

GOD HAS MADE US SUFFICIENT TO MINISTER
CAMPBELL BAPTIST CHURCH (07/26/2015)

Idolatry, theft, greed, sexual immorality, alcoholism, fraud, deception, adultery, homosexuality, scorn, abuse: in a world full of unrighteousness, how can we be confident that our ministry will yield any real life-changing results? The short answer is because Paul's did. Consider what he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 9 to 11:

[D]o you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. 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.

How did Paul's ministry succeed in bringing about these changed lives? That's a good question, a good question that our text for this morning addresses. If you haven't done so already, I invite you to open your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 3—2 Corinthians chapter 3 and we're going to look at verses 4 to 6. If you're using one of the Bibles provided in the pew rack in front of you, you'll be able to find our text on page 965. That's 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 4 to 6:

⁴Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, ⁶who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

Notice how Paul begins by talking about the confidence he has through Christ, confidence that the change he could see in the Corinthians' lives was owing to his ministry among them. Remember verses 1 to 3? "You yourselves are *our* letter of recommendation." Paul was confident that his ministry was yielding results—life

changing results—and, as such, we can be sure that he pressed on *in that confidence* continuing to preach the gospel wherever he went; but what about you? What about me?

Do we have confidence through Christ that our ministry will yield life changing results? We should. According to the Bible, we should. So let's look, again, at our text and see what reasons we have for confidence in Christian ministry. There are two.

First, we can have confidence that our ministry will yield life changing results because our sufficiency is from God and not from ourselves.

Second, we can have confidence that our ministry will yield life changing results because we are ministering the new covenant, a covenant that gives life not death.

As verse 5 says, “Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant.” Did you hear that? God can make you sufficient for whatever ministry he calls you to. Are you an elder? Are you a parent? Are you a Sunday School teacher or a small group Bible study leader? God can make you sufficient for the task. Not that you're sufficient in yourself to claim anything as coming from you, but your sufficiency is from God and so all the glory goes to him.

I think of Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary in China. When he first arrived in Macau on September 4, 1807, after 113 days at sea, he presented his letters of introduction to some of leading Englishmen and Americans there. Although they were quick to welcome him, Morrison needed a bold heart as they were also quick to tell him of all the apparently hopeless obstacles that stood in the way of him accomplishing his mission. First of all, Chinamen were forbidden by the Government to teach the language to any one under penalty of death. Secondly, no one could remain in China except for purposes of trade. Thirdly, the Roman Catholic missionaries at Macau, who were protected by the Portuguese, would be bitterly hostile, and stir up the people against a Protestant

missionary. When asked, shortly after his arrival in China, if he expected to have any spiritual impact on the Chinese, he answered, “No sir, but I expect God will!”

No sir, but I expect God will!

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

— Isaiah 55 vv. 10 & 11

Any success we have in ministry comes from God. Let me say that again. Any success we have in ministry comes from God—why?—because any sufficiency we have *for* ministry comes from God. As Oswald Chambers once said,

GOD CAN ACHIEVE HIS PURPOSE EITHER THROUGH THE ABSENCE OF HUMAN POWER AND RESOURCES, OR THE ABANDONMENT OF RELIANCE UPON THEM. ALL THROUGH HISTORY GOD HAS CHOSEN AND USED NOBODIES, BECAUSE THEIR UNUSUAL DEPENDENCE ON HIM MADE POSSIBLE THE UNIQUE DISPLAY OF HIS POWER AND GRACE. THINK JARS OF CLAY. HE CHOSE AND USED SOMEBODIES ONLY WHEN THEY RENOUNCED DEPENDENCE ON THEIR NATURAL ABILITIES AND RESOURCES AND RELIED SOLELY ON HIM].¹

So, rejoice, elder; rejoice, parent; rejoice, Sunday School teacher; you don't need to be sufficient in and of yourself for the role you find yourself in. In fact, it's actually a detriment if you are. Your ministry will yield life changing results because your sufficiency is from God, not from yourself.

That's the first reason you can have confidence.

¹ Oswald Chambers, “Man’s Weakness—God’s Strength,” *Missionary Crusader* (December 1964), 7 as quoted by R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 69.

The second reason you can have confidence is because you are a minister of the new covenant, a covenant that gives life not death.

Look again at verse 6: “who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Twice, here, Paul contrasts the letter with the Spirit, the letter of the law versus the Holy Spirit of grace. Think, again, of our call to worship:

Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the letter (Romans 7:4-6).

