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By What Criteria? 2 Cor 3:1-6

CAROL GAFFORD

Several options are open for approaching this text, including the letters-of-recommendation metaphor with which the passage begins: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?” These questions in verse 1 prompt a discussion of the controversy brewing between Paul and his opponents, and the questions continue to address the conflict already present between Paul and the Corinthian church. In the midst of both disagreements, Paul describes his apostleship and ministry.

We understand this letters-of-recommendation metaphor, because it is loosely akin to our well-known introductions and resumes. Sometimes it is who we know, not what we know, that recommends us; and our success in getting our foot in the door rests solely upon the credibility of the one who introduces us. Moreover, if written creatively, the resume can offset even the obscurities of our education and the limitations of our experience, thus giving us at least an outside chance to be named to a position. In addition to who we know, as attested by the letter of recommendation, the resume can give us the boost that we need to start up the ladder of success.

With that in mind, Paul’s message to the church with regard to introductions, resumes, and recommendations can apply to our circumstances today within the context of ministry. Just as Paul’s opponents challenged his ministry in Corinth, our traditions, lifestyles, and even misunderstandings challenge our witness and ministry. The passage answers our question, “by what criteria?” as Paul describes a standard for the letters it references.



CONTROVERSY IN CORINTH

Paul’s relationship with the Corinthians spans seven years, including three personal visits and the correspondence he writes to them in his absence. That there is friction between Paul and the Corinthian church is no secret. Although his rivals have not created the entire conflict, their presence and teaching disturb Paul and exacerbate the existing problems. In order to combat their assertion that his credentials are inferior and his ministry questionable, Paul provides a lengthy explanation and set of instructions in 2 Corinthians to resolve the issue.

Conflict and controversy are real in both of Paul’s letters to this church, and in this particular passage, he “proceeds to address an issue that, appar-

ently, he perceives to be of the utmost importance if his newly strengthened but still precarious relationship with the Corinthians is going to be further improved. It is the issue of his apostleship itself, and specifically of its authenticity and meaning.”¹ All of which is intrinsically related to the integrity of his ministry.

Throughout his letters, Paul clearly wants to reestablish his relationship with the Corinthian Christians, drawing them closer to him and to the gospel he has taught them. His apparent plan for repairing the relationship is to present them with credentials that build confidence in him and provide a defense against his opponents. To do this, he reaffirms his shared history with the Corinthians and reminds them that their lives reflect his teaching. He explains in detail all the ways and reasons his travels changed (1:12-2:4) and urges them to show love to an offender who has repented (2:5-11). After a brief thanksgiving in the last verses of chapter 2, Paul asks an important question to contrast his ministry with that of his challengers (2:16b-17).

Paul states his position that an apostle who is “sufficient for the task [of ministry]” is the one who is sincere, speaks the word of God, stands in the presence of God, and finds his identity in Christ

DEFENSE OF HIS MINISTRY

It is at this point that Paul launches what may be his most determined defense of his ministry. A question-and-answer sequence begins with the first question, “Who is sufficient—or equal to the task—for these things?” (2:16b). The question and the remarks regarding his rivals relate significantly to our text (3:1-6). Paul answers this question and the one that follows in 3:1 from two perspectives.²

First, he includes the disparaging remark that “an adequate minister is not a peddler of God’s word.”³ These “peddlers” are ones who have come to Corinth and work from a fee system as traveling Jewish Christian preachers—itinerants out to discredit Paul’s ministry. Although little is actually known about their identity, they criticize Paul’s refusal of financial support (1 Cor 9:3-18; 2 Cor 12:13) and his not carrying appropriate letters (2 Cor 3:1-3), all the while boasting about their own achievements (11:21-22). Not only do they encroach upon Paul’s territory but they also claim credit for work that is not theirs, challenging his credentials and apostolic authority along the way. The “new guys” claim spiritual superiority through outward show: signs, wonders, and miracles are claimed to be marks of an apostle (12:12) along with visions and revelations (12:1), eloquent speech (10:10), and the proper heritage (11:22) that are sources of their pride.⁴ Paul pictures their approach of mistaken emphasis on external show as “looking only on the surface of things” (10:7). These intruders dare to suggest that Paul needs a letter of recommendation within a community of faith he had himself established. His focus on the excesses of the false teachers questions the appropriate witness of the gospel: is it signs and wonders, great knowledge and polished speeches, the glitz and glitter of programming? Or is it preaching Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as servants for his sake, not only from our pulpits but by our lifestyle?

