with God, and on goes the list. Moses' glory is indeed *done away*.

You and I are to be *epistles*, that are written so clearly that we can be *known and read of all men* (2 Cor. 4:2). We are to be “the Testimony” of the New Covenant. If the writing is fading, or getting blurry —and we should be able to discern this from others when it's apparent that they're just not getting the message from us— then it's time to present our hearts anew to Christ, that through His Spirit He might continue to write His story through us, picking up, if necessary, where He had been obliged to leave off.

This is the message of spiritual renewal.

Are we ready?

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*