

Our Sufficiency Is From God 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Sinclair Ferguson tells the story of coming out of a Sunday church service one day when he noticed (as he put it) an “ordinary, middle aged lady.”

- He kept saying, “There was nothing particularly striking about her. She had on ordinary clothes and had a modest appearance.”
- He went on to say as I watched her walk down the sidewalk, all of a sudden I noticed that a chauffeur met her, dressed in the classic chauffeur apparel, gently opened the door for her, and they drove away.

He later learned that this ordinary lady was actually a multi-multi-millionaire!

Rather unimpressive on the outside, but in another sense, very impressive, powerful.

I’m sure many of you have a similar appearance with a famous or wealthy person — that just went right by you without much to wonder about.

- You can often spot the basketball players!
- I was once on a flight with Rick Flaire ... and he’s very noticeable.
- But I’ve been on planes with certain coaches, actors, or politicians just quietly board and are seated.

The apostle Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to see him in his true light.

- They complained that his appearance was too ordinary.
- His preaching wasn’t all that.
- And he had no reference letters — which was a big deal to everyone.

Paul is trying to defend his apostleship because the gospel is at stake.

- The Corinthians needed to see him as the real deal, lest they be duped by the false apostles.
- The false apostles were showy.
- They had domineering personalities.
- But they were leading people astray.

And we find here application for our own ministries, as ministers of the new covenant — ministers who proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah in this age of the Spirit...

We see some key traits of faithful and effective gospel ministry.

Consider what Paul says about (1) his credentials, (2) his confidence, and (3) his calling.

#1: His Credentials: Transformed Lives (3:1-3)

1a: “Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?”

Paul is sensitive about commending himself, and is reluctant to do so, but he had to address the criticism.

- The people in Corinth were obsessed with credentials due to the presence of these super apostles.
- Paul mentions this issue of commendation a lot in the letter:

¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. (5:12)

¹¹ I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. (12:11)

- The super-apostles really thought they were something:

¹² Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. (10:12)

1b: “Do we need ... letters of recommendation?”

I have submitted many references as a pastor here, and I have read many. Often they are filled with exaggeration. “The gods have come to live among us” one person said.

- These letters were common in the first century; people would ride into town but how could they know whether or not to trust this person and his or her message?
- You see Paul throughout the epistles telling the churches to welcome certain individuals (eg., Phoebe).
 - Apollos had come to Corinth with letters (cf. Acts 18:24–28)
- But it was absurd to suggest that Paul, the founding apostle, needed them!
- You can imagine the spin narrative they were making up: **“Paul wasn’t part of the original twelve. He looks really weak. He’s not a great speaker. Who is this guy? We need to see some papers and he doesn’t have any”**

2b: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation”

- Paul says **“I don’t need references, you, Corinthians, are proof of my ministry.”**
- **“There were no Christians there, no church, and now there is! Why do you need these letters!”**
- **You want credentials - look at my back!**
- Paul says **“My apostleship is verified by your transformation.”**
- **“Just look around at each other!”**

Application

- Transformed lives are the best credentials you can have.

- You may have a lot of **degrees**, but the question is **“do you have any disciples?”**
- It’s fine to have a degree, to have a proper ordination, **but are there any living letters?**
- These credentials are not seen on paper, but in people.
- The very existence of this church proved his authenticity and effectiveness.
- What we should see about our ministries, is that this requires **proclaiming the gospel** (which is that which changes lives!) **and taking people into our hearts...**

2b: “Paul says that you are written on **our hearts** known and read by all”

“Written on our hearts”: This speaks of the love Paul has for them, &the unity they share.

- Paul had known them in a special way.
- He not only proclaimed the truth but displayed pastoral love. 2:4
- These are two essential traits of faithful ministry, and church planting.
 - Acts 18 shows the primacy of the word, here he speaks of his love for them.

And the fruit of this kind of ministry?...

“Known and read by all”: Everyone could see the Corinthians transformed lives!

- Think about what kind of lifestyle some of them came out of!
- It was obvious that they’d been changed!

Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, ¹⁰ nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And such were some of you. 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. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

“Such were some of you” — “I don’t need letters, I’ve got living testimonies of transformation.”

Now, this may sounds like **bragging**, but that’s not what Paul intends...

