

SERMON NOTES & STUDY GUIDE • 2/5/17

MOVEMENT

Our sermon series, **MOVEMENT**, is an exploration of 2 Corinthians. The focus of the series is on the church. The church is not a building. The church is not even a conglomeration of people. The church is a movement, a group of people 'called out' (ekklesia) to meet and glorify God, and to represent His Kingdom to a broken world. The church doesn't sit still; it moves and grows. To be a Christian is to be on the move! Throughout this series we will explore what it means to be a part of this **Movement** of God.

CONFIDENCE TO THE WEAK • 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 • Jennifer Holz • February 5, 2017

Today we come to the table of the Lord, affirming the work of God in the world. Declaring that God has made the first move towards us in Jesus Christ. As a church on the move, we are fed by Christ himself at his table. For our journey is to present the living Christ to a world in darkness that all might move from death to life.

Let's open our Bibles to 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 and continue in this powerful letter of Paul to the church at Corinth. Today we talk about confidence.

"Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. ³You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴Such confidence we have through Christ before God.

⁵Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. ⁶He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:1-6).

Letters of Recommendation.

Just last week, I wrote a letter of recommendation for someone. I actually regularly write letters of recommendation in my role here as a pastor. Perhaps you are in a position to write these types of letters too. Or maybe you've recently had to ask people to write a letter for you—for a job for which you are applying, for an application for school, or to be a member of a board or a team.

Letters of recommendation are helpful because they give insight into who you are, your work ethic, your character—written by someone who knows you and has spent time with you. Such letters are really helpful for those who might not know you.

Letters of recommendation were also common in Paul's time. Theologian, N.T. Wright tells us that in the ancient world, letters of recommendation were very important (N.T. Wright, Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians; p. 26). Those who travelled for work purposes, carried letters with them to affirm who they were and the nature of their business. We know from early Christian writings, that the practice of writing letters of recommendation was a way of authenticating those who claimed to be servants of Jesus the Messiah.

So, when Paul asks the Corinthians if he needs letters of recommendation, he's referring to a common practice. On appearance, it seems like a reasonable request of one who travels, plants churches is constantly meeting people who might not know him. *But how do you verify God's authentic work in a place?*

As we've been discussing the last several weeks, Paul's relationship with the Corinthians has been complicated. Paul was the "father" of this church movement in Corinth. He was the founder. They actually know him. But since he left, it seems like "some people" have been in and out of this new church with their own letters of recommendation and calling into question who Paul really is. In the passage before ours, Paul refers to those who are "peddling the word of God." And it's not a compliment. His credibility has been consistently undermined and it has caused a great deal of pain for all. He has had to defend himself on several occasions with them.

But Paul's question here about whether he needs letters of recommendation is more rhetorical, it's for their self-reflection. He's not *really* asking them if he needs a letter of recommendation. Rather, he's compelling them to reflect on where their confidence lies. He takes the opportunity to reframe a common practice of authenticity and he encourages them to search elsewhere for a sense of clarity of God's work in their midst.

Look around you. What do you see? You will discover that you already have a letter of recommendation. And it's not written on paper. Or stone tablets. There is no ink involved.

"You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone" (2 Corinthians 3:2).

Not only am I not attaching a letter of recommendation, writes Paul—Look in the mirror. Surprise! You are the letter. Paul writes:

"You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts" (2 Cor. 3:3).

It's as if Paul is saying, The Spirit of God has taken hold of you, my dear Corinthians...and God is writing His story through you for all to read. When I preached the gospel to you, the work of God took root and grew this fellowship of believers in your city. Your hearts carry a letter from God. Don't revert back to asking for pen and ink. The Spirit of God is writing on your hearts.

Be the letter of Christ in the world.

Written with the Spirit.

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke about a time when God's word would move from tablets of stone to hearts of flesh. God's word would no longer be an external letter, but an internal reality.