Second, and on a more positive note, Paul states his position that an apostle who is “sufficient for the task [of ministry]” is the one who is sincere, speaks the word of God, stands in the presence of God, and finds his identity in Christ.⁵ This is the way in which Paul sees himself as an apostle devoted to the ministry to which he has been called. His positive statement of his ministry in 2:17b leads to the questions that begin our passage.

Letters of Recommendation

Because Paul found it necessary in earlier circumstances to commend himself and his ministry, does his opening question mean he is repeating that process? The inferred answer is no, for he immediately follows his first question with another one meant to distinguish his relationship to the Corinthians from the rival

apostles. He makes the Corinthians aware that he did not require, “as some do,” letters of recommendation either to them or from them. His reference is pejorative, with some referring to Paul’s opponents, so that his intentions are clear: to squelch them and to distance himself from association with his rivals who have just come through Corinth with *their* letters of recommendation.⁶ As the popularity of these “new guys in town”

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grows, Paul becomes yesterday’s news to their cutting-edge attraction.

Paul earnestly believes that the gospel transforms the lives of believers who are filled with the power of the Spirit that is poured out under the new covenant. The Corinthian Christians, “as the temple of the Holy Spirit, are evidence that the promises of the prophets are being realized in and through Paul’s ministry. . . . This transformation supports Paul’s

legitimacy, so that he needs no ‘letter of recommendation’ in Corinth beyond the Corinthians themselves.”⁷ Consequently Paul is distressed that a church he loves so deeply is being swayed by itinerants with self-approving letters.

Letters of introduction did play a large role in Paul’s time, partly because communication was limited and finding hospitality while traveling was difficult. Such letters were common even within the Christian community, but they were only an advantage to itinerant Christian teachers and preachers where churches had already been established. Paul does not bring such a letter to Corinth because he comes as a missionary to begin the work and is like their “father” in the faith. Those who need to bring an introductory letter to Corinth show by that very fact that they cannot be compared to Paul, for letters alone do not prove one’s legitimacy as a servant of Christ. Because Paul works only in areas where churches have not been established, the very existence of a church is a letter of recommendation for him. The rival teachers who sought letters of recommendation from the Corinthians will be leaving, but in the meantime, their presence increases the tension at Corinth because the church apparently falls for the outward show and forgets the lessons learned at Paul’s feet.

Yet Paul affirms the Corinthians with his words, “You are yourselves our letter of recommendation” (v. 2). This letter—much more than ink on paper, for it is written on Paul’s heart—is read and known by all. It

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is actually public knowledge. Paul carries the presence of the Corinthians in his heart; they are living letters of recommendation of him to others.

In verse 3, Paul explains that Christ dictated the letter and used him in the communication process as the scribe. Now, the lives of the Corinthians testify to others the faith of the gospel. Paul further assures them that the confidence he enjoys is no “self-commendation,” for his ministry comes only through Christ who has enabled him to feel confident as he

stands before God. Paul boasts, but only in what God has done in his life through Christ (2 Cor 10:7-12, 17-18; 11:22-29; Phil 3:4-6). Paul is confident that God is using him as a minister of what he calls a “new covenant” of love (2 Cor 3:6).

