

Paul was dealing with an extremely frustrating situation when he wrote 2 Corinthians. Because he had spent a lot of time in Corinth preaching the Gospel. In fact, in Acts chapter 18 we are told: "He stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them." Paul rarely stayed anywhere that long. Most of the time he would stay just a little while, a couple of months at most, and then he would go on somewhere else to continue preaching the Gospel. So he put a lot of effort into Corinth. He spent a lot of time there giving them the Word of God.

But after he left, some other teachers came into Corinth. And these other teachers were wandering preachers, men who would go from one town to another preaching about Jesus. That was nothing unusual in these days. But the problem was that these teachers were false teachers. They came saying that in order to be saved you had to live like a Jew. You had to become a Jew if you really wanted to be a Christian. And as a result, they were also saying that Paul was illegitimate. He was not a real apostle, and therefore they shouldn't listen to him. They said he was illegitimate because he was a poor speaker. Maybe Paul had a stutter, or maybe he was afraid of public speaking. We're not really sure what. They said he was illegitimate because he suffered. His life did not seem very successful. Most the time it seems like he was in jail or getting run out of town or even beaten. But most of all, they said that he was illegitimate because he didn't have the right paperwork. He didn't have letters of recommendation that showed that he had the approval of someone else. They said: "We do! We have these glowing letters of recommendation. We'll even show them to you. And they show that we know what we're talking about. Everything's in order. Everything is official. But this Paul, he doesn't have anything like that. In fact, he once persecuted the church. And he's not even one of the original twelve apostles. Nothing about him seems legitimate." "So don't listen to him," they said. "Listen to us instead, because all the paperwork is in order."

That's a very frustrating thing that Paul had to deal with, but what made it more frustrating still was the fact that the Corinthians were listening to them. The Corinthians were convinced that these newcomers actually spoke the truth, that Paul was in fact illegitimate. They were better speakers than him. They had more successful lives than him. And above all, they had all the right paperwork. They had the letters of recommendation which showed that they were legit. And for that reason, they were asking Paul to prove himself, to show that he was in fact a real apostle. And then they would listen to him again. How frustrating that must've been! To labor so long in Corinth, eighteen months, and yet have them turn on him in the end.

But Paul was patient with them. And he showed that he did in fact have a letter of recommendation, one far better than anything that these false teachers had. And that letter of recommendation was them! The Corinthians themselves. Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 3, verse 2: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all." They were the proof that he was a real apostle. And even if they struggled, even if they didn't always live up to what they should be, they were still Christians. And the world around them could see that. They could see that they belonged to Christ. Paul didn't need some kind of written document to show that God had sent him. He had all the proof that he needed in the Corinthians themselves. All that these false teachers had was paper. They had nothing else. They were paper-preachers, at best. But Paul was something more, because he could show it in the lives and the hearts of the Corinthians.

Now, Paul was not boasting the way that the false teachers did. He was not saying, "All of this is true because I'm so great as a preacher." No, he didn't say that at all. Rather, he said these things because his confidence came from God. God used him to do all of these things. God used him to bring the Corinthians to Christ. Because without God, Paul would have nothing. Without God, Paul would be nothing. But in God, Paul became a mighty instrument to bring the Gospel to Corinth and also to all the world. So Paul's ministry was legitimate. He was a real apostle, and they could know that because of the Corinthians themselves.

Now, I recognize that what Paul is talking about here in 2 Corinthians applies mostly to pastors. He's talking about what it means to be in the ministry. But we can also see that these things apply to us when we ask this question: are we just paper-Christians? Just paper-Christians the way that those false teachers were paper-preachers? Because somewhere in the record books of this church, your names are all written down. In the books it says on this date you were baptized. And in the books it says on this date you were confirmed. So that if you were to go to any other church, you would be able to point to those books and say: "See? I'm a member here. I belong here. This is my church." And that's good. We should have those kinds of records. Absolutely. But is that all that you have? Would anybody be able to tell that you are a Christian if you didn't have those records? Would anybody be able to say that you were following Christ if you didn't have it written down? Are you a living letter of recommendation to all the world, or just a paper-Christian rather than a Christian in the heart?

Because if we are paper-Christians like those false teachers were paper-preachers, then our heart has not been changed. Because the Gospel is something within us. It is something which changes us, which makes us into something new. And a paper-Christian is just like the old covenant given on Mount Sinai by Moses. Because when he brought down that covenant from the mountain, it was written, not on paper, but on stone. But because it was written on stone, it was not written in the heart. And because it wasn't written in the heart, the heart was no different. It's kind of like the signs out here by the highway. They tell you what to do, and they want you to follow them. But as soon as we pass them by, we go right back to what we were doing. They don't actually change us in any way. They simply say do this or don't do that, and that's it. Now, of course, the old covenant was not evil. God gave it, after all. And it had its own glory. Moses' face shone like a lightbulb every time he talked with God. It was something good, but it wasn't permanent. Because it was not written down [on the heart], it did not endure. God brought it to an end.

And paper-Christians are the same way. The heart is no different than it was before. There is no difference between us and the world. No one would be able to tell the difference between someone who believed in Christ, or claimed to believe in Christ, and the world if they were just paper-Christians. Because all that you have is the paper. But we need something more than this. We need to be heart-Christians as well.

And we become heart-Christians through Jesus Christ. Because God brought the old covenant to an end, the one which was written on stone. But in its place, he gave us a new covenant, one that Jeremiah talks about in Jeremiah chapter 31, where he says: "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." No longer would God's people be his people only on paper. They would also be his people in the

heart, so that they would seek after him, so that they would strive to follow him with all that they had. Because now the Law is not just a sign telling us what we can and can't do. The Law has been written on the heart. It has changed us from within, so that through the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we are now able to do what God wants us to do. We are now able to follow after him in all things.

And this is so much more glorious than the old, Paul says, because it's permanent. It's something which will never pass away. God brought the old one to an end, just like paper and even stone eventually crumble into nothing. But because the new has been written on the heart, it is eternal, and it will never come to an end.

And when we are heart-Christians, it's something that cannot be hidden. It's something which can be seen by everyone in the world. As Jesus says, you can't hide a city up on top of a hill. It's going to be seen by everyone. When we are heart-Christians, even the worst unbeliever will be able to say: "This one is a Christian. This one belongs to Christ." And in that way, Christians, we become a living letter, a living letter of recommendation, written by Jesus to all the world. A living witness to all those around us.

So Christians, let us not be paper-Christians. Let us turn to Christ who gives us a new heart. And in that way, we become heart-Christians, living letters from Jesus himself. Not letters written with ink on paper only, but living letters written with the Spirit of the living God. And then others will be able to see what we have done and give glory to our Father who is in heaven. So let us be living letters, living witnesses to the world around us through our lives that show that we are a new creation in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have made us new through your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us always to live as you would have us live, so that we may do what is pleasing in your sight and be a living witness to the world around us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.