

Ministers of a New Covenant: A Sermon for Potential Seminarists

2 Corinthians 3: 7-18

The chapters in 2 Corinthians that begin with this evening's lectionary reading have always been one of my favorite selections from Scripture. 2 Corinthians 3-6 contain some of the most beautiful writing in all the Bible. You are no doubt familiar with some of the verses: "The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." Or, "For this momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen." Or again, "For we walk by faith, not by sight." There is also "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

This selection of Scripture is also particularly relevant this evening as I address a chapel full of seminarists and potential seminarists. Why? The context of the entire letter of 2 Corinthians is one long sustained argument that Paul is having with the Corinthians in which he defends his ministry. We know from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians that Paul did not get along well with this church, and that there were those who challenged his ministerial credentials. Under similar circumstances, we ourselves might well be tempted to respond with an outburst of temper: "Because I'm the apostle, and you're not! That's why!" There is a little of that toward the end of the letter when Paul warns them: "What we say by letter when absent, we do when present." (2 Cor. 10:11) So, the Daddy apostle is coming home, and boy are you going to get it!<more/>But, Paul is, after all, Paul. And Paul is nothing

if not a theologian. So before Paul warns them at the end of the letter that if they don't straighten up, they will be sorry, Paul does what Paul does. He theologizes. And for this we can be grateful, because Paul defends his ministry by a theological reflection on ministry that contains these wonderful three chapters from chapter three through chapter six. In this selection, Paul provides some of his most profound insights on the meaning of redemption and Christian life. The heart of Paul's defense of his ministry is that as an apostle, he is a minister of God's new covenant in Christ Jesus, a covenant written not in the stone letters of the ten commandments, but in letters of love written by the Holy Spirit on human hearts.

Paul begins his reflection in the passage that we read this evening by making three contrasts: he contrasts two divine ministries, two divine covenants, and two divine glories. Briefly, how does he make his argument?

First, two divine ministries. In defending his ministry, and by extension, all Christian ministries, Paul decides not to mess around with second-stringers like some of his opponents at Corinth. Paul decides to compare himself with Moses. Paul uses the word diakonia (from which we get our word "deacon") to describe what our English translations give us as "ministry." Paul says that Moses' ministry is a diakonia of death, carved in letters of stone. In contrast, Paul claims that his own ministry as an apostle of Jesus Christ is that of a diakonia of the Spirit, carved not on tablets of stone, but in the words of verse 3, the tablets of human hearts. In verse 6, Paul says that the letter (carved in stone) kills, but the Spirit gives life. In verse 9, Paul says that the ministry of Moses is a diakonia of condemnation, while his own ministry is a diakonia of righteousness. So, while Moses' diakonia leads to death, Paul's diakonia, the diakonia of the Spirit, gives life. While Moses' diakonia leads to condemnation, Paul's diakonia leads to righteousness.

Second, two divine covenants. In verses 14 and 15, Paul has the parallel phrases "when they read Moses" and "when they read the old covenant." In verse 6, he says that God has "made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit."

Paul is echoing two passages of Hebrew Scripture here: the story of Moses delivering the law on stone tablets in Exodus 34, and Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31. As with his discussion of the law in Romans 7, Paul's point is not that God's covenant with the Hebrew people was a bad thing. The problem is not with the law, which was written on stone tablets, but with the hearers of the law, who don't fulfill it. John Chrysostom notes that Paul does not say that the law causes death, but that it is a "ministry of death."—it "ministers" death. It is sin, says Chrysostom, that causes death. The law reveals evil, and the sin that causes it. The law does not encourage us to sin, but it does bring our sin to light. Paul echoes Jeremiah's claim that only a covenant that is written on human hearts can result in heart-felt obedience.

