

When was the last time you put together a resume? Making a resume is something of an art. They come in all shapes and sizes. You can tell a lot about a person not just by what's included on the resume but also by how it looks visually. But when it comes to the business of trying to show you're the right person for the job, it usually comes down to the same information. There is the personal details—name, address, background, education, even a photograph. Then there's something about your past work experience. Finally, there's a list of references—people who will speak on your behalf. All of this shows you have what it takes to do the job, that you're qualified, competent, and more than able to succeed.

But let me ask you a question. If you were to write a resume to show you're competent to work for God, what would it look like? What would it say? What would you put on and leave off that resume? How would you show someone you're qualified and competent to work for God? What would you want them to know about you and your education? Who would be your references?

I think we all know this might look a bit different from a normal resume, but how? I've looked at hundreds of resumes over the years for positions on our staff at CPC. Often, I've noticed how similar they are to those in any other arena. There are respected universities and seminaries listed; former employers and work experience, an impressive track record of successful ministry, and a few important names used as references.

I've often wondered how the Apostle Paul would put together his resume if he were looking for a job in a church today. Here was a man who'd spent a good deal of time in jail. I'm not sure he'd include that! His work history was sketchy. He hadn't spent more than three and a half years in any one place. He had no permanent residence of his own. He frequently had to do menial work to support himself. He wasn't much to look at, so I doubt he'd have added a photo. He was also known to be a poor speaker, which doesn't bode well for a would-be preacher. On one occasion, he droned on so long a young man dozed off, fell out of a window, and died! The bottom line is Paul just didn't fit the profile of what makes for successful ministry today. No wonder they questioned him in Corinth. No wonder they had a hard time believing he was the real deal.

We arrive at 2 Corinthians 3:1-6, where Paul answers the question, What's the basis for our competence as those who serve God? What makes us adequate to do the job? This was an issue

between Paul and the Corinthians. Paul had his critics there who had credentials a mile long. Where were Paul's credentials?

When we arrive at chapter 3, Paul just finished talking about the impact of authentic ministry in the world. And he made an audacious claim—he said God always leads him in triumph, even when he's at his worst. He said to some people, his aroma would lead them towards death, but to other people, he would be the sweet aroma of life. In other words, wherever he goes, he makes an impact!

Now to play that kind of a role in other people's lives is daunting. So Paul asks at the end of chapter 2, "*Who's equal to such a task?*" Who's qualified for this role? Who has what it takes? Paul's answer is, "We are." At the end of chapter 2, he says, "*We are sent from God.*" How can he say that? It sounds a bit presumptuous, don't you think? So Paul clarifies what he means.

You are our Letter of Recommendation

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. 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 Corinthians 3:1-3

He starts with two questions. "Are we just commending ourselves? Do we need letters of recommendation to you or from you?" Letters of recommendation were common back then. They were required in the ancient world just to get a place to stay for the night. And if you were an itinerate preacher like Paul, moving from place to place, you needed them.

A number of years ago, Lynn and I traveled to Italy and visited the town where my relatives were from. I had an address where some of them lived. We arrived unannounced. They had no idea who I was, but I had a letter of introduction written in Italian by my great uncle so they'd know who I was. I wasn't some freeloader but a legitimate relative. They looked down from the second-floor window on Lynn and I as I read the letter out loud. When they realized I was a genuine relative, they welcomed us with open arms.

Paul asks, "Is that what I need to be accepted as a genuine apostle by you folks in Corinth?" No doubt Paul's critics in Corinth had a

bundle of such letters of recommendation from very important people they could pull out. And there were those in Corinth who felt Paul wasn't the real deal because he lacked such letters.

I suppose Paul could have produced such letters if he wanted to. I mean, the apostles themselves considered Paul as one of their own. But he refused to do this. He saw it as an activity of the flesh. Instead, he pointed to the Corinthians and said, "*You are our letter; a letter written on our hearts.*" In other words, "The letter of recommendation I carry is you. I carry that letter with me in my heart. All the endorsement I need is what Jesus has done in your life through my ministry."

He tells us a number of things about this letter. He tells us who reads this letter. He says it's "*known and read by everyone.*" It may be written on the heart, but the work of God in their lives is plain for all to see; it's widely distributed; everyone can see what Christ has done in their life.

He also tells us who wrote this letter. He says you're "*a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry.*" Paul took no credit for writing this letter. Paul was just the postman who delivered the letter through his ministry. Christ did the work in their hearts. He transformed their lives, but he used Paul and his friends.

He also tells us how this letter was written. He says it was "*written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God.*" It was God, who through his Spirit, worked in their lives and wrote this letter. Who needs letters written with lifeless ink when you can have one written by the Spirit of the Living God?