According to Paul, the letter kills. Our sinful passions, aroused by the law, work in our members to bear fruit for death. That’s how it works. And, as Jason Meyer says, the law’s ability and propensity to kill was there from the very beginning. Two pieces of evidence:

FIRST, EXODUS CONFIRMS WHAT PAUL SAYS, BECAUSE KILLING (SAME WORD IN EXODUS AND 2 CORINTHIANS) IS LITERALLY THE FIRST THING THAT HAPPENS WHEN MOSES BRINGS THE LAW DOWN FROM MT. SINAI. ISRAEL BROKE THE COVENANT WHEN THEY WORSHIPPED THE GOLDEN CALF. THE RESULT WAS THAT THE LEVITES WERE COMMANDED TO KILL SOME OF THE ISRAELITES (3000 PEOPLE DIED THAT DAY—EXODUS 32:27-28).

SECOND, THE REST OF ISRAEL’S OWN HISTORY SHOWS THAT THE LAW DID NOT SOLVE THEIR PROBLEMS; IT EXACERBATED THEM. THE CENTRALITY OF THE LAW COMES INTO VIEW BECAUSE OF THE LITERARY STRATEGY OF PLACING SIMILAR EVENTS BEFORE AND AFTER THE GIVING OF THE LAW AT MT. SINAI. GRUMBLING AT THE START OF THEIR JOURNEY RESULTS IN NO PUNISHMENT (EXODUS 15:22-26) BEFORE SINAI, BUT THE SAME BEHAVIOUR AFTER SINAI RESULTS IN DESTROYING FIRE (NUMBERS 10:33—11:3). GRUMBLING OVER THE MANNA AND THE QUAIL LED TO NO PUN-

ISHMENT BEFORE SINAI (EXODUS 16:1-15) AND A KILLING PLAGUE AFTER SINAI (NUMBERS 11:4-8). A SABBATH VIOLATION RESULTED IN A REPRIMAND BEFORE SINAI (EXODUS 16:27-30) AND DEATH BY STONING AFTER SINAI (NUMBERS 15:32-36). GRUMBLING OVER WATER LED TO NO PUNISHMENT BEFORE SINAI (EXODUS 17:1-7) AND A DESTROYING FIRE AFTER SINAI (NUMBERS 20:2-13). THE DIFFERENCES ARE SO STAGGERING THAT IT IS HARD TO ESCAPE THE DIRE CONCLUSION THAT “SINAI DOES SOMETHING PROFOUNDLY NEGATIVE TO ISRAEL.”²

But, my friends, that was the Old Covenant. We’re not ministers of the Old Covenant. We’re ministers of the new covenant. We don’t preach law, at least not the law as written on tablets of stone, exterior to us, telling us, “Do this and live” and we say, “We can’t do that.” No, we preach the Spirit who writes the law on tablets of fleshly human hearts so that we can perform it. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. So the question then is, “How do we get the Holy Spirit?” How? Peter answers this question, saying, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Repent. Turn from your sin and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ—in other words, identify with him by faith in his death, burial, and resurrection—and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Now, having heard that, think, again, of Isaiah 55:11. “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” If God sent his word about receiving the Holy Spirit in response to repentance and faith and his word, as it goes out, succeeds in the thing for which it is sent, then we can be sure that as we preach that word some will come to repentance and faith, receive the Holy Spirit and be given new life.

It’s just that simple. We can have confidence that our ministry will yield life changing results because we are ministering the *new* covenant, a covenant that says you can receive the Holy Spirit who gives life rather than death because he writes the law on your heart.

BACK IN AUGUST 1955 CANON H. K. LUCE OF DURHAM WROTE A

² Jason Meyer, “The Sufficiency of the Spirit,” sermon preached 17 August 2013 at Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN <http://www.hopeingod.org/sermon/sufficiency-spirit> accessed 21 July 2015.

LETTER TO *THE TIMES* DEPLORING BILLY GRAHAM'S RECENT INVITATION TO PREACH AT CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY. BILLY GRAHAM'S APPROACH, HE ARGUED, WOULD BE "UNTHINKABLE BEFORE A UNIVERSITY AUDIENCE ... IT WOULD BE LAUGHED OUT OF COURT." THIS OF COURSE PROVIDED A LONG AND LIVELY CORRESPONDENCE IN ENGLAND'S GREAT NEWSPAPER.

THOUGH BILLY, AGE THIRTY-SIX, WAS UNUSUALLY EXPERIENCED, THE THOUGHT OF CONDUCTING A MISSION AT CAMBRIDGE WEIGHTED HEAVILY UPON HIM. HIS BIOGRAPHER WILLIAM MARTIN NOTES:

GRAHAM, EVER INSECURE ABOUT HIS LACK OF ADVANCED THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION, DREADED THE MEETINGS AND FEARED THAT A POOR SHOWING MIGHT DO SERIOUS HARM TO HIS MINISTRY AND AFFECT 'WHICH WAY THE TIDE WILL TURN IN BRITAIN.' HAD HE BEEN ABLE TO DO SO WITHOUT A COMPLETE LOSS OF FACE, HE WOULD HAVE CANCELED THE MEETINGS OR PERSUADED SOME BETTER-QUALIFIED MAN TO REPLACE HIM.