In **verse 3**, he shows the source of their transformed life is not him **but Christ**.

3: What do people see in the Corinthians? **“a letter from Christ delivered by us”**

- They see an “epistle of Christ”
- The living Christ himself is the source of their transformation.
- Christ has written his name on their hearts.
- Paul had **“delivered”** the message of Christ, who changed them.
 - This word **“delivered”** means “ministered” or “serviced”

Kruse: **“Within a metaphor of letter writing (as here) where an author and a scribe are envisaged, a better rendering would be ‘enscribed’. So Paul sees the Corinthians as a**

‘living letter’ dictated by Christ, but ‘enscribed’ by Paul through the apostolic ministry of gospel proclamation.”

- **IT’s a reminder for us to stay centered on the word of Christ in ministry.**

And with what did Christ write this letter? (3:3)

- **Not ink, but "the Spirit of Living God."**
- **That is to say, Paul’s ministry was empowered by the Spirit who brings about this transformation.**
- **Paul mentions the Spirit here a cascade of references will follow, because of this emphasis on the new covenant.**

App: **When The Spirit of God writes Jesus’ name on your heart, everything changes.**

- **The things of God are not boring; they are exhilarating.**
- **What was a burden is now blessing.**
- **Scripture, assembling, praying, singing...**
 - **I don’t have to attend worship, I get to, I get to join a church, I get to give, pray...**
 - **“You have to KISS YOUR WIFE”; I DON’T HAVE TO; I GET TO!**

Paul delivered the message of Christ and the Spirit of God changed them.

By speaking of the Corinthians in this way, he is showing them of where they are located in redemptive history – as the rest of the chapter will show.

- **Location, location, location**
- **They are located in the age of the Spirit – the new covenant. The Messiah has fulfilled the promises.**
- **The OT anticipated a day in which God would establish a “new covenant” (Jer 31:31; 2 Cor 3:6).**
- **He would write his law on their hearts.**
- **Ezekiel promised that God would give his people a new heart, a new Spirit with them and remove their heart of stone (Ezk 36:26; 11:19)**

God had always indicated that internal transformation of the heart was needed:

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.(Deut 10:16)

“keep my commandments and live; keep my teaching as the apple of your eye; bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart.” (Prov 7:2-3)

Yet he knew he would have to do this:

And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.(Deut 30:6).

Now after centuries of failure, God mercifully and powerfully did it!

What God promised, Paul declared; and the church experienced.

- “I’m getting pretty tired of living through historical events” (meme of Chris Farley)
- Worst of times but best of times, as those living in new covenant age.

See this about Christianity; it’s about internal transformation by the Spirit, not external conformity to a set of rules or religious rituals.

This is what we proclaim to the world: transformation through Christ by the Spirit.

#2: His Confidence: God’s Sufficiency (3:4-5)

4: The first word is “**confidence**” and this particular word occurs four of its six times in the NT in 2 Corinthians.

- Paul highlights that his confidence for ministry is in God.
- **Recall 2:16** — “Who is sufficient for these things?” Here’s the answer in **verses 4-6**

His confidence is tied to this fact that he is united to Christ: “**through Christ**” (v. 4; **Phil 4:13**). We experience the sufficiency of God through Christ.

Application

We will have feelings of inadequacy in ministry: that’s not wrong.

- Ministry is demanding, and often thankless.
- What is encouraging is a verse like this one: our confidence is in God.
- Throughout Scripture we see God being the source of ones confidence: **Moses, Gideon**.
- Even more so now in the new covenant age.
- **God doesn’t want our strength. Never did. He wants us to give us his strength (Ramsey)**

Recall the courage and confident of the early Christians empowered by the Spirit (cf., **Acts 4:29**). This led to bold ministry in the face opposition.

- The Spirit doesn’t give us a spirit of fear, but of confidence (**Rom 8:15-17**).

5: This confidence is not a human confidence, for Paul says, “**not that we are sufficient in ourselves**”

- He has a biblical estimation of himself.
- Left to his own resources, even the mighty apostle falls short.

A sign that you’re qualified for new covenant ministry is that you know you’re inadequate.