Finally, he tells them on what this letter was written. He says, "*not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*" He changed the metaphor here, moving from letters written with ink to tablets of stone. Remember, the Ten Commandments were engraved by God on stone tablets. That was part of the covenant God made with the Jewish people. God said, "I'm giving you my law because you're my people. Now go and keep it!" But the problem is, no one could keep it. But now, Paul says, God is doing something new. He's writing the law on human hearts. No doubt, he's thinking of how the Old Testament prophets had looked forward to a time when God would give his people a new heart—soft, responsive, and pliable. God said through Ezekiel,

"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." Ezekiel 36:26-27

So Paul claims his competence is proven not by letters written in ink by important people, but in transformed lives wrought by the Holy Spirit through his ministry. The true test of a person's ministry isn't who they know or where they went to school, but rather it's the fruit of changed lives. And this isn't just true of apostles like Paul; it's true of all of us.

Think of the people God has used in your life. Who's that person in your life that's impacted you the most spiritually? You're reading this today because God's Spirit worked through someone to lead you to Christ or to help you grow in Christ. Who are those people? Do they need a letter of recommendation from someone to prove their worth to you? No! I remember one of the first believers I met at Cal Poly as a baby Christian—Norm Frankenburger. I was just an 18-year-old punk who knew nothing. But he took an interest in me and disciplined me. Is he the real deal? I can answer that—absolutely! I'm his letter, sent from Jesus Christ, written by the Spirit of God on my heart. And guess what? God wants to use you like that as well! You don't have to have it all together. You don't need a seminary degree.

Have you heard of D.L. Moody? He had a fifth-grade education. As a teenager, he was selling shoes on the streets of Chicago. He did well, but then there was a financial crash. Later, a fire burned down his home. Somehow God got a hold of him through all of that. He traveled to Great Britain, and he met a man who said this to him, "Moody, the world has yet to see what God will do with a man fully consecrated to him?" Those words lit a fire in Moody's soul. He became an evangelist. In Great Britain alone, four million people flocked to his revivals. He founded the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. He's been called the greatest evangelist of the 19th century. But he never went to seminary. He was just an ordinary man. The proof of his ministry was changed lives.

Our Competency is not in Ourselves but in God

So Paul says, "You are our letter of recommendation. The work the Spirit of God has done in your lives is the only letter we need." Now, again, that might seem a bit arrogant. I mean, he's claiming to be a co-worker with God himself! So starting in verse 4, he explains the basis for this confidence.

Such confidence we have through Christ before God. 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—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. vv. 4-6

He says this confidence comes only "*through Christ before God.*" When we stand naked before a holy God, Christ is our righteousness and our only confidence. And this lays the foundation for Paul's competence. Three times in these verses, he uses that word competent. Other translations use the word adequate.

Paul says the source of his adequacy or competence isn't in himself; it comes from God. He's not self-competent, but God-competent. In fact, when it comes to competence, nothing comes from himself; everything comes from God. God makes us competent as ministers of a new covenant. We'll talk more about the new covenant in a moment, but don't be fooled by that word

minister. It just means servant. He's not talking about pastors and missionaries. We're all servants of the new covenant.

It's amazing. Paul would say his competency comes only from God. Paul had a long list of credentials. In Philippians 3, he says this,

If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. Philippians 3:4b-6

He had it all. He had the right ancestry, flawless orthodoxy, unmatched zeal, and the highest morals. But he's cast all that aside; it means nothing to him. In fact, he says he considered it to be nothing but "dung" (I won't use our word for it, but you get the idea).

Martin Luther once said, "God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a person is nothing, God can make nothing out of him." Each of us must come to that place of brokenness and weakness where we see we're nothing apart from Him. For some of us, we have to fail over and over again to see we're nothing. It can be a painful process.

It's like what happened to Peter. Remember? Jesus told his disciples in the Upper Room they would all abandon him when the heat was on. But Peter piped up and said, "Not me, Lord! I'll never leave you. I'll lay down my life for you." Peter was so confident in himself. But that very night, he denied the Lord not once, or twice, but three times! He learned the hard way he was nothing. We all have to come to that place where we know we don't have what it takes.

Coming to grips with this has been a process for me over the years. On the one hand, I've always felt inadequate. I never had the advantage of a Christian heritage to look back on. My pre-Christian life was tainted by sins that left a mark on me. I'm not particularly smart. I'm not particularly funny. I can't sing worth a lick. I didn't go to all the right schools. I'm an introvert by nature. I don't have the most charismatic personality.

At the same time, I'm very determined by nature. I've always found by putting my head down and working hard; I can accomplish a lot. But, time and time again, the Lord has had to bring me to a place where that's not enough, all my inadequacies come to the surface, and all I can do is cry out to God for his strength and power. I've found when I come to the end of myself; the Lord delights in giving me more of himself! It doesn't happen overnight. None of us get to that place without considerable failure. It's a lifetime process.