AND, INDEED, BILLY, WRITING IN HIS OWN BIOGRAPHY FORTY YEARS LATER, QUOTES HIS OWN PERSONAL LETTER TO JOHN STOTT THAT CONFIRMS HIS TREPIDATION:

I HAVE BEEN DEEPLY CONCERNED AN IN MUCH THOUGHT ABOUT OUR CAMBRIDGE MISSION THIS AUTUMN. ... I DO NOT KNOW THAT I HAVE EVER FELT MORE INADEQUATE AND TOTALLY UNPREPARED FOR A MISSION. AS I THINK OVER THE POSSIBILITY FOR MESSAGES, I REALIZE HOW SHALLOW AND WEAK MY PRESENTATIONS ARE. IN FACT, I WAS SO OVERWHELMED WITH MY UNPREPAREDNESS THAT I ALMOST DECIDED TO CANCEL MY APPEARANCE, BUT BECAUSE PLANS HAVE GONE SO FAR PERHAPS IT IS BEST TO GO THROUGH WITH IT. ... HOWEVER, IT IS MY PRAYER THAT I SHALL COME IN THE DEMONSTRATION AND POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

THUS THE GREAT EVANGELIST CHRONICLED HIS WEAKNESS AND HIS NEED OF THE SPIRIT'S POWER. BILLY'S ARRIVAL IN CAMBRIDGE WAS UNSETTLING. THE OPENING NIGHT OF THE CAMBRIDGE MISSION WAS SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 6, THE DAY AFTER GUY FAWKES DAY, A DAY OF FIREWORKS, BONFIRES, AND GENERAL REVELRY. AS BILLY SPOKE TO HIS TEAM IN THE DEBATING HALL OF THE UNION, A FIRECRACKER WAS TOSSED THROUGH AN OPEN WINDOW DESPITE A STRONG POLICE PRESENCE AROUND THE BUILDING. BILLY ALSO MET WITH C. S. LEWIS, NEWLY ARRIVED IN CAMBRIDGE, AND THE CONVERSATION WENT WELL, THOUGH LEWIS'S PARTING REMARK WAS UNSETTLING: "YOU KNOW YOU HAVE MANY CRITICS, BUT I

HAVE NEVER MET ONE OF YOUR CRITICS WHO KNOWS YOU PERSONALLY.”
HAD LEWIS MET ANYONE WHO KNEW BILLY PERSONALLY?

THE MEETINGS WERE HELD IN GREAT ST. MARY’S, THE UNIVERSITY CHURCH IN THE EPICENTRE OF CAMBRIDGE. AND AS YOUNG BILLY SAT IN HIS GENEVA GOWN AND DOCTORAL HOOD, EVERY GALLERY AND NICHE OF THE CHURCH WAS OCCUPIED.

GRAHAM PREACHED FOR THREE NIGHTS, BUT THE RESULTS WERE MOD-EST. HIS SERMONS WERE, BY HIS OWN ESTIMATION, TOO ACADEMIC. HE KNEW THAT HE WAS NOT GETTING THROUGH TO THE STUDENTS’ HEARTS. HE FELT HE WAS PREACHING TO PLEASE HIS AUDIENCE RATHER THAN THE HOLY SPIRIT. SO BILLY GRAHAM SOUGHT THE LORD.

THEN CAME THE BREAKTHROUGH. FOLLOWING HIS THIRD SERMON, THE DAY AFTER HIS THIRTY-SEVENTH BIRTHDAY, BILLY GRAHAM SET ASIDE HIS UNIVERSITY-FOCUSED SERMONS AND PREACHED TO ORDINARY HUMAN SOULS. BILLY GRAHAM’S WEAKNESS PLUS THE ALL-SUFFICIENT, TRANSFORMING GOSPEL OF THE NEW COVENANT PLUS HIS DEPENDENCE UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT WROUGHT A MIGHTY MINISTRY IN CAMBRIDGE. AFTERWARD JOHN STOTT WROTE HIS PRAYING CONGREGATION, “HIS-TORY WILL BEGIN TO SHOW, BUT ONLY ETERNITY WILL FINALLY REVEAL, HOW MUCH WAS ACCOMPLISHED DURING THAT WEEK.”³

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

3 R. Kent Hughes, *2 Corinthians: Power in Weakness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 73-74.

