

May 17, 2009 2 Cor. 3:1-6 “Letters from the Heart” by Richard Boatman

¹ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or like some, do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, recognized and read by everyone, ³ since it is plain that you are Christ's letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets but on tablets of human hearts. ⁴ We have this kind of confidence toward God through Christ: ⁵ not that we are competent in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our competence is from God. ⁶ He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.

A couple weeks ago I received an email from a young man attending Central College in Pella. He has decided to pursue a path of church ministry. He was one of our confirmands six or seven years ago and was touched by our lives—Larae's and mine. He's one of our “living letters” written from the heart. In the very first church I served, there was a fellow named Bob. He was rough around the edges. On the second Sunday he attended, he gave me a big bear hug during meet and greet and said, “Pastor, you're doing a h_____ of a job.” When he realized his slip of the tongue he said, “Oh, d_____.” We both roared with laughter. He was rough around the edges but he had a heart for God. He's now in his twenty-third year of pastoral ministry. He's one of my “living letters” written from the heart.

Much like resumes and letters of references today, travelers in Paul's time would often carry letters of recommendation when going into new areas. But also like today, sometimes these letters would be inflated to make someone seem better than he really was. Paul was not interested in such fluff. He considered his real letters of recommendation those “written on...hearts, recognized and read by everyone.” People living resurrected lives—these were the “letters” Paul was interested in.

Dick Sheppard, the remarkable English author, Vicar, Dean and founder of the Peace Pledge Union once said that “the greatest handicap the Church has is the unsatisfactory lives of professing Christians.” “I've been baptized” or “I've been confirmed” or “I serve on the evangelism committee” is pretty meaningless (and may even be counter productive) if the resurrection cannot be seen in our lifestyles. Bestselling author and researcher George Barna recently estimated that of those professing Christianity in America, only nine percent possess a biblical world view, i.e. a view of the world shaped by looking through the lens of Scripture. It rather makes one wonder what Jesus we're all talking about if he's not the one found in the Bible whose words form our decisions and actions.

The disparity between what we profess and what we actually practice may be symptomatic of a faith being more taught than caught. Historic Christianity has always found its traction in hunger and thirst for God. Jesus never said, “Everyone come to me!” He always qualified it: “Come to me, *all you who are weary and burdened*, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). Or, in John 7:37, “*If anyone is thirsty*, let him come to me and drink.” We can stand waist deep in water and still die of thirst. We can be surrounded by good solid teaching in Sunday school and church and still not drink it in. Until our souls are thirsty, we won’t drink. And until we receive and swallow the water—until we take a gigantic gulp of the God-life, we will never “catch” the Spirit and begin resurrected living.

Indeed, living resurrected lives, becoming Christ’s living letters, actually helps create thirst in others. Think about when your hunger and thirst began. It’s likely that you saw in someone (or in several people) a reality of Jesus. You hung around that person and, like a holy germ, you began to catch something. At first you tried to down play it: “Oh, it’s nothing. Probably just a twenty-four hour bug.” But the holy germ of thirst grew in you. You had to keep bottled “living water” with you all the time. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” you’d confess, “I’m so dry. I need water.” This holy germ began to occupy more-and-more of your time. Pretty soon you were drinking in God everywhere. Things you once thought important seemed lackluster and the things of the Spirit loomed large. You found yourself telling others about Jesus. You wanted to love folks. And now you became a carrier. People started spiritually “sneezing” around you catching *your* holy germ. Oh, beloved, Jesus is truly more caught than taught. You have become Christ’s living letter, carriers of his holy germ of regeneration.

Paul was confident that this “holy germ” of Christ, what he called “Christ’s letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God,” would continue to work through the Corinthian believers, spreading Jesus’ reality. But this confidence was not simply a positive mental attitude—a confidence in his own ability, but a “confidence toward God through Christ: ⁵ not that we are competent in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our competence is from God.”

All believers are to live resurrected lives. All Christians are to be living letters, carriers of a thirst producing “holy germ.” But we do so in a myriad of places and ways. Some will take this holy germ into the classroom, others into the boardroom. Some will carry it into the factory, others into the fraternity.