In verse 5, Paul answers the question with which he began his ministry defense, “Who is sufficient for these things?” For Paul, it is “God who makes us sufficient” for this kind of ministry. With the same attitude that he exhibits in 1 Cor 15:10—“by the grace of God I am what I am”—Paul avows again that “our sufficiency is of God.” In no way does he commend himself in this passage or earlier in the Corinthian cor-

respondence (1 Cor 4:1-5). His spirit of humility contrasts markedly with his opponents who “commend themselves” (3:1) and “compare themselves with one another” (10:12). Their sufficiency is based on their abilities alone. In contrast, Paul claims nothing on his own merit but only what God can do through him as a minister and servant of Christ.

As the passage ends with verse 6, Paul demands that the Corinthians realize at least two things: first, any level of competency achieved comes from God; and second, only as ministers of a new covenant—a covenant not strapped in legalism but overflowing with life from the Spirit—will their lives be seen as living letters recommending Christ and the faith of his gospel.

By What Criteria . . . ?

After he affirms the Corinthian church as his letters of recommendation, Paul claims that such letters come from Christ, with Paul’s role only that of a “deliverer” or postman. (Earlier, we used the word “scribe.”) In any case, the point is clear: Paul sees himself as an instrument God uses to equip others to be “living letters” to recommend the faith. To his earlier list—“is sincere,” “speaks the word of God,” “stands in God’s presence,” and “finds identify in Christ” (3:27)—Paul here adds “confidence” and “competency” (3:4-6).

When complete, the criteria are simple: be a living letter that recommends the gospel, be used as God’s instrument, and find both confidence and competency from the Father. It is obvious that an attitude of humility will prevail in the life of one who fits this description. Coupled with the list from 2:17 with which this section began, these criteria can now be brought to bear on our contemporary scene.

To agree with Paul’s words and example is an easy exercise; to apply his principles to our culture and to our community of faith is far more difficult. No question that intentions are good, even noble at times, but unless willingness is present to patiently read and reread the “letters” our lives are writing, necessary editing seldom occurs.

We know that the Corinthians were impressed by the newcomers—the “peddlers of God’s word,” as Paul refers to them. Yet the newcomers’ attitude of superiority and confidence based on their own merits automatically questions the standard Paul sets for ministry, replacing it with impressive externals and surface spirituality. Paul’s opponents boast about their own work and achievements, ignoring God’s hand in the ministry effort (11:21-22). When this happens and we deny that our competency is God-supplied, the criteria are diluted. The competency becomes ours, not his.

If overlooking the criteria God sets and seeks for our lives reduces our message and discounts our ministry, in what areas should we be on alert? Where might the potential problems lie? First, what about the “letter” that we—individually and corporately—are writing today? How does a “letter” read that records a church’s decision to select a person for elder who is not a teacher, has not been involved in the ministry of the congregation, and knows little about the needs of the members? Such a person is admired simply because he has achieved professional success, is well known in the business community, and has acquired substantial material wealth. The church’s decision seems to be based on the hope that secular experience makes up for spiritual deficiency.

Another “letter” comes from a church that has agreed a candidate on the final list of potential elders does not meet biblical qualifications but points out that the candidate has helped the church accrue hundreds

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of thousands of dollars through wise investment. Becoming an elder would reward him for his efforts. If either were my congregation, would I want anyone to read our “letter”?

Red flags wave in the area of competency. Whereas Paul is definitely proud of his training and counts himself near the top of the well-educated of his day, he does not depend on his abilities but on God, who gives him confidence and supplies the competency for him to be a servant of Christ (3:4-6). Across the board we can agree that, in and of ourselves, our experience, education, intelligence, wisdom, expertise, etc., are not enough to equip us apart from a total reliance upon God. Yet, accumulation of credentials and achievements often pushes us in the opposite direction, and we begin to look like the intruders at Corinth. Experience and education *can* equip us to improve ministry—when we are in submission to God and when we allow him to work through us. Our acquired competencies serve us in beneficial and uplifting ways most of the time. Nevertheless, it is quite possible to overlook the devoted “nobody” who lacks these credentials and to exclude men and women who, in our opinion, do not meet a preferred standard.

