

God's Credentials for Church Leaders

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You are our letter, written in our hearts and known and read by everyone. You are demonstrating that you are Christ's letter, produced by our service, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Corinthians 3:2,3)

What is it that really makes a person fit for the ministry of the Gospel? What credentials should a pastor have? Which certificates or papers or letters of recommendation should a pastor have to prove that he is suitable for the work of God?

We know that churches often want to consider the credentials of pastors, particularly when they are either seeking a new pastor or handling some problem surrounding a pastor. What are the credentials that should be considered?

People always have placed, and probably always will, some confidence in letters of reference or certificates, diploma or degree papers or testimonials with specific stamps on them. Yet we know testimonials are often exaggerated and diploma and degree papers can even be falsified or forged. They are not always accurate or truthful.

Even very recently we have had several examples of people in high governmental positions who claimed to have doctor's degrees, and now it has been discovered that they are not competent to do their work and have produced fake papers.

Many people also have the idea that wearing certain clothes is the best way to prove that people are highly qualified. They say that if the students of a college or university do not wear grand robes at their graduation ceremonies, such institutions are not of a high standard – as if a piece of cloth can guarantee the content of learning that has been offered. There are also people of certain churches that will not accept the words of a pastor or bishop if he does not wear a stunning gown or uniform. What is it that really makes a person fit for the ministry of the Gospel?

Background of 2 Corinthians 3

2 Corinthians 3 gives a unique answer to this question.

The background of 2 Corinthians 3 is that there were people in the Corinthian church who accused Paul of pride and arrogance. There were others who accused him of not being as learned as the Greek philosophers and of not having their deep kind of wisdom.

Paul declared that he did not corrupt the Word of God as many do, and that his ministry was based upon a true call of God (2 Cor. 2:17). He knew that those who opposed him were going to jump on this claim and again accuse him of being not really fit for the ministry. That is why he dealt with the question. This question is extremely relevant for you and me, for any person who wants to enter into the pastoral ministry, or for anyone who wants to become better equipped for the work of the ministry of the Gospel in some way.

Very simply, the question in 2 Corinthians 3 is this: Why should the Corinthians or anyone else listen to the words of a pastor? What credentials should he have that would cause people to listen to him and his message?

God Values Love Letters in your Heart

In answering the question and in establishing his credentials, Paul makes it very clear that the things God wants to see are not in the first place letters of commendation, certificates, or diploma or degree papers. What God appreciates as important is not a letter of reference, but something of far more value. God does not primarily look at our papers; He looks into our hearts. He wants to see whether we have such

deep love for Him and the people to whom we are ministering that they – the people – are written like letters in our hearts.

Look how clearly Paul stresses it in verse 2: “You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts” Paul actually says that the Corinthian believers were written upon his heart. Anyone who knew him could see that he deeply cared for the Corinthian church, that he was always praying for them and expressing love and concern for them. He cherished them. They were dear to him, so dear that he could actually say that they were *written in his heart*.

Thus God makes it clear to us in this passage: the first credential of the pastor is the human lives written upon his heart. The people to whom you and I are ministering are much more important than our diplomas or degrees or other papers or gowns or robes. The day when we as pastors die and stand before God, he is not going to ask us: “Let me see your diplomas and degree papers.” No! He is going to ask: “Where are the people I have given to you to minister to? Are they really in your heart?”

The point is this: people are far more important than papers. A pastor's commendation is not letters or certificates of recommendation, but a heart . . .

- that has people written upon it.
- that endears people to itself.
- that loves and cares for people.
- that deeply feels for people.
- that cannot let people go.
- that must reach and grow people for Christ.

The work of a godly pastor amongst the people where he is ministering should prove that he has such an overruling love for them that he could also say to them as the Apostle Paul said to the Corinthians:

- in 2 Corinthians 6:11: “We have opened wide our hearts to you”
- or as in 2 Corinthians 7:3: “. . . you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you.”
- or with 12:15: “. . . I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.”

The Source of the Godly Pastor's Love for the Church

You know, if you read in this letter how often Paul tells the Corinthian church how much he loved them, you could perhaps get the impression that Corinth must have been a fantastic congregation that served their pastor very well. Perhaps they paid him a high salary? Perhaps they happily accepted all his teachings? Perhaps they had great respect for him?