“**God created the world out of nothing, and as long as we are nothing, he can make something out of us.**” (Martin Luther)

- We are not sufficient but he is,
- We empowered by him (**Col 1:29, 1 Cor 2:1-5; 15:10; Phil 2:12-13**)

- Christ, in Us, is doing new covenant ministry. an

“Our sufficiency is from God”

- It is easy to feel overwhelmed in ministry, but the solution to this “not-enough-ness” is the all sufficient grace and power of God.
- Our sufficiency is a gift to be received, embodied, and rejoiced in.
- “What does it look like to move through life aloof to this truth? Frantic, anxious, overworked, judgmental, burned, insecure, easily threatened, easily hurt, darting eyes. What does it look like to move through life in synch with “Our sufficiency is from God”? Calm, relaxed, encouraging of others, cheerful, impervious to criticism, all with childlike wondering at the full and free mercy of God and his remarkable condescension to sinners such as us. And ultimately only this kind of life will prove to be spiritually fruitful, for it will be living and serving out of the deep resources of the Spirit of God (cf., Gal 5:16-26), not the impotence of a heart attempting to satisfy the demands of the letter on its own steam”

#3: His Calling: New Covenant Ministry (3:6)

6: Paul drills further into God’s sufficiency, showing the purpose of this power: to be ministers of the gospel, of the new covenant.

God has “**sufficited us**” (woodenly) as ministers (servants) of “**the new covenant.**”

- He has made Paul (and by extension all of us) as heralds of the long awaited days in which the Messiah would fulfill the promise and the Spirit would be poured out.
- We are stewards and proclaimers of the time foretold in the OT in which God’s promises reach their zenith.
- Paul already stated this privilege in chapter 1.
- Christ will one day bring to completion all that he started in those who are new creations in Christ.
- The phrase “**new covenant**” is only found one other time in Paul’s writings: in **1 Corinthians 11:25**, when speaking of the **Lord’s Supper**.
- Paul says he received (“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”).
- Like the writer to the Hebrews, Paul saw the death of Christ as that which established the new covenant (Heb. 9:15–28).

But what he emphasizes here is that new covenant ministry is “**not of the letter but of Spirit**” for the “**letter kills but he Spirit gives life**”

- The Spirit is the sign that this new creation has dawned.
- This time in redemptive history has eclipsed the former time - in the coming of Jesus Christ and in the descent of the Spirit.

“Letter” stands for the old covenant – the ministry of Moses.

- It kills when used inappropriately: that is, if you use it as a set of rules to follow in order to earn righteousness. (cf., Rom 3:20; 10:1-4)
- That will kill you.
- No one can satisfy the law’s demands. No one.

What a contrast to **“the Spirit”**!

The big difference in the letter and the Spirit?

- The Spirit gives life! **2:16**

Not only are believers forgiven fully and forever through the work of Christ, but we are now motivated and empowered by the Spirit to do what we could never do.

- The letter can only kill because left to ourselves we don’t measure up, and it leads only to condemnation.
- It bounces off our hardened hearts.
- But the Spirit makes dead people alive!
- It is this ancient hope and promise that the Corinthians were experiencing.
- And so were Christians around the world.
- The new covenant means we’re part of an international community!

So this is where we leave it: the Spirit gives life!

- We are not holding out to people: “be a nicer person” or “a more religious person”
- We are saying, “become a new person.”

Dangerous: to attend regularly but have no life

Maryland guy

One of the principle characteristics of the Spirit is that he imparts life.

- “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.” (Rom 8.1-2)
- “If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit.” (Gal 5:25)

In Paul’s theology there are three stages of this life-giving work of the Spirit.

- **First, regeneration — coming to life; being born again.**
 - Titus calls this the “washing of regeneration” which he attributes to the work of the Spirit (“the renewal of the Holy Spirit”)
- **Second, sanctification.** This is the ongoing work of the Spirit in the believer’s life, making them more like Christ, as he or she bears the fruit of the Spirit.

- **The Spirit strengthens us (Eph 3:16), renews us (2 Cor 4:16), gifts us (Rom 12:3ff) and changes us from glory to glory (2 Cor 3:18).**
- **Third, final resurrection, or glorification. This too is the Spirit's work:**
 - “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom 8:11)

So there are many things that we could ponder today, but let us pause, and express our thanks that the Spirit of God has given us life.

And what he has done now, assures of what he will do in the future; he will raise our lowly bodies in resurrection glory.