Paul's name for this kind of life and ministry is "the New Covenant." That's what he calls it in verse 6. A covenant is simply

an agreement two parties enter into, an arrangement that forms the basis and terms of the relationship. In this case, the two parties are God and his people. There was an Old Covenant and a New Covenant. As we've seen, under the Old Covenant, God wrote the law on stone tablets up on Mt. Sinai and gave it to Israel through Moses. God said, "Keep my law, and you'll live. Break it, and you'll die; you'll be cut off from relationship with me." That's why it says here, "the letter kills." They broke it. We all break it. The Old Covenant is all about the letter of the law and what we have to do to please God and stay in relationship with him. It's all based on our own efforts and ability, and we always fall short. But the New Covenant is different. At the heart of the New Covenant, it isn't what we do for God but what he does for us.

The prophet Jeremiah looked forward to the New Covenant

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. Jeremiah 31:31-32

You see, the old covenant said, "Do this, keep this law, and you'll live." But God says they broke that covenant. But then he says

"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "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. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." Jer. 31:33-34

The Old Covenant was all about us keeping the law, but in the New Covenant, God writes his law on our minds and hearts. It's the same law, but instead of being an external demand, it's written internally on our hearts. And he gives us his life-giving Spirit so we can draw on his wisdom, power, and strength for all we need to serve and love him. The Old Covenant is us trying to do our best for God; the New Covenant is God's Spirit working through us. And when we mess up, when we do sin, we can continually count on his forgiveness and grace. That's why he says as part of the New Covenant, "*I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.*" He settled once and for all the question of our guilt because he died for us. That's why, at the Last Supper, Jesus called this "the new covenant in my blood."

The great theologian Clint Eastwood once said, "A man's got to know his limitations." Do you know your limitations? Do you

understand apart from Him, you can do nothing? Do you get what Paul meant when he said, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

I want to close with an illustration used many years ago by Ray Stedman. I think it's as relevant today as it was then. If you're seeking adequacy and competence in your life or ministry by your own resources rather than by the life of Jesus within you, you're like a person who goes down to buy a car and doesn't know it comes equipped with a motor. Naturally, buying a car on that basis, you'd have to push it home. When you get there, you might invite your family out for a ride, so your family hops in, and you start pushing from behind. At that point, someone might see you and ask, "Hey, love the new car! How does it drive?"

You might say, "Oh, it's a great car. Look at the upholstery, and I love the color and listen to the horn. What a great horn! But it is exhausting! It goes downhill beautifully, but I find myself struggling if I have to go even slightly uphill. It's really hard to push this car uphill."

He says, "I know just the thing to help you. At our church, we're having a seminar this week. We have a speaker that will teach on, 'How to Push a Car Successfully!' On Monday night, he's going to show us how to push with the right shoulder. On Tuesday night, he'll show how to push with the left shoulder. On Wednesday night, he has a video to show us how to really get our back into it and push. On Thursday night, he'll put us in small groups to support one another in our pushing, and on Friday night, there'll be a dedication service where we all commit ourselves to the work of pushing cars. You should come every night and learn everything about how to push your new car!"

You see, that's how so many people are living the Christian life and trying to serve God today. No wonder there's so little joy! We spend hours trying to mobilize all our human resources and try harder to get the job done for God. But so often, we're just mobilizing the flesh. We try to build up our confidence in our own adequacy, but deep down, we know we fall short.

What we really need is for someone to come alongside us and say something like this. "Hey, come around to the front of the car." He lifts up the hood and says, "Do you see this iron thing with all the pipes coming out of it? Do you know what that is? It's a motor. It's a source of power. The maker of this car knew you couldn't push forever, so he designed this to enable you to go uphill as easily as downhill. When you learn how to operate

the motor, you'll experience the power. Just turn this key, and the motor will start. Then put it in drive and step on the pedal, and away you go. You press the pedal, and you do the steering, but you're totally dependent on the motor. You don't have to push the car at all. There's no need to worry because the motor can handle not just the downhill but the uphill as well."

Honestly, as I look back on my own ministry, I often wonder how much of what I've done has been me just trying my best to push the car uphill. How often I've had to come back to that place of surrender where I trust the Spirit of God to do in me and through me what I can't do. That's the New Covenant.

God knows we are inadequate in ourselves to meet the demands of life and ministry, so he gave us a Helper; a source of power; the Spirit of God who manifests the life of Jesus within us. He's perfectly adequate for the task. Not only will he change you and me, but he'll change others through us. He'll make us adequate and competent as ministers of the New Covenant.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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