The amazing thing was that of all the churches where Paul worked, Corinth was the problem church. In 2 Corinthians 6:12, he says that they were closing their heart to him and were withholding their affection from him. It was in fact a church that could not manage to pay him any salary so that he had to work with his own hands and make tents to raise some money to feed himself.

What was it then that stirred up such a glowing and self-sacrificing love in his heart for this church? He gives the answer in 2 Corinthians 5:14, where he says that *Christ's love compelled* him, because he came to the understanding that Christ died for him. Yes, he says, Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for Him who died for them and was raised again (2 Cor. 5:15).

Only if we are so deeply touched by the love of Christ that we are now willing to give ourselves wholeheartedly to Christ and His cause, are we really qualified to be regarded as real pastors who are called by God. If we think of the love of Christ dying on the cross for us and we sing with Isaac Watts, "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all", then we have the basic qualifications to be pastors. Someone who does not have a glowing love for Jesus Christ is not qualified for the ministry, even if he has the most impressive diplomas and degrees or gowns and robes. That is why Jesus also asked Peter three times, "Do you love me? Do you love me more than the other people here", before He gave him the charge to feed His sheep.

Let us answer that same question afresh today: "Do you truly love Jesus?" If you as a pastoral student truly love Jesus Christ, you will love people and have the desire to bind them to Christ. If we as lecturers truly love Christ, we should love the students and have a deep desire to draw them even closer to Christ.

Look how Paul does it with the church of Corinth according to 2 Corinthians 11:2 in saying to them: "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him."

Changed Lives of People

Paul also makes it clear that he had gone to Corinth to minister to the people, and some had been reached and others had grown in the Lord. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 he mentions how sinful some of them were before their conversion. He mentions sexually immoral people, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, homosexual offenders, thieves, greedy people, drunkards, slanderers, swindlers and then says: "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor. 6:11) Their testimony of transformed lives was his letter of commendation, and their testimony before the world was far more important than a letter of commendation.

We must always remember that a pastor's greatest commendation is the changed lives of people. The fact that a pastor has led people to Christ and grown them in Christ speaks far more than any other letters of commendation.

Transformed Lives Become Open Letters to the World

Paul makes it clear that if a pastor loves his people with the love of Christ and faithfully ministers Christ to them, the members of the church become letters not only in the heart of their pastor but open letters that will also be read by the unbelievers. Believers are said to be "read by all men". Day by day believers must be careful what they write by their lives, for the public is closely observing and reading exactly what they do.

Therefore, the second credential of the pastor is the lives written by Christ *through the ministry of* the pastor. This is a critical point to note, for the pastor is not the one who converts and changes the lives of people. It is Christ and Christ alone through His Holy Spirit who converts and grows people. The lives of believers are said to be "the epistle [letter] of Christ." Christ is the author of the believer's life, the author of his conversion and righteousness. Whatever change is wrought in the believer's life – whatever love, joy, peace, and assurance of life – is all due to Christ. The lives of believers are not written with ink which men use, but with the *Spirit of the living God*.

When the pastor faithfully and lovingly preaches Christ, the Spirit of God does not write the message upon tables of stone, as He did when He gave the commandments to Moses, but upon the fleshy tables of men's hearts. He puts His message upon the hearts of men which causes men to live changed lives.

Paul is saying that Christ creates the letter, the lives of believers, using the pastor's ministry as an instrument. It is the pastor who ministers to the lives of believers. Thus, the greatest credential that a pastor can have is not letters of recommendation, but . . .

- Christ written in the lives of people.
- the Spirit of the living God written in the conduct and behavior of people.
- the law of God written upon the hearts of people.

Such people come face to face with Christ. This means that the believer is given the privilege of standing face to face with Christ, the privilege of knowing Christ personally and learning all about Him. There is no veil over the face or eyes of the believer, nothing to keep him from knowing the Lord. Then God receives glory through the ministry of the faithful pastor, because when the believer beholds (grasps, understands, studies, lays hold of) the glory of the Lord, the same glory is created in him. When the believer beholds the glory of the Lord, the believer progresses and grows from one stage of glory to a higher stage. Look how the passage ends: "We who reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

The outstanding characteristic of a Christian is this unveiled frankness before God so that his or her life mirrors Christ for other lives. By being filled with the Spirit, we are transformed and become mirrors. You always know when a person has been beholding the glory of the Lord; you feel in your inner spirit that this person is the mirror of the Lord's own character.



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