

Introduction

It is crucial in this passage to see the connection of verses 1-3 with verses 4-6. Recall that in the first three verses, the apostle Paul defends his apostleship by saying that he would not commend himself, nor did he need letters of recommendation from anyone. He had human "letters of commendation" which confirmed his apostleship. His recommendation letter was:

- Carried with him in his heart;
- Known by everyone, not sealed information;
- Written by Christ, not written by some man;
- Based on the work of the Holy Spirit, not based on writing with ink;
- Living and in the heart, not on paper or stone.

However, it was "ministered by us" (v. 3) so that the apostle did do something active in proclaiming the truth to the Corinthians.

A. Confidence in the Ministry, v. 4

Paul was confident about the Corinthian's epistle-status because Jesus Christ gave him that confidence. This was not just a vacuous hope that it was so, but there was a basis for confidence:

1. The knowledge that the message preached was given sincerely, not twisted and peddled for profit like so many other roaming teachers (2:17).
2. The existence of the church at Corinth itself (1 Cor. 9:1-2, besides 3:1-3 earlier).
3. The fact that God is the one doing the work, in this case, on the ministerial side, by qualifying him or making him sufficient for the task.

The phrase "through Christ" indicates the source of this confidence. We can say before (toward) God this is the hope we have. In other words, there is confidence not only *in* God but also *toward* Him, that He will do the work, not only in ourselves, but also (particularly in this case) in those to whom we minister (Php. 1:6, 2 Tim. 1:12, Heb. 12:2).

B. Source of Ministry Sufficiency, v. 5-6a

Some might grouse, "Well, there Paul goes again, commending himself!" To counter that argument, the next verse qualifies and clarifies verse 4. The Bible gives us here a comprehensive statement against the self-sufficient attitude. This helps the reader to avoid thinking that Paul is commending himself in previous verse. He is certainly not doing that.

When something is sufficient, it is all that is necessary. A *sufficient* condition, for instance, is a condition which is enough to make something else true, regardless of any other conditions. If the condition is only a *necessary* condition, more is possibly required to make something true.

We have in this passage the word "sufficient" in adjective, noun, and verb form. The adjective is defined as sufficient, able, or considerable. The noun is fitness, sufficient, or adequacy, capability, or qualification. The verb is to make fit, sufficient or qualify. The word group can mean adequate or competent.

There is not some quality about the apostle that allows him to think that anything sources from himself. The same goes for us. The qualification spoken of here has to do with giftedness to do the job of ministry, that he is equipped to fulfill this role. Paul cannot say *anything* comes from himself, so he does not have any measure of sufficiency in himself. This *anything* includes the ministry that he has had among the Corinthians. He cannot claim credit for himself for any aspect of his ministry. In fact, 2:16 teaches that no one is sufficient to deal in the kind of life-and-death ministry that the gospel is.

You know the ideal "rugged, self-sufficient American," right? Well, there is no such thing! All we have and are is from God (Acts 17:25). Deut. 8:8, 11, 17-18 reminds us that we Americans live in a land like the one of Promise—of wheat and barley and milk and honey. We easily forget that it is God who gives us power to get wealth, not we ourselves.

The Bible enjoins this kind of humble, God-centered attitude in many places:

1. John 15:5 – without Christ we can do nothing.
2. Prov. 6:16-17 - The idea of humility is ever commanded.
3. Rom. 11:36 - There is nothing "from ourselves" because all things are from God." Note the fact that God planned, produced, preserves, and providentially guides all things. There is nothing outside of his control, so we are not in control!
4. Salvation is from God – 1 Cor. 1:30, 1 John 2:29, 5:1.
5. Rom. 15:15-19 –only boast in what Jesus Christ accomplishes through us.
6. 1 Cor. 15:9, 1 Tim. 1:15 – least and worst, unfit as he is for the ministry, yet he is fit because of God.

It is explicitly said in 3:6 that God made us sufficient (past tense). Here is probably an oblique reference to the Damascus Road experience, at which God saved and commissioned Paul for his ministry to the Gentiles. But don't think that the apostle got an injection of "God sufficiency" and then went on his way. Rather, the Bible teaches us that he was initially put into the qualified position, and then could say day by day that his sufficiency presently "is" from God. If God were to take that away, it would be no more.

Character of New Covenant Ministry, v. 6b

The new covenant ministry is what Paul has been doing for, by the time of the writing of 2 Corinthians, about 20 years. That is, the preaching of the gospel of God's grace, commanding men to repent and turn to Christ, informing them of the indwelling Spirit who enables them to please God, the planting NT churches, and so on.

1. The Character of the Old and New

A. Letter. This refers to the 10 commandments which were engraved in the tablets, and more generally to the Mosaic law as a whole. When we use the phrase "the letter of the law" today, we mean something slightly different than "the letter" in this text. The letter in common parlance is the technical details of the law, as opposed to the spirit of the law. Or, it can mean the improper use of the law as opposed to the proper use of it. Here the letter refers to the law itself, not technicalities or wrong usage. Not even proper use of the Mosaic Law within its dispensational context can overcome its inherent limitations.

B. Spirit. A characteristic feature of this age is the distinctive work of the Holy Spirit. Thus we call it the age of the Spirit (also called the church age or dispensation of grace).

These words do not support a spiritual reading of the OT. Rather, taking the OT literally, the OT Law (the letter) is different in character than the later NT dispensation.

2. The Outcomes of the Old and New

A. Kills. What a problem! There was a major defect in law in that it had no provision for ability, transformation or regeneration to cause the Israelites to have the capacity to obey it (Deut 5:29). In fact, Rom. 3:20 tells us this specifically—the purpose of the law was to point out sin, not solve it. Gal 3:10 tells us of the curse of law and how it really only results in the death penalty. And so, the Law was temporary and has now come to end (Gal. 3:19, 24-25, Rom. 10:4).

This is not to say that the law of Moses was bad (only relatively so). In fact, 3:7-11 tell us that it was glorious. Rom. 7:12, 14 say that it is holy, just, good, and spiritual.

B. Gives life. This is the idea that the Spirit grants life – initial, ongoing, and final. He is the life principle.

Conclusion

Nothing comes from ourselves. That should strike a goodly note of humility in our souls. We are not sufficient in ourselves, but we are sufficient as God enables. So the balance exists—we are not nothings, nor are we everything.

These verses form a transition from the defense of Pauline apostleship to his ministry in the new dispensation. In the next studies we will see how superior the NT message of the gospel is compared to the OT ministry of the Law (3:7-11) and then we will study the open (unveiled) NT ministry as compared to the veiled OT ministry (3:12-18). MAP