

Transformation

2 Cor. 3: 1-16; 17-18; 2 Cor. 4: 1-7.

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We have seen the effect in Stephen of the change of dispensation consequent upon the introduction of Christianity into this world by the coming of the Son of God. In the verses read we see how that change is brought about in those who are called to share in the blessings of the present dealings of God with His saints. We have it in these verses in doctrine, followed by the manifestation of that doctrine in the life of the apostle Paul as a pattern to all who are the subjects of this new covenant ministry.

When the apostle asks the question, "Do we begin again to commend ourselves," he infers — "Do we need to bring a letter to you to assure you that we are genuine, upright saints of God sent out apostolically with the truth of the gospel of the glory? He had no need of such a letter for their assurance. Nor, as he goes on to say further down, did he need a letter to prove his apostleship. Had any one asked Paul, "Are you sure you are called to this work?, he could have replied, "If you have any doubts about it, go to Corinth, and you will see the effects of my calling." The saints in Corinth were his epistle, his letter of commendation as to his apostleship.

He then turns to a second and more important point when he reminds them that they were also the epistle of Christ; they represented Him before the men of this world. It is this which we have in mind in reading these verses. We, like the Corinthian saints, are the representatives of Christ in the places where we live. We may well ask ourselves, "What sort of a representation am I giving?. He does not say they *ought* to be such an epistle, but rather affirms that they were this, whatever kind of a representation they were actually giving. There can be no hiding of this fact, for he says of them, "manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ." Once we have declared ourselves to be believers on our Lord Jesus Christ, we are looked upon as His representatives, and what we do or say is regarded by men of this world as the actions of Christians. Do we appear merely as men who attend religious meetings, or is Christ seen in manifestation in our live?

The effect of the ministry of the new covenant is to produce in us conformity to the likeness of Christ, in order that we may be a *true* representation of Him. We *are* His epistle; we ought then to be like Him, seeing that we are His letter of commendation to this world. It involves, beloved brethren, being on our guard at all times, lest we give a false representation of Christ.

What then is this new covenant which produces such features in us? It is not a set of rules and regulations, for the apostle goes on to say, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart." If we set out merely to keep the precepts of Scripture as a set of rules, we shall not be any more successful than the children of Israel were. The new covenant is not an objective code of regulations, but a subjective power in our souls, whereby Christ can more and more be formed in us with a view to His features being seen in testimony. If Israel could not keep the precepts of the law because they lacked the inward power to do so, how can we hope to keep the greater precepts of Christianity if we do not possess the inward power to do so? That is why Paul says, "written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God." It is Christ written on the heart by the Spirit. Nor is that word "living" without point, for what is written by the "Spirit of the living God" is written *livingly*, to come out in our lives. Dear brethren, Christianity is a *living* matter, not

merely a moral code which we endeavour to keep. The gift of the "Spirit of the living God" I believe to be the new wine in the new bottles of which we have been reminded. The power is *within*, in order that the light might shine *out*.

If we pass over the parenthetical portion of our chapter, and connect the end of verse 6 with the beginning of verse 17, we see how this is brought about. "The letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life . . . Now the Lord is that Spirit." The translators say this is a difficult passage to translate as they are not sure which verses apply to our Lord as the spirit of the new covenant, and which verses apply to the Holy Spirit. A simple view of this may be to see that all the glory of the new covenant is shining in the face of the risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit is in our hearts as the reflex of that glory; we see it established objectively in Christ in glory, and formed subjectively in the hearts of those who belong to Him and who have the liberty to gaze upon that glory which is shining in His blessed face.

The last verse, "But we all, looking on the glory of the Lord with unveiled face, are transformed according to the same image from glory to glory, even as by (the) Lord (the) Spirit. (N.T.) plainly shows how we are transformed. It is by occupation with Christ in glory. What is in mind is that Christ should be seen in manifestation in the lives of those who have part in this new dispensation. Note how often the apostle uses the word "manifestation" in these verses. This is something which God intends should come to light in those whom He has so wonderfully blessed. Three times the word translated here "changed" is used in Scripture. First in relation to the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17), again in Romans 12: 2, and lastly in the chapter we are considering. The first occurrence of the word gives us to see clearly what is meant by it; a complete outward change. The disciples had been looking upon the Lord, whose external appearance was that of a normal man of His times, when suddenly they saw Him shining with a glory above the brightness of the noonday sun. Externally they saw a wonderful change; He was transformed before their eyes. It does not mean a change of nature, or of mind, but a *transformation*, an external and visible change, and this incident in relation to the Lord clearly shews the meaning of this word. In Romans chapter 12 this transformation is brought about by the renewing of the mind, but in the passage in Corinthians it is said to be brought about by occupation with Christ in glory. Hence the new covenant ministry is not given to us only to teach us of our place of acceptance in glory; it does involve that, but it is also to form us after Christ, so that what we are as in Him in glory, may characterize us in our lives in this world.

In the next chapter we see Paul the minister of the new covenant, formed by the truth of it himself. Christ is the spirit of the new covenant; Paul was its minister, and he goes on to shew to those Christians in Corinth how he himself had been affected by it. He refers to himself as a vessel of mercy. No doubt he was referring to the mercy shewn to him on the Damascus road, but I think he was also referring to himself as still receiving the mercy which enabled him to carry out his ministry. It is good to think of the "ministry" and the "mercy" running on together in this vessel; because this was so he did not faint. His own ministry had a transforming effect upon him as we see in 2 Cor. 4: 2. "But have *renounced* the hidden things of dishonesty." They did not fall off like autumn leaves, as we sometimes erroneously hear, he *put* them off; and we need power to do the same. We may thank God that we have the power, but do we use it as Paul did? May the Lord graciously preserve each one of us from stooping to dishonest practice in any of our dealings with our fellow men! Note how this great servant speaks without fear of contradiction. He *had* put off dishonesty, craftiness and deceit; he was formed (we may say transformed) by the ministry he had been given to pass on to others, and he desired that the same features should be produced in them. What came to light in him was a "manifestation of the truth," not merely a ministry of the truth, but a *manifestation* of it. We see here his doctrine and his manner of life, welded together. He did handle the word of God in doctrine, but not deceitfully; that

refers to his practice. He was what he taught.

Lastly, he refers to the gospel which he preached. While he gave such a demonstration in his life of the features of Christ, and of the features of this present dispensation, all did not believe his gospel. This was because the god of this world had blinded their minds. It was not because of the failure of the servant. Paul had a clear conscience concerning those who would not believe, for while Satan put a stumbling block in their minds, Paul saw to it that *he* did not put any stumbling block before them in his life.

Let us see to it that we do not put a stumbling block before the unconverted, but rather by manifestation of the truth shew to others the wonder working power of the gospel of the glory, a gospel which not only saves and fits for glory, but also transforms men in this world into the likeness of Christ. We ARE the epistle of Christ, may we give a right representation of Him to others.