

Study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

Paul commences a long discussion on the nature and character of the apostolic ministry. It was in stark contrast to what the Judaisers were trying to take the Corinthians back to. They had the assurance of the Holy Spirit, so what further proof should they want?

In the same way, God gives the same assurance to us. Why would we want to go anywhere else, or turn away from what the apostles teach?

Body of the Study

Commendation or Condemnation for Paul?

The apostles competency for service

Supremacy of the New Covenant

Further comparisons to Moses

Comment on the Holy Spirit

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *Paul speaks of our confidence (vs 4), boldness (vs 12), and freedom (vs 17). How does each of these characterise our new covenant ministry?*
- *Paul had a relationship with the Corinthian church. They were his reference if ever he needed one (despite the fact that they were being turned against him). Who are your spiritual referees? How have you developed and nurtured those spiritual relationships?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 4 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

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Body of the Study

Commendation or Condemnation for Paul?

The Judaisers had come and (apparently) brought with them letters of commendation from some who were *of reputation*, which (supposedly) gave them some “credentials”. In counter to this, Paul makes a twist of irony: “...do we commend ourselves?...” Paul’s credentials were such that he needed no such letters. In fact, the Corinthians themselves could have provided such letters of reference to Paul! In his twist of irony, Paul suggests that if he needs such credentials, that the Corinthians should write it for him.

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians was of long standing. They knew him, and he knew them. Sending letters of commendation was a common practice in the New Testament church (Rom 16:1; Acts 18:27). The true commendation for Paul came from the knowledge that others would see in the Corinthian Christians. They were (or at least ought to have been) such examples of contrast to the world that they lived in, that they would be “...our epistle written in our hearts, known and read by all men...” (2:3:2)

The contrast between the Judaisers and Paul didn’t end there. The Judaisers wanted to bind the Law of Moses, which was metaphorically represented by the writings tablets of stone. In contrast, the Law of Christ makes us free from such a law (the whole argument of the Roman letter). The Holy Spirit (and the Corinthians had the miraculous manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual gifts) gives the assurance our salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice (Paul will show this later in 2:5:5).

So, Paul draws a contrast – the tables of stone representing Moses, and the Holy Spirit representing Jesus. The Judaisers were peddling Moses, and he clearly taught Jesus. He leaves it to the Corinthians to answer the obvious question of just how they managed to get the miraculous gifts. (They came through the laying on of his own hands).

The apostles competency for service

Paul (and the other apostles) had a full and complete relationship with and trust of God, which came through Jesus Christ. This relationship was not a self-commending one (as some of the Judaisers might have been suggesting). Rather, their ministry was one of service. Such service was given and demonstrated in the life of Jesus. The life of ministry of the apostles has already been shown by Paul in 1:4:9-13, and he will show it again later in 2:11:23-28.

Christ motivated Paul. It was not self-motivation “...for me to live is Christ...” (Phil 1:21). So, he writes “...our sufficiency is from God...” (2:3:5).

He continues, and contrasts again the old and new covenant, and uses it as an illustration of himself with the Judaisers “...as minister of the new covenant...” (2:3:6). The contrast is further drawn between “...the letter...” (of the law that the Judaisers were insisting on) and “...the Spirit...” of which Paul was a minister, and he had imparted the gifts to them. The answer was plain and simple “...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life...” (2:3:6 NKJV)

Supremacy of the New Covenant

In his usual style, Paul introduces a subject, then comes back and discusses it in detail. The irony and context that he has set through the letter makes it clear that those who were troubling him (rather troubling the Corinthians, by attempting to discredit Paul), were the Judaisers.

This was “*The issue*” of the first century – whether you needed to be a Jew in order to be a christian. The Judaisers took the position that the Jews were God’s chosen people, and the Jewish religion was always God’s plan for reconciling people to Himself. As a result, they regarded christianity as just another sect of the Jews – but therefore if you want to become a christian, you have to first become a Jew. Almost every book of the New Testament touches on the issue from Acts onwards, particularly Romans and Galatians. For further discussion on these issues, refer to my notes on these two books.

So, the Judaisers had arrived in Corinth, and were trying to bind the Law of Moses onto the christians. Paul now brings a strong contrast between the freedom that we have in Christ, and the bondage under the Old Covenant.

It was true that there was glory under the Old Covenant. When the Covenant was given, Moses went up to the mountain to receive it. He was permitted to see the back of God whilst he was on the mountain (Ex 33:18-23). When he came down from the mountain his face shone so much that he needed to put a veil over it to protect the people (Ex 34:29-35).

The Old Covenant was written on tables of stone, and written by the finger of God. It was glorious – if for no other reason – that God had given it to them. But in relation to the New Covenant, there was no comparison.

The problem was, that the Law that was intended to bring life, brought nothing but condemnation because no one could keep it perfectly (Rom 7:10). In contrast, Christ came and did keep the Law perfectly. He was then able to make the perfect sacrifice, and by that sacrifice reconcile man back to God. There is no comparison between what Christ did, and what the Law offered (2:3:9-11).

Further comparisons to Moses

The comparisons don’t end there. Moses put a veil over his face because it was too bright for the Israelites to look at – they were unable to see the true form of Moses’ face that was behind it. In a direct comparison, the Israelites of Paul’s day (and by direct application the Judaisers, but the comparison is much wider than that) had the same kind of fuzzy understanding of the Old Testament. “...until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament...even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart...” (2:3:14-15 NKJV).

The Old Testament was like a schoolteacher to bring us to Christ (Gal 3:24). It was only through our understanding of the nature of sin and of sacrifice that we could understand the magnitude of Christ’s life and death. To look at the Old Testament (in the way that the Jews were doing) and considering it as God’s ultimate revelation, is to ignore Christ’s sacrifice and make it of no effect at all. To do that, we just don’t see the picture clearly at all – it is the example of the veil.

But, “...the veil is taken away in Christ...” (2:3:14 & 16). When we understand the gospel and put on Christ, we can clearly see God’s revelation. We can clearly see the contrast when we see verses 15 and 16 together:

15 But to this day
whenever Moses is read
a veil is on their heart

16 But whenever
he turns to the Lord,
the veil is removed.

In completion of the irony, when Moses went into the presence of the Lord, he removed the veil. In exactly the same way, we enter into God’s presence through Christ, and the veil is removed from our hearts.

Comment on the Holy Spirit

Paul makes quite an unusual comment in this passage on the Holy Spirit. His point is that when we turn to the Lord the veil is taken away, and we therefore have liberty. We can be assured of this, because of the action of the Holy Spirit (and in the context of the Corinthian church, primarily the miraculous manifestation of the Holy Spirit. In our case, we have the same assurance by the indwelling of the spirit).

He explains the connection between the two. "...the Lord is the Spirit..." (2:3:17). The one whom he is talking about is Christ – and he explains that Christ is the Spirit.

The connection between Christ, the Father, and the Spirit as parts of the Godhead are no surprise, and in a sense they are all one (compare Jn 17:21). But we also need to reconcile this with the promise that Jesus made to his disciples: "...if I do not go away, the Helper (HS) will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you..." (Jn 16:7 NKJV).

Jesus is here with us, in the person (form) of the Holy Spirit. The promise was clear and manifest in the miraculous gifts amongst the Corinthians, but it is just as certain in our own lives as He lives and dwells in us "...and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, to you your children and those that are far off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call..." (Acts 2:38-39).