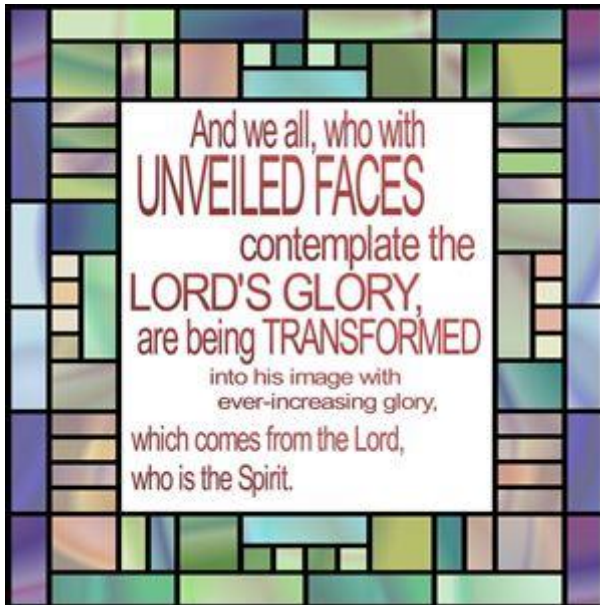


Sunday Evening 1st June 2014, Kenneth Gray. 2 Corinthians 3 “What kind of letter”



A difficulty faced by the New Testament church was that it did not yet have any formal structures or an 'operating manual' for its day-to-day operation. In virtually all modern day branches of the church, in most denominations, ministers/pastors have a licence to preach - they have been 'ordained'. They possess a set of credentials that state they have met a required standard. There is even a process of equivalencing that enables individuals ordained in one country to preach in another. For the early church the only way to verify someone's credentials was to experience them.

Those being challenged by Paul's preaching in Corinth were responding by questioning Paul's right to chastise them. This attitude is observable nowadays too. It is a popularly held view across our

society that 'what I think is as valid as what you think'. This has also crept into church thinking in relation to liturgical, theological and practical issues. But Paul states that some things are true and some are not. This may be easy to say but situations can sometimes colour our judgment.

For example, it will be relatively easy for those who are not tempted by sex to criticise those who are more easily drawn into sexual immorality. Similarly those who are not avaricious will be quick to criticise those who steal money and defraud people. Clearly, it is impossible to run a church without moral absolutes.

Paul tells them that what he says to them is what God is saying '*Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.*' Paul's authority comes from the highest source – God himself. He says that anyone can see or read what he has done by looking at the brethren and how they are behaving as a church. This is quite a risky claim to make as some of the brethren had clearly not really been converted judging by some of the things they were doing!

Kenneth commented that the sad reality is that for the past 100 years the church in the West has been distancing itself from God and has now majored in rules and regulations as a substitute for drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit. Despite Paul's warnings we have become legalistic rather than faithful to the *spirit* of God's laws.

True conversion comes not when we know and believe everything in the Scriptures but when we know Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is living within us.

Paul was very much an old covenant Jew – he loved and affirmed the Old Testament. Here he talks of the old covenant and wishes that God's people had adhered to it '*Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, transitory though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?*' Moses bore the glory of having been in God's presence and that glory should be discernible in us. People should be able to see God dwelling in us, to see the likeness of God in our faces. Strong witnessing begins when people can recognise the Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

'If the ministry that brought condemnation was glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.' The old

covenant encompassed a ministry based on the ten commandments of whose standards we would always fall short. Nor by observance of the commandments would we secure righteousness. Only in Jesus Christ is the old 'veil' removed.

If we do not honour everything God wants us to honour then we are not in Christ. So many who call themselves 'Christians' are not – hence the state of the churches today. Many individuals in positions of authority in the church do not know Christ.

'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' says Paul.

He tells the Corinthian church 'you are my 'letter', my credentials. Through you others will know my ministry.'

A minister's job is to be faithful – it is the Holy Spirit who will do the converting.

This called to mind the missionary, Robert Moffat, a Scottish Congregationalist missionary to Africa, and father-in-law of David Livingstone. He worked faithfully and tirelessly in Africa with poor results in terms of conversions during his lifetime. Yet Africa is currently a continent where the Christian church is experiencing wonderful growth. 'Success' as a minister is to be measured in faithfulness to the Word rather than in actual numbers converted.

As we tell people about our faith we should also pray for them but it is up to the Holy Spirit to convert them.