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The test of our ministry is
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An example: when my husband and I arrived at his first preaching ministry, we met an elder in the congregation who would be etched in our hearts forever. When he stood to begin the Bible class on that “try-out” Sunday, I made several assumptions because he did not come close to my standard of a well-dressed man or impressive figure. Among other things, he was at least eighty-something, and he had

no teeth. But, as it turned out, Brother Brumfield was so saturated with the word of God and was so mature in Christ that his mismatched clothes and missing teeth were quickly forgotten as he led the class. Articulate, well-prepared, kind, and obviously filled with God’s Spirit, this man made the first of his lasting impressions on a rather full-of-herself twenty-something. I had been certain the class would be drier than dust and his knowledge limited. Over time, I learned he was educated only by his Bible study and the power of the gospel. He was a “devoted nobody.” Through the years after we left that congregation, Brother Brumfield continued to bless us with letters of encouragement that resembled letters from an apostle. By what criteria?

In the thick of activity and decision-making, we often rely on what we know and recognize best, the symbols of official authority—titles, accomplishments, and degrees—especially when we have lost direction or true authority. This may describe what happens in the “worship wars” in which some congregations are engaged. In the heat of battle, we resort to tactics with which we are most familiar. Some use their impressive credentials and say, “I am a professor of Christian worship. I have more knowledge than any of you, so I know best.” And derision and complaint continue until the church is polarized. Or credentials may speak in these words: “As a minister, I am more in touch with the congregation, so I know better how worship should be. I’ll be a committee of one.” It is difficult to counteract such a preacher unless troops are recruited; and once the troops gather, battle lines are drawn. When our credentials look like money, the wealthy member says, “If you continue the shift to the contemporary (or stay with the traditional) worship, I’ll withhold my contribution.” In each case, anxiety drives us to control, and the criteria for ministry are not met. Is this “letter” the one that encourages and unifies the church and reaches a lost world?

Finally, through the ages, various issues have surfaced in the church, and leadership has been forced to respond. One of these issues involves women and their role in the church. More and more women are entering the professional ministry of the church, serving in roles traditionally reserved for men; others are leading ministries that were previously off-limits to them. In spite of this, most churches have never addressed openly the age-old question, “What do we do about the women?”

And that question begs another, one about letters of recommendation. What kind of “letter” do we send to recommend a woman to a position not recognized by most of our churches? Can Paul’s criteria for minis-

try fit for women? Before our “letters of recommendation” are written and become public, isn’t a conversation necessary? Not one with a skewed agenda, but one designed to inform and equip us for decisions that may not be the “one-size-fits-all” variety. This topic and others as important to our future ultimately affect our “letter-writing,” because at the moment, there *is* a question in the minds of most of our congregations about the “letter” that we write for a woman.

CONCLUSION

Letters of recommendation are written to us or sent from us, and they intend to commend those who do ministry. Overarching this entire discussion is the purpose, the goal of ministry, which is to bring people to God and to maturity in Christ. This goal relativizes our resumes of accomplishments and academic credentials. This purpose should define our ministry. When ministry meets God’s standard, transformed lives are “letters,” just as the Corinthians were for Paul. Ministry results write letters.

One question remains: how is it that I can and do minister? And I answer: with a willingness to follow, with a willingness to sacrifice, with a willingness to serve as Paul served. In my ministry, I eliminate the outward elements of showmanship and self-commendation to humbly recognize that only God supplies my confidence and competency. As I minister, God’s Spirit overlays mine to make me an instrument for his ministry in a new covenant of love.

The test of Paul’s ministry is the Corinthians. They are his letter of recommendation. The test of our ministry is the lives that are blessed and transformed. By what criteria are our living letters being written?

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Victor Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1984), 75.
- 2 Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Corinthians*, (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 141
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Linda Bellville, *2 Corinthians*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 33.
- 5 Talbert, 142-143.
- 6 Ibid., 143.
- 7 Scott Hafemann, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians,” *Interpretation, A Journal of Bible and Theology* 52/3 (1998): 255.

