

## The Four C's of Authentic Christian Ministry

Let's turn together to 2 Cor. We're going to read from verse 15 through 3:6

*<sup>15</sup> For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, <sup>16</sup> to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? <sup>17</sup> For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.*

*<sup>3</sup> Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our<sup>1</sup> hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.<sup>[u]</sup>*

*<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

Over the years, I've been asked to write references for quite a few people. Thankfully I don't think I've ever had a problem writing a good reference for those who have asked.

Did you know that an employer can get into trouble for writing a bad reference? Even if an employee was a terrible worker, the employer needs to be careful about what they write. But someone came up ways to both be honest and avoid legal hot water.

So for instance, suppose you're asked to write a reference letter for an employee who's...

**Never around when there's work to be done:** "A man like him is hard to find."

**Lazy and unmotivated:** "You would be fortunate indeed to get this person to work for you."

**Not worth being considered:** "I would urge you to waste no time in making this candidate an offer of employment."

**A dishonest employee:** "He's an unbelievable worker."

Some people in Corinth seem to be demanding Paul present to them letters of recommendation. References to prove he is a legitimate apostle. *Do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*

Backstory to all that's going on in Corinth is that there is a group of self-proclaimed apostles who are trying to win Corinth's allegiance, and turn them against Paul. They consider themselves super-apostles, they are trained speakers, they commend themselves, and they commend each other.

No doubt they came to Corinth is official looking letters of reference from important people. And they're whispering, "Paul commends himself, but is anyone important vouching for him? He's not one of the 12

apostles, is he? He's not a great speaker, he's unimpressive in person, and he doesn't even have official letters like we do. Not much of an apostle."

Some people think ministry is all about a piece of paper hanging on the wall. Ministry is having a title, an office, ordination papers, a degree. Paul has a different view of what makes for authentic ministry, and here he lays out what I'm calling the 4 C's of authentic Christian ministry.

But before we do, please don't think to yourself "Well, I'm not a minister, so I don't need this". God calls every one of us as ministers of the gospel. Eph. 4 says the five-fold gifts are there to *equip the saints for works of ministry*. You are a minister and God wants you to add your ministry to the building up of the body! 4 C's of authentic Christian ministry begins with...

### **1. Commendation of hearts and lives written on by the Spirit**

**3** *Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup> You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our<sup>1</sup> hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup> And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

Some people make a big thing out of having the right paperwork. Here's my credentials. Here's my diploma, here's my ordination, here's my resume. The false apostles in Corinth had official paperwork with signatures written with ink. And that's not wrong, it's just not enough.

Paul says to the Corinthians, I don't have a piece of paper, but I have *you!* You are my letter of recommendation, written not with ink but by the Spirit of God on your hearts. When Paul entered Corinth there was no church and when he left a year and a half later there was a church.

Paul says, Corinth, do you really need a letter to verify my ministry is authentic? *You wouldn't exist if not for my ministry!* You are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. Paul says, you're my letter of recommendation to yourself and to others. You're on my resume and everyone is reading you!

Now to be honest, I'm not sure I'd want Corinth on my resume. It was a church filled with sexual perversion, division, drunkenness, spiritual abuse, and arrogance. I'd put Philippi on my resume. I'd include Ephesus. I'd even throw in Thessalonica – church far from perfect. But I'd be a little embarrassed to put Corinth on my resume.

But for all their faults and problems, Paul loves them. They're written on his heart. And he knows, even with all their mess, that Christ is written on their hearts.

Churches are messy, people are messy, and therefore ministry is messy. Even when grace is working, there will be mess. Messy grace. Paul saw past the mess and he saw the grace, saw the ministry. The Spirit was writing on their hearts, and they were writing on his heart.

You might at times think God isn't using you, or that He can't use you. Maybe you think you're life is too messy. Maybe you look at the people in your life and all you see is their mess. And you can't see how your efforts to love them and share Christ with them have made any difference. Paul's love for and ministry to Corinth should encourage our hearts to believe God is using us as ministers of Jesus Christ.

You are touching lives. You are writing on people's hearts. You may not even know who or how much. That cup of coffee with a friend where you just wanted to encourage them even though you seemed to stumble over your words? Your friendship and care wrote on their hearts. Your witness at work might seem weak to you, but if your co-workers know you're a Christian, they're watching your life. And God will use your imperfect life to write on their hearts. God is using your life to write on people's hearts: your spouse, your kids, your family, your church family. I know that over the years many of you have written on hearts in Grace Community, including my heart.