Jeremiah 31:33:

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

Ezekiel 36:26-27:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

Paul is indicating that time of the *new covenant* has come. Because of the risen Christ, the Spirit is now alive and moving among them. They are new creations, and all who come in contact with them will be able to sense the new life surging through them. God is still writing letters. But now He has moved as He promised from tablets of stone to hearts of flesh. He’s no longer writing with ink, but with His own Spirit.

Think about your own story. *When did God first start writing on your heart? Was it through a person sharing with you, or when you began reading His Word? When did your heart first begin to show signs of life?* My story is simply my parents living out a life of faith with our family, being a part of this community of faith and worship. But I can certainly pinpoint a few times in those early years when the life of Christ surged through and around me. I remember a trip to Haiti with the High School ministry to work alongside the church there. It was the first time I had encountered systematic poverty and deep need in the world. I also witnessed a vibrant church who depended on God for everything. Life was pulsing through our brothers and sisters in Haiti. I remember going to college and finding I was no longer under my parent’s faith. Did I really belong to Christ? Yes, I discovered. The life of Jesus flowed in my veins.

Our mission in the world is not to invite people to follow a set of tablets, or laws or written instructions. That, my friends, is death. None of us can live up to the letter of the law. The law was given to show us how much we need a savior, but it cannot save. Rather, our mission is to bear witness to the Spirit of God who is moving in the world and bringing hearts from death to life. Our mission is to invite people to meet Jesus and to invite them to open their hearts to the Word of God. And to allow the Spirit to begin writing a new story for their lives. The invitation is to relocate confidence in self to confidence in Christ and, in doing so, to find true life.

The Corinthian Church had met Jesus. Paul had introduced them to one another, and an **outpost of life** had taken root in that city.

Confidence to the Weak

In 1872, an outpost of life took root here in Colorado Springs. First Presbyterian Church was founded by Sheldon Jackson. Last Sunday at our annual meeting Tim

invited us to look more closely at this invitation from our early church leaders. The year was 1877. An invitation was given out to meet Jesus at 7:00 p.m. at the Presbyterian church on an evening in January.

It has always been our call to be an “outpost of life” in this city, to be a church who invites people to meet Jesus. And to invite them to enter into the fullness of life in concrete ways and with very specific invitations. But to be a church who can invite others to meet Jesus with boldness, clarity and genuine love of neighbor means that we have to rely on Jesus in every way. Paul’s message quickly moves to the importance of our confidence being in Christ and not ourselves (vs. 4).

Paul writes that they are not competent on their own to claim anything about for themselves (vs. 5)—but they are competent, sufficient, and adequate because God has made them so. Their confidence rests on Christ. And so must ours. God has made us sufficient as “ministers of the Spirit.” And the Spirit, Paul writes, literally “makes alive.” That’s an amazing call we have—ministers of the One who “makes people come alive.” Who wouldn’t want to be a part of that?

Simply put, if our confidence rests in our own abilities, our lives and our life together becomes pretty small pretty fast. But as human beings, created in the image of God, we are made to be alive in Christ and to minister life into a dead world.

In Isaiah 58, we get a picture of God’s people ministering “life” to the world—

- Breaking the yoke of injustice
- Feeding the hungry
- Providing shelter for the poor wanderer
- Clothing the naked
- Satisfying the needs of the oppressed
- Then...your light will rise in the darkness and you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail.

Andy Crouch, who was with us for our Christian Life Conference last April, used the word “flourishing.” “[Human beings] are meant to flourish—not just to survive, but to thrive; not just to exist, but to explore and expand” (Crouch, Strong and Weak). To flourish is to be fully alive.

The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, is the message of life to those who are dead, strength to those who are weak, light to those who walk in darkness, abundance to those who live in scarcity, refuge to those who live in exposure. As image-bearers of the living God, we minister such life to others as we minister Christ Himself who ...“unleashed more flourishing in this world than any other human ever has or ever will” (Crouch)—Christ Jesus, the image of the invisible God, the One in whom all our confidence lies.

