

## **Unapologetically Apologetic**

### **2 Corinthians 3**

One of the growing realities we're facing in our part of the world is opposition to Christianity – our beliefs, our practices, our worldview, and way of life. We see this opposition more and more in media, public policy, and even some personal encounters, often from our very own family members. A growing number of people want to discredit Christians and Christianity – to silence us and push us into a quiet little corner where we don't make any noise.

And to do this, people are going to try to discredit your testimony and character as well as the reliability of what you believe. What are you going to do when that happens? Will you be able to answer them?

Whether we like it or not, the world we live in is forcing us to have to grow in the area of Christian apologetics. What's that? It sounds like it has to do with making an apology or something, but it's actually quite the opposite. Apologetics isn't about apologizing for what you believe, it's about defending your faith and being able to explain what God has done in your life and why you believe what you believe. That's Christian apologetics and based on the direction things are going in our world, we need to learn to be "unapologetically apologetic." It's a little play on words, but I hope you get what I mean.

We need to learn how to be confident in our beliefs and testimony. Not arrogant or prideful, as if we're better than anybody else, but confident and unashamed in what we believe. How well do you know what you believe? If someone were to question your testimony, would you be able to stand your ground and confidently explain what God has done in your life? If someone were to ask you tough questions about Christianity and what you believe, would you know how to answer them? Times are coming where we're likely going to face this more often and it would be good if we were prepared.

Though new for us, there's nothing new about having to defend the faith. This has been a part of Christianity from the very beginning. And in our passage for today, we're going to see an example of apologetics from the Apostle Paul. Based on his example, we're going to see two basic things we need to know how to do.

We are going to cover 2 Corinthians 3 today, and I struggled to make sense of it for a few days until I started to piece together what must have been going on behind the scenes. Once I read the chapter in light of the opposition Paul was facing from false teachers in Corinth, it made a lot more sense. So I want to share briefly about the kind of opposition I think he was facing related to what he writes in this chapter, and then we'll look at the chapter itself.

Based on what he writes, it sounds like there must have been some false teachers present that were trying to discredit him and the message he was preaching. It appears that they had a Jewish background and were trying to get the Corinthian believers to turn away from Paul's preaching that centered on the new covenant, or the gospel. They seem to have been elevating the importance of the old covenant and were trying to get the Corinthians to turn to the teachings of Judaism. To do this, they were questioning Paul's authenticity as a messenger of God and questioning his teachings of the new covenant which he had brought to them and founded the church upon. So in this chapter Paul is defending both his ministry and his message, which give us an early example of Christian apologetics. Let's read the first part and see what he's doing.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:1-6.

*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? <sup>2</sup>You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. <sup>3</sup>And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.*

*<sup>4</sup>Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup>Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup>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.*

The questions he begins with assume there was going to be resistance to what he wrote at the end of chapter 2 and accusations of being self-authenticating as a messenger of God. He just wrote about the incredible importance of his ministry – he and his team were spreading the fragrance of

the knowledge of Christ everywhere they went – a fragrance that led to eternal life or death to everyone they shared with. This was a calling of eternal weight and importance that God had assigned and commissioned them to do.

Now as he begins chapter 3, it's as if he realizes there would be people in Corinth who would criticize him for writing that and try to discredit him by accusing him of being self-promoting and self-authenticating. So he heads off those accusations at the beginning of this chapter by asking a couple of questions: "*Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you?*"

The implied answers to both questions are: "No! They aren't just commending themselves and they don't need a letter of recommendation." He tells them to look at the most obvious evidence, which was what happened to them. They were the proof that he had been commissioned by God to be his messenger. He was the founding missionary of the church in Corinth and it was obvious that the Holy Spirit had worked through his ministry. The very fact that they existed as a church was all Paul needed to confirm to them or to any other church that he was commissioned by God. So he wasn't just commending himself and he didn't need a letter of recommendation – they were the only letter he needed.

In verse 4 he goes on to say that what happened to them was what made him confident in what he was doing in gospel ministry – not that he took any credit for himself, it was God who worked through him and his team and gave them everything they needed to do what he called them to do. God was the one who called, empowered, and sent them to be the ministers of the new covenant.