Whatever our call, whatever the gifts we've been given, we often feel inadequate. "How can God use me?" or "I've made too many mistakes" or "I'm just not qualified to tell others." But there's an old line that gets it right: "God doesn't call the qualified; he qualifies the called." That's what Paul is saying. "Our competence is from God." Abraham waffled. Moses stuttered. Ruth didn't have the right background. Elizabeth was too old. John was too blunt. Thomas was too skeptical. Peter was too unpredictable. Tabitha was too sickly. Paul was too stubborn. You get the point. This "holy germ" doesn't need a perfect host, just a willing one. The "germ" of Christ will do the inner work.

That's part of our problem. We try to do too much in our own strength rather than maintaining a posture of genuine openness and letting Jesus do the work on the inside. He's the one who makes us both competent and contagious.

A seventy year old woman needed to lose weight, so she asked her doctor if she could go to an exercise class. Getting the okay, she attended her first session. She jived and jerked and gyrated. She huffed and she puffed...but by the time she got her leotards on, the class was over. Listen, if you wait until you think you've got it all together before you can be used of God, the "class" of your life on earth is going to be over before you ever get started. You and I must respond to the call. Jesus will qualify us. And yes, most of the time it's going to feel like on-the-job training. But just keep drinking lots of water—water of the Spirit that is.

⁶ He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.

Paul here speaks of a Spirit-Life covenant. The old covenant or testament gave laws that helped create civil order and issued moral mandates that helped craft fruitful and productive behaviors. But the weakness lay in Israel's inability to live up to the standard, the people's fallen nature precluding them from rising to such lofty heights. Therefore, they, and we, lived under a constant sentence of death as the Law's demands condemned such futile efforts. The "letter [of the Law] kills" because we cannot fulfill it in our own strength.

But Paul breathes life into desperate, spiritually thirsty lives: "There is therefore now no condemning sentence for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made you free from the law of sin and of death" (Romans 8:1-2).

One summer in my youth I worked for a carpenter. He was a master; I was a mess. His every movement was fluid and efficient. I fumbled about, bent nails and never quite new what was next without his clear instruction. He scampered up the roof like a squirrel. I clung to the ladders as though dangling from a skyscraper. But with all my flaws, he never condemned me nor made fun of me. He would encourage me and patiently tell me the same things to do over-and-over. And slowly I grew. I would never be what he was, but working with him made me better than I could possibly have been on my own. But what was really incredible, when we were all done with the job, he was the type to say, “Look what we did. Look what we accomplished.”

He was the master. I was the mess. Look what *we* accomplished?! All I did was show up everyday, follow him around and try to do what he asked me. Yes! That’s it. We are in Christ Jesus; we enter into the work of his Spirit-Life covenant. He never condemns or makes fun of our effort. He just keeps encouraging us and patiently telling us the same things over-and-over. And slowly we grow as the Spirit reproduces God’s image in us. Our main job is just to show up everyday at the prayer site for assignments. We search the Scriptures and by the Spirit’s leading follow him, trying to obey what he asks throughout the day. “Look what *we* did,” our Lord says at the end of a task. “Look what *we* ’ve accomplished!”

The grace of the new covenant doesn’t mean we do our own thing in life and then one day Jesus will say, “It’s okay.” Grace isn’t license for staying at home or going to the horse races when the Master Carpenter is working on the job site and then expecting him to say, “Look what we’ve accomplished.” That’s foolishness and laziness and what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Grace is being identified with our Lord and following him, not perfectly but faithfully. Grace is taking seriously what Jesus accomplished for us through the cross and resurrection and taking just as seriously our call to live in and with Christ as our Savior and Lord through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Grace is that ongoing work whereby the Lord reigns in our heart more and more. Through the means of grace—prayer, study, fellowship, the sacraments, etc.—we just keep showing up. He’s the Master, we’re the mess. But slowly we’re changed into his image. Slowly but surely he reigns in us. And at the end of our physical lives he says, “Well done good and faithful servant.” Or maybe he’ll just put his arm around us and say, “Wow, look what we’ve accomplished!”