So what does it mean for us to put our confidence in Christ and not in ourselves? To proclaim sufficiency in Christ and not in our own competencies?

Andy Crouch suggests that to be an image-bearer means to live in paradox. Flourishing comes from being both strong and weak.

Being the Letter of Christ.

It's rare these days to get a hand-written letter in the mail. I have two women in my life (from an older generation—one in CA and one in CT) who take the time to hand write me notes consistently. Those letters are precious to me. In those letters, there is a freedom for those women to reflect in the work of Christ in their lives and share the good and the difficult with me. They do so with humility and confidence. As I read them, I feel as if we are talking to one another, person to person. I can picture them setting aside time to write specifically to me. It's a discipline these days to engage in letter writing from the heart. It takes time to chronicle the whole range of our human experience and to point to work of Christ in our lives especially through difficulty. Perhaps it's merely a sign that we aren't a very thoughtful or reflective culture, or maybe just simply that our communication has become more transactional than transformational.

As we follow Paul's travels, we realize fairly quickly that Paul writes letters from the heart. He shares boldly and vulnerably. Every word points to Christ. He is incredibly strong in his delivering of the message of Christ, and he is open about his own weaknesses. He never shies away from speaking the truth of Jesus with boldness, but he also lays his life and heart open as he writes about his difficulties. Even in the midst of misunderstanding and hurt he speaks tenderly to his flock about his heart for them, his thankfulness for their lives and his own struggles with them. We know that Paul spends a lot of time in prison. He goes wherever the Spirit leads even into tough places. He is bold and tender. He is confident and vulnerable. When it comes to being a minister of the Spirit of Christ and bringing the message of life, Paul holds nothing back. He is strong and weak.

Paul's confidence is in Christ, the giver of life. Later in this letter he pens these words:

"But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7).

"That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

If we are to be a "letter of Christ" in this world, it will mean allowing the world to see the gospel alive in "jars of clay." It will mean allowing the strength of Christ to shine through our weaknesses. It will mean we speak boldly for

Christ while allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, even to experience woundedness. And it means we move towards those who are at risk, vulnerable, naked, hungry, in need of shelter, in need of rescue and we minister life in the name of Christ.

But the true joy of being Christ's letter in the world, is that the letter ultimately is not about you. But Christ *in* you, our only hope in this world.

Confidence in weakness.
Confidence to the weak.
Confidence in Christ.
Amen.

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STUDY GUIDE

"Confidence to the Weak"

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Study It

- Share about the last time you either asked someone to write a Letter of Recommendation for you, or you wrote one on behalf of someone. What was it for? And what caused you to choose that person, or caused that person to choose you? What did the Letter communicate?
- What strikes you about this passage? What do you notice, and what questions arise for you as you read this section?
- Letters of Recommendation were carried in the ancient world to authenticate a person's identity and credibility. It was a common practice. What is Paul communicating to the Corinthians about his own practice (or lack thereof) of carrying such a letter?
- What authenticates Paul's ministry among the Corinthians?
- Talk about your own journey of trusting in your own competencies and learning to trust the Spirit in your life. What's the difference between relying on your own abilities and relying on the God who gave you those abilities?
- Think about our church as a "letter of recommendation" to Colorado Springs. How do you think our city "reads" us? How might we continue to grow as a church in relying on the Spirit's work in our midst?

CONFIDENCE TO THE WEAK • 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 • John Goodale • February 5, 2017

I thought I'd begin today with a personal confession. Though we've lived here in Colorado for 22 years, I've only skied one day in my life. It was such a great day, I decided to quit while I was ahead! One thing I learned from that experience was that to ski well, you need to lean forward—and I remember how counter intuitive that felt. When I was hurtling down the mountain, every instinct told me it was safer to lean back!