Third, two divine glories. Paul here echoes the numerous passages in the Pentateuch that refer to the divine glory—the shekinah—that appeared when the divine cloud descended on Sinai or in the tent in the wilderness. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the copy of the ten commandments—he broke the first tablets after the Golden Calf incident—Exodus says that his face shined because he had been talking with God. Moses then put a veil over his face to hide the divine glory just as the tent of Israel hid the divine glory when the cloud would descend on it.

Paul contrasts this glory of the diakonia of Sinai with the new glory of the diakonia of the Spirit. Paul finds two weaknesses in the glory of God revealed to Moses at Sinai. First, it was a glory that needed to be hidden. Moses had to wear a veil to cover it up. Paul says that even today, apart from the Spirit, there is a veil that lies over the reading of

the old covenant. Second, it is a fading glory, a glory that was being brought to an end. Paul actually goes so far as to claim that Moses wore the veil to prevent the Israelites from seeing the fading of the glory.

Again, Paul's point is not that there is something wrong with the glory revealed to Moses, but that the glory of the new covenant far surpasses it. As Paul writes: "What once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it." (v. 10)

What is this glory of the new covenant that so surpasses the fading glory of the old one? First, and foremost, Paul make it clear that the answer is Jesus. More specifically, Paul answers that the glory of the Lord, the glory that had appeared on Sinai, has now appeared definitively in Jesus Christ. In verse 4 of the next chapter, Paul refers to "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God."

Second, where God's glory in the old covenant had been hidden behind a veil, now, says Paul, through Jesus, that veil has been removed. Paul echoes the passage from Exodus when he says that "When one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." As Moses removed the veil whenever he entered the tabernacle, so through Christ, the veil hiding God's glory has now been removed for us. Paul speaks of us all, "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord."

Third, where the divine glory of Sinai had been temporary, the new glory that has appeared in Jesus will never end. Paul says: "For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory."

And, finally, the glory of the new diakonia is superior to the glory of the old diakonia because Jesus Christ, through the Spirit, fulfills Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant by writing a letter not on tablets of stone but in human hearts.

This, I think, is extremely important in this time of Lent. Reformation Christians often focus on the new covenant as the forgiveness of sin, freedom from the condemnation of the law. As Paul says in Romans, "There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8: 1) Paul does use that language here when he contrasts the diakonia of righteousness with the diakonia of condemnation. But Paul says something else as well. Paul says in this chapter that grace is effective—that through the presence of the Spirit, grace is not only forgiveness but change. The Lord to whom we now turn with vision unveiled by Christ, Paul says, is the Spirit, and "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." "And we all," says Paul, "beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." As Paul says in the next chapter, the God who said "Let light shine out of darkness has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (4:6) As God's glory shines in our hearts, we will be changed to be like Christ, who is the image of that glory.

In conclusion, I would like to make a few points that might help in your own ministry. First, how does Paul defend his ministry? As are we all, Paul might well have been tempted to point to his authority, to his effectiveness. Instead, he points directly to Christ. Paul claims no glory in himself or in his ministry. It is in Jesus Christ, and in him alone that we know God's glory.

Second, Paul does not browbeat his opponents; nor does he give them moralistic exhortations to improve—at least not yet. There is certainly some of that later in the letter. But first he reminds them of the good news of God in Christ—that Paul's diakonia is not a message of condemnation, but a gospel—good news written not on tablets of stone, but in their own hearts.

Finally, Paul gives hope to his opponents. He does not compare their failures to the excellencies of his own ministry as an

apostle. Nor does he browbeat them with their own bad performance. Nor does he give them moral exhortation. Rather, he encourages them to look to Christ. And he promises them that as they look to the one who bears the glory of the image of God, that the veil that stands between them and God's glory is removed. As they do so, the Spirit who is the Spirit of freedom will write his letter on their hearts, and they will be changed. They will become like the one who bears the image of the glory of God. And his light will shine in their hearts.

That, of course, will be the message you will preach to in your own ministries—your diakonia. Look to Christ. Trust in his forgiveness. Allow his light to shine in your hearts through his Spirit so that you might reflect his glory. Amen.