

2 Corinthians 3

Introduction

This chapter speaks of the power of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life. Paul has already touched on the theme, but here he speaks of the very foundational work of changing and transforming sinners, recreating, renewing, liberating and transforming. And how they needed it in Corinth. We all need that transforming work, but it was especially obvious in Corinth, the centre of vice and idolatry. C.f. the expression κορινθιαζεσθαι "to live like a Corinthian" meaning to live a life with drunken and immoral debauchery. The term actually penetrated the English language in Regency times, when a wealthy young man living recklessly and with moral abandon would be known as a "Corinthian".

In 1 Corinthian 6 there is a list of those not entering the kingdom, and this list includes the immoral, idolaters, sexual perverts, thieves, drunkards and swindlers, and Paul makes it clear, **And that is what some of you were. 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 Corinthians 6:11). In 2 Corinthians he develops the theme of the Holy Spirit and shows that it is not just at the beginning of the Christian's life, but throughout life, that the Holy Spirit's transforming ministry is essential.

The relevance of the Gospel to our present day situation is nowhere so clear and obvious as here. Many will agree the state of our nation today is because our society is rotten, but few know where to find the remedy.

The glory of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit

The background is important and crucial. These statements in 3:1-6 are addressed to the troublemakers who were giving Paul a hard time in the Corinthian church. They had come to the church with letters of commendation, exalting their virtues, and then having won the ears of the Corinthians began teaching things in opposition to Paul, and stating that Paul was not a true apostle of Christ. They were corrupters of the word.

Paul has to speak up. Normally when accused, it is best to say nothing because the truth will out in the end. It is humiliating to be condemned, painful to have to be silent, and degrading to have to defend one's self. But on this occasion Paul has to speak out, not for his own sake but for the good of the church.

Letters of commendation were often sent – e.g. Paul wrote to commend Phoebe (Romans 16:1), and Paul was commended by Barnabas (Acts 9:27). But as the apostle who had founded the church at Corinth, he states he does not need a letter of commendation. **You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody** (2 Corinthians 3:2). Their changed lives were proof that Paul was a genuine apostle empowered by Christ. Christ wrote the letter, Paul was the instrument, the ink was the Holy Spirit, and the Corinthians hearts and lives was the resulting letter.

Here are two important things about being a Christian and Christian service. Being a Christian involves being wrought on by the Holy Spirit. He implants the very life and nature of God into the innermost citadel of personality. He gives new birth from above (John 3:5). We are new creations in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 5:17). We do not just become nice, pleasant church-going people, but we are subject to a mighty transformation. We are new people. Christ is at the heart, and the evidence is that we love God, we love His word, prayer is a reality, and we have confidence in Christ above. Our life is touched by God in power.

Then true Christian service has its source not in human influence, or learning or manipulation, but in the power of God's Holy Spirit. The worker is merely a pen, an instrument or tool used by the Lord through the Holy Spirit. The pen through which the ink of the Holy Spirit flows. **Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant** (2 Corinthians 3:5,6).

The Spirit's strategy is to take weak, cowardly, incompetent men, take possession of their faculties and being, and fill and possess and use them. When the missionary Robert Morrison was sailing to China, the captain of the ship scornfully said to him, "Well, Mr Morrison, you expect to make an impression on the great dark land of China, do you?" Morrison replied, "No, sir, but I expect God will."

If a minister stays any length of time in a church, the proof will be in the lives of the people to whom he ministers. Every congregation is a reflection of the man and those in leadership. No congregation rises higher than its leaders spiritually.

The effect of this transforming work

The era we live in is pre-eminently the era of the Holy Spirit, the age of the New Covenant. The Old Covenant (found in the Old Testament) had God's Laws, revealed God, and was an important period. But it was only a preliminary and temporary revelation. Now we are in the days of God's final revelation – the New Covenant – when the Spirit is poured out in fullness.

In the Old Testament we have God's laws and especially the Ten Commandments. He set high standards. If we hoped to be saved by keeping them, it would end in condemnation and death, for God requires perfection. God's law could make demands but did not have the power to enable us to keep it or change our hearts that we would even want to keep it. The result – the law on its own leads to frustration, despair and death.