I share this because we may feel something of this dynamic with today's passage. Some of what Paul writes may seem counter-intuitive to our own instincts. Whenever our actions or way of thinking is challenged in some way, our tendency is to lean back and dig in. It feels safer to hold fast to what's familiar and comfortable.

Our current Movement sermon series, though, reminds us of God's longing to produce movement in our lives, and to propel us outward as His movement into the world. Movement occurs when we lean forward—not only on the ski slope, but also in our lives. We lean into, rather than away from the Spirit's work within us. As Tim put it last Sunday, movement is every Christian believer taking one step forward to Jesus. And then another, and another.

With this in mind, let's take a closer look at Paul's words to us today. He begins with a defense of his ministry: "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?" (3:1) As we learned previously, others had followed Paul to Corinth, to challenge and correct his teaching. Paul alludes here to letters of commendation they brought to establish credibility with the Corinthians. This was common practice in the ancient world, as a way of providing authority for unfamiliar teachers.

We might expect Paul to say, "You've seen their credentials; now here are mine." But in a surprising twist, he points to the Corinthians and says, "You are my letter of commendation." He writes in verse 2, "You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone." Paul wisely realized that the greatest testimony of what God was doing through him were the changed lives of these people. And what a letter they were, "known and read by everyone." God's transforming power was clear for all to see. Paul then returns to this theme again in

verse 3: "You show that you are a letter from Christ."

Paul's description of the Corinthians begs the question of us: To what degree are we a letter from Christ to our world today? Oh, I anticipate leaning back in response to that question! I've never had a bumper sticker on my car, but have thought that if I did, I wouldn't want one pointing to my faith. I'd be afraid that my driving might negate any positive message on the bumper sticker! We can have this same approach when it comes to how we live. Jesus says "You are the light of the world." But we don't want to shine too obviously, so others can more easily see our flaws and where we fall short. In that case we'd be embarrassed, and they'd be turned off to the faith. We tell ourselves this again and again.

When it comes to our relationship with God, we have a choice. We can be a spiritual turtle, trying to keep our faith beliefs and practices safely protected within the shell of our lives. This may keep us from discomfort caused by others' responses to our faith. But I guarantee you the Holy Spirit's life-giving movement will be limited in our lives. Or, we can be God's letter to the world, leaning forward, moving outward, and allowing Christ to be seen in us. A letter of hope, meaning and love that can strike a chord with someone looking for something more. I heard a great example of this just two days ago. A woman lost her spouse of many years last year, and was devastated. One of her co-workers was a member from First Pres, who invited her to church. She came—and she's still coming today.

If we're honest, skiing may feel safer to some of us than putting our faith on display! If that's the case, don't miss the freeing message Paul has for us here. After being attacked and questioned by his critics, he could have made a case for how capable he was. In another surprise, that's not where Paul goes; instead he acknowledges he's not competent, writing in verse 5, "Not that we are competent to claim anything for ourselves." That's not exactly a winning self-defense! But Paul acknowledges this so he can get to the next part of his message: "but our competence comes from God" (3:5). You see, as Christ's letter to the world, we point not to what we have going for us, but to what Christ has going for us.

Again, this can push against our instincts a bit, for competency is a high value for us. The more

competent we are, the better we feel about ourselves, and the more positively we believe others will see us. Competency is expected in school, at work, and anywhere else we want to succeed. So we do our best to convince ourselves and others that we're on top of things, and that we have our act together. And this works—until it doesn't. For as we know all too well, none of us fully have our act together. Far more often than we prefer, we experience weakness, and display imperfection. We fall short not only of others' expectations of us, but also of our own self-expectations.

The good news of Paul's message is that there's an alternative to always trying to be strong enough. As we come to God just as we are, in all our weakness, we discover that He can make up the difference. As pastor Mike Erre put it, "The American Dream is to live in our strength; God's dream is that we live in our weakness." Why would we want to live in our weakness? Because when we do, we experience more of God in our lives.

