

Hearty Letters of Recommendation**Introduction**

Have you ever needed a letter of recommendation? The Corinthians apparently thought that Paul needed one. The apostle effectively argues that he does not, given the spiritual kind of letter he carries around with him in his heart every day.

A. Letters of Commendation, v. 1.**1. Definition.**

To commend means to mention as worthy of attention, to recommend; to express approval of; to praise. It comes from the verb “to stand with.” In this context, a letter of commendation is basically a recommendation letter.

2. Examples in the NT.

In the NT era, Acts 9:1-2 (Acts 22:5) for Saul from the high priest. In Acts 18:27 the brothers in Ephesus wrote on behalf of Apollos, commending him to the reception of the Christians in Achaia. Rom. 16:1 is a commendation of Phoebe—part of the Bible itself! 1 Cor. 16:3 mentions letters that the Corinthian church would write to commend the brothers who were to carry a monetary gift to Jerusalem. Acts 28:21 mentions a “reverse commendation,” but fortunately no such had been written against Paul.

Misuse of in Paul’s day. In 2 Cor. 10:12, 18 there is an indication that there were some itinerant speakers who commended themselves, that is, there was a group of them who wrote letters for each other. They compared themselves by their own standards. On the surface the commendations may have allowed them sneak into Christian assemblies. These were likely the same people in 2:17, the “many” who twist and hawk the Word of God for their own profit.

3. Meaning Here.

The questions in verse 1 are cast in a form that expect a “no” answer in both cases. It is as if he writes, “We aren’t commending ourselves again, are we? We don’t need recommendation letters to you or from you, do we?—Obviously not!”

The first question points out that Paul is *not* commending himself, as some do (2 Cor. 10:12, 18). In fact, 2 Cor. 5:12 teaches us that Paul did not want to commend himself again to them at all—rather, he wanted them to commend him.

As far as the second question Paul is saying that he is not of the same crowd of people who carry these letters of introduction, and especially he does not do that for the Corinthians. Why would he? It would be like a father having to bring a letter from the hospital to prove to his children that he is their dad! Perhaps those folks are saying “Look at Paul. He doesn’t carry proper identification. How can you follow him?” Verses 2-3 answer the question more fully.

However, he is not at the same time degrading the use of all such letters, which in some cases are necessary. I outlined some above and there are some examples below of their modern use.

4. Modern-Day Examples.

References on your resume are kind of the same thing. Though those may be unwritten recommendations, if you are in the academic setting, you are familiar with “letters of recommendation” that a candidate for tenure has to obtain from other tenured faculty that know him. Or if you are in the medical community, letters of recommendation are necessary for your portfolio in applying to residency programs.

Down to today in our churches. Brethren churches have such letters. Baptist churches have what they call letters of dismission/commendation/transfer. *The Hiscox Standard Baptist Manual*, p. 39 says, “A member may, on application, receive a letter of commendation and dismission from his church, with which to unite with another of the same faith.” Our church constitution has a similarly-worded provision in it.

5. Incidentals.

The word “commend” is used as “to recommend” in other passages that do not refer to letters as such (2 Cor. 10:12, 18, 12:11). It is also used to speak of an expression of approval to the work of the ministry and of trust toward God (Acts 14:23, 26, 15:40).

The English Bible uses “commend” to translate other words. For instance, it can mean to make us noteworthy in some way (1 Cor. 8:8). It can also mean to provide evidence of a personal characteristic or claim through action, to demonstrate (2 Cor. 4:2, 6:4, 7:11).

B. Spiritual Letters of Commendation, v. 2.

We have a metaphor here in which the Corinthians are said to be a letter. Remember that a **metaphor** is a figure of speech containing an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase ordinarily and primarily used of one thing is applied to another. It says “something *is* something else.” For instance, “The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer...” (Ps. 18:2). (A **simile** is “something *is like* something else.”)

In other words, the Corinthians are clamoring for a letter of commendation, which they themselves are! By virtue of their “amen” to the gospel they commend his ministry.

Carrying on the metaphor, this letter-which-is-the-Corinthians is written in the hearts of Paul and his missionary companions (see 2 Cor. 7:3). They “stand written” in his heart (perfect tense), as it were engraved or inscribed there never to be removed. He carries the remembrance of their faith wherever he goes.

The phrase “known and read by all” might be confusing. If this letter is in Paul’s heart, how can anyone see or read it? The indication is that it stood open for inspection by anyone, either as they saw the Corinthians, or as they listened to Paul’s testimony of them.

Many times letters of recommendation are sealed and cannot be shared with the subject so as to protect the author so he can be candid (somewhat like executive privilege). On occasion, I’ve heard of a letter that the author leaves open for the subject to read. In this case, we have a totally open recommendation letter—the lives of the believers.

C. Paul’s Heart Letter is the Xerox Copy of the Real Thing, v. 3.

In this verse, the metaphor is detailed a bit more. We are still talking about letters, but the author is explicitly given now – Christ Himself. “Ministered by us” shows that Paul had a hand in writing these letters by his ministry of the gospel—but only as secretary!

These letters are not written with ink or on stone. This means that the work of Paul’s ministry is not external like letters or the law. Instead, it is written by the Spirit of the living God on tablets of flesh. It is internal, in the heart. The contrast has to do with the writing instrument (ink versus the Spirit) and the writing material (stone versus the heart).

So, we are introduced to a contrast between the OT dispensation characterized by the law and the NT dispensation characterized by the work of the Spirit. We can correlate this with Jer. 31:33-34 and Ezek. 36:25-27, specifically with respect to the inner work of the New Covenant given there and how Christians partake in benefits of the same kind.

What is the connection between verses 2 and 3? The reason the Corinthians are a recommendation letter carried by Paul in his heart is that they themselves were “written” by Christ through the ministry of Paul. Their lives were transformed, and this testimony is what Paul carries in his heart.

Conclusion

Taken together, the three verses forcefully teach that Paul does not need letters of commendation to or from the Corinthians. They themselves are his best recommendation letter because of their conversion at his message, the gospel. Christ wrote the genuine original letter on their hearts, of which the letter on Paul’s heart is a spiritual copy.

Obviously people could read the recommendation on Paul’s ministry just by looking at the work God had done through him in the lives of the believers. However, it is also the case that the life of the believer is an epistle written by Christ. Do the contents of that letter come across with clarity in your life, or they crinkled up? To use a radio analogy, is your life a clear signal or does it have static and interference? Adjust the radio dial! MAP