But all that has changed. God sent His Son, and brought in the New Covenant. Foretold by Jeremiah. Fulfilled when Jesus died on the Cross, and commemorated at the Lord's Supper. This great note brings liberty, freedom and release. The Holy Spirit has been poured out. **Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom** (2 Corinthians 3:17).

Freedom in two areas. Firstly, forgiveness of sin by God's grace because Christ has died for us. To attempt to earn salvation by keeping the commandments will be a

disappointment. A classic case was Martin Luther, who was aware of sin and danger. Death and judgement terrified him. He prayed and fasted, he had sleepless nights, he punished himself – but then he found the Bible which condemned him also brought him hope. He learnt that in Christ and His cross and sin-bearing death he could find full and free salvation. By faith alone. Peace through Christ's death, and not through his own efforts.

*“Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone,
Thou must save, and thou alone”*

Toplady

And the second freedom that is ours under the New Covenant is freedom from slavery to sin. By the Holy Spirit, the law is written on our hearts, we love it and we want to keep it. We have this new desire within us, and we grieve when we fail. **The law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death** (Romans 8:2). **Liberated from its bondage... brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God** (Romans 8:21).

The New Covenant, with its outpouring of the Spirit, brings an end to frustration, despair, habit, pessimism, fear, bondage, condemnation. It sets us free, empowers us, gives life, and deals with the deepest problem – our motives, and the “want to”. We have new life, new heart, not a set of rules we don't want to keep. We delight to do His will, and we feel the liberty from condemnation and slavery. This theme is celebrated in so many of our hymns.

*“Blessings abound where'er He reigns.
The prisoner leaps to loose his chains”*
Isaac Watts

*“My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed thee”*
Charles Wesley

*“Free from law, O happy condition,
Jesus hath bled and there is remission.”*

This liberating experience is very relevant today. The problem of mankind is not lack of knowledge, but lack of will and desire. The Gospel produces new lives, changed hearts, new desires, new men and women, with new outlook and new power. He brings freedom. And yet the people of the world think the Christian is the one in bondage – having to keep rules they don't want to keep. In fact it is the world that is in bondage to fear and condemnation.

Billy Bray, the converted Cornish tin-miner, “The Lord pardoned all my sins in November 1823. But what day of the month I don't know. But I know this – that everything looked new to me – people, fields, cattle, trees. I was like a man in a new world.. the Lord set my feet on a rock and he established my goings.”

The continuance of this transformation

Paul argues that the Christian has new life and nature by the transformation of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17,18). This is one of the blessings of the New Covenant and it means liberty and deliverance. But though this work is begun, it is not yet complete. Salvation is a gift and also a growth; a person and also a process. The believer is day by day being changed and transformed more and more into Christ's likeness. From one degree of glory to another.

Paul uses the word μεταμορφω from which we get our English word metamorphosis. This word was used in Matthew 17:2 and Mark 9:2 about Jesus being transfigured. Also used in Romans 12:2, "Being transformed by the renewing of your mind." The Christian's daily experience is being more and more changed and transfigured into maturity and adulthood. **When the veil is taken away... we with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory** (2 Corinthians 3:16,18). Our vision of God is initially very imperfect, but as we keep looking, we are transformed more and more into the same image. All done by the Holy Spirit who started the work in the first place. As we gaze at Christ, His image and his reflection will be increasingly seen. Eyes fastened on Christ, we reflect Him.

*"Turn you eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in his wonderful face."*

The Puritans used to say, "For every look at self, take ten looks at Jesus." Here is the secret of growth and progress along the Christian path. We can all plead, "Please be patient with me. God hasn't finished with me yet." His work is continuing daily, and the more we look at His Son, so we progress from one degree of glory to another.

*"Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before him,
Lost in wonder, love and praise."*

Conclusion

The Christian life is a transformed life. It begins with the Holy Spirit poured out in fullness under the new covenant, implanting new life. Then there is a continuing work till we get to heaven. What is my relationship to the Holy Spirit? He has given we new life, but am I open to Him doing His daily and continuing work within me?