Paul learned this the hard way. Later in this same letter, he refers to a difficult experience. Listen to his description: "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:8-10). Paul actually declares here that he delights in weakness. What kind of person would do that?! One who learned that God's power is made perfect in our weakness.

Where in your life do you feel weak right now? How can these words be good news for you? Though we try to avoid weakness at all cost, let me briefly offer three thoughts about how we can live into Paul's message for us. First, **admit where we're weak or insecure**. We need to do this first with ourselves, and that's not always easy. But when we have, we can then bring these places to the Lord, asking His power to compensate for and even transform our places of weakness. Second, **allow our weakness to become a marker of God's work in our lives**. In the same way diamonds shine brightest against a black backdrop, God's activity is most clear against the background of our weakness. This can encourage us in the faith, as we see glimpses there

of our Lord's presence and activity. And finally, **acknowledge our lack of competency to others as a way of pointing to God's competency**. If we're hesitant to do this, keep in mind that those around us are also struggling with places of weakness and insecurity. When they see some of their story in ours and what God is doing in us, they'll get a glimpse of what He can do in their lives

Ignace Paderewski was Poland's prime minister, and also a concert pianist. A story is told of a mother who wished to encourage her young son's interest in music, so she got tickets for them in the front row for one of Paderewski's concerts. When they arrived, the mother began talking to a friend, and didn't notice her son had wandered off until the lights were dimmed for the performance. At that point, she discovered to her horror that her son had made his way onto the stage, and was seated at the concert grand playing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star!" At that same moment, Paderewski entered from the side of the stage. He came up behind the boy, and whispered to him to keep playing. As the young child did, Paderewski's left hand began filling in bass notes, while his right hand added a running obbligato. As child and master played together, the audience was mesmerized by the music they made.

That's a beautiful image of how God's power is at work in our weakness. That's also the content of Christ's letter to the world, through us. So let me ask: Will we bring our places of weakness to God, and lean into His power and competency? And will we move towards others in love and transparency, so that they might find hope in what they see God doing in our lives?

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STUDY GUIDE

“Confidence to the Weak” • 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Start It

- Our society tends to glorify strength over weakness. So it's not surprising that people are drawn to stories about a scrawny teenager who becomes Spiderman, a blind attorney who becomes Daredevil, or a child afraid of bats who becomes Batman. Yet we can all think of areas and even seasons of our lives when strength has not been our defining characteristic—and perhaps we've been nervous about allowing others to see that about us. Today's passage frees us to acknowledge our weakness and insufficiency, because of what God can do with it. So take a few moments to acknowledge places where you may feel weak or insecure.

Study It

- Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-3. Apparently, critics of Paul had arrived in Corinth with letters of commendation to establish their credibility with the people there. Rather than leaning upon his own credentials to defend himself, Paul asserts to the Corinthians that they were his letter of commendation, demonstrating God's transforming power to all. He notes that their changed lives were “known and read by everyone.” To what degree do you feel you are a letter from Christ to the world today? What can hinder you from being this—and how can today's passage encourage you to move more in this direction?
- Read 2 Corinthians 3:5. Rather than leaning upon his own competency, Paul asserts that his ministry is due entirely to God's competency. If we combine this truth with the previous one above, this means that as we are Christ's letter to the world, it's not about how we have our act together, but about what God has done and can do within us. How would this be attractive to others around us, who are also struggling with weakness and insecurity?
- Paul's words here were undoubtedly shaped by a previous experience that he describes later in this letter. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. How can you find encouragement this week and beyond from God's promise, “My power is made perfect in weakness,” or Paul's assurance, “For when I am weak, then I am strong?”

Pray It

O Holy God, thank you for power greater than mine, and that you are sufficient so many times when I'm insufficient. Teach me how to rest in your strength, and how to let others know this good news. Amen.

Live It

Identify places in your life where you currently feel weak or incompetent. Allow them to become markers of God's work and power in your life. And pray for ways to acknowledge your lack of competency to others as a way of pointing to God's competency.