- We've watched as some of you walked through valleys of loss and heartache, and through the tears you've glorified God. You have written faith on our hearts.
- We've seen you care for other people when they've walked through hard times. Written compassion.
- We've seen you walk through hard times of change and stretching, and it's been scary. But as you put one foot in front of the other, it's written courage on our hearts.
- Some people I admire are those who serve the church in various ways, and have served faithfully week after week, month after month, year after year. Worship team, projector, sound, greeting, CM, leading studies, hospitality, and so many others, and a part of me is afraid you're going to realize one day, "hey, I'm not getting paid for this! I quit!" Write faithfulness on our hearts.
- Young people, you write so many things on our hearts. You are such a blessing to this church, and such an encouragement to our hearts in so many ways! Know that your life is so important to God, and He wants to, first of all, write His love deeply into your hearts, and then use you to write His love on other people's hearts!

Ministry isn't about paper and ink hanging on a wall. It's about the Holy Spirit writing Christ on our hearts and using us to write Christ on other hearts.

## **2. Confidence and competency from the Spirit, not ourselves**

*<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient (competent) in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God...*

There are those whose ministries are testimonies to themselves. Confident in their abilities, confident in their gifting, confident in their charisma, they're doing great things for God. But all that self-confidence doesn't leave room for them to feel their need for God.

Authentic Christian ministry recognizes that we are insufficient to accomplish anything in ourselves. What a contrast! These super-apostles are claiming they are great and they have the papers to prove it. Their ministry is fueled by pride and self-promotion.

Paul, an apostle by the will of God, says I'm not sufficient to do any of what God has called me to do. I need God to do it through me. And I'm confident He will. Such is the confidence that we (I) have through Christ toward God, my competence comes from God.

Jesus said apart from him we can do nothing. That's what Paul is saying here.

There are two extremes we need to avoid here. One is self-confidence and pride. The other is a mentality that God can't use me, I'm good for nothing. Paul doesn't say, "such is the uselessness that we have through Christ." He says, "such is the *confidence!*" He is confident God is and will use him! His confidence is in God, not himself.

This is a blessed confidence because it's not based on pride. It's based on faith. We have boldness not because of how great we are but because of how great God is. God says He has called me to do works of ministry, then He will empower me to do it. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!"

I've struggled a bit with faith for how God wants to advance and expand ministry in this COVID season. There's so many limitations on what we can do. We can feel boxed in, but God is never boxed in. Maybe you feel boxed in – you see your own limitations, maybe you struggle with fear or insecurity, maybe you just don't see how God could use you.

It's now who we are, it's who God is. God's power is perfected in weakness, so the weaker we are, the more powerful His grace can work in and through us. Let's be confident – not in our abilities but in God's ability, and let's ask God to use us everyday to write His love on people's hearts.

### **3. Covenant of the Spirit not of the letter**

*our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

This contrast between a letter written on paper with ink to hearts written by the Spirit makes Paul think of the contrast between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. We'll look more at this contrast next week, but in the OC the law was written on tablets of stone and in the NC the law is written by the Spirit on our hearts. The letter kills but the Spirit gives life.

Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, he came to write it on our hearts. The law is good, the problem is we can't keep it. And the law, written on tablets of stone, had no power to enable us to keep it. So Jesus came to fulfill the law – to keep it perfectly, and then die as a lawbreaker in our place so that we might live.

By faith we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, and in his perfect obedience to the law. In God's sight we are righteous law-keepers. And we don't have tablets of stone as an external force telling us to obey, we have the Spirit living within us causing us to want to obey.

The 4<sup>th</sup> C to authentic Christian ministry is the most important: Christ.

- Authentic Christian ministry is the aroma of Christ
- Speaking in Christ in the sight of God
- Letter from Christ written on hearts
- Confidence through Christ toward God
- And it is the New Covenant written in Christ's blood and by the Holy Spirit on our hearts.

Christ, Christ, Christ, Christ. He is our everything. Apart from him we can do nothing, and apart from him we are nothing. Authentic Christian ministry is lifting up Christ always and loving him above everything. Even life itself.

Paul asked *who is sufficient for these things?* The answer is no one... and us! Our sufficiency is from God. You are competent to be a minister of God by the power of God working in you. We leave here as ministers of Christ, let's keep our eyes open for the opportunities God will give us to minister, and then confidently trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to make us competent to do that ministry.