Paul had a clear understanding of how God had called him and was working in his life so that when that was called into question, he was able to give a confident answer. That's apologetics – being able to defend your faith and testify to what God has done in your life.

Are you able to do that? If someone was to accuse you of being a fraud, and say that your Christianity is just empty religion, would you be able to prove that isn't true? Do you know how to share the story of what God has done in your life in a humble but confident way? That's something that all of us need to be able to do. So that's the first part of apologetics that we see in this

chapter. The second part is in the second half and has to do with defending the gospel – defending the teachings of Christianity.

At the end of verse 6 Paul makes a bold statement about the new covenant, or gospel which he was teaching, in contrast to the old covenant which is presumably what the false teachers were trying to promote. He says, “*For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*” The “letter” is a reference to the law of Moses which was central to Judaism, and Paul says it “kills.” It leads to death. But the Spirit, which is central to the gospel, gives life. So he criticizes the old covenant as a means of salvation and elevates the new. And he continues to do that throughout the rest of the chapter. What he’s doing is defending his beliefs and teachings. He’s defending the gospel, or the “new covenant” as he calls it in this context. Let’s see how he does that.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:7-11.

*Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end,<sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory?<sup>9</sup> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.<sup>11</sup> For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.*

In these verses Paul is declaring the superiority of the glory of the new covenant over the old. He says that when the old covenant was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the glory of God illuminated the face of Moses. But as soon as Moses left the presence of God to minister to the people, that glory began to fade. The glory of the old covenant would come to an end and be surpassed by the glory of the new covenant.

The new covenant was superior to the old. Paul says the old covenant was the ministry of death, but the new was the ministry of the Spirit. The old was the ministry of condemnation, the new is the ministry of righteousness. The old was being brought to an end, the new is permanent. The glory of the new far exceeded and surpassed the glory of the old so that what once had glory has come to have no glory at all.

Paul is not usually this critical of the old covenant unless, like we see here, he's defending the teachings of the new, which is the gospel. The old covenant had a very important place in God's plan of redemption, but now that the new had come, the old was gone and it was time to move on. So Paul is confidently defending Christianity and making a clear case as to why it is to be sought after instead of Judaism. He continues in the last part of chapter 3.

Read 2 Corinthians 3:12-18.

*Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, <sup>13</sup> not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.*

Here he explains three things. First, he explains that it was because of their hope in the permanence and superiority of the new covenant that Paul and his team were very bold as ministers of the new covenant. Far different than Moses, the minister of the old covenant, who would put a veil over his face after meeting with God because the glory from being with God would fade and be a sobering reminder that the old covenant was insufficient and would come to an end.

Second, he explains why the Jews still relied on the old covenant, even though it was obsolete, including the false teachers who were trying to influence the Corinthians. Their minds were hardened and they had a spiritual veil over their eyes. They were spiritually blind. The only way they could see is if they turned to Jesus, and until then, they'd be hard hearted and opposed to the gospel/new covenant.

The third thing he explains is why Christians aren't like them anymore – it's because when they turned to the Lord, the veil was removed and they could see. The Holy Spirit opened their eyes and set them free from spiritual blindness and bondage to the old covenant. When the veil is removed, we are

able to behold the glory of the Lord, just like Moses did, and as we see him and know him we are being transformed more and more into his likeness.

So here again Paul is articulating what he believes and confirming it with real life experiences, continuing to make his case for why the new covenant is superior to the old – why the gospel of Jesus is superior to Judaism. He was confidently defending his beliefs. He was unapologetically apologetic.

And again I ask, are you able to do the same? Are you able to explain why Christianity is superior to other religions? And why Jesus is the only way to salvation? Are you able to explain what salvation is and what we all need to be saved from? Do you understand the basic message of the Bible well enough to contrast it with the false beliefs that are circulating all around us, even those that claim to be part of Christianity? I'm reminded of Dave Fish who used to say: "You've got to know what you believe."

So Paul gives us a great example in this chapter of what I think all of us are going to need to be able to do, especially as we move further into the future. We are going to need to be able to defend our faith and testify to what God has done in our lives. We need to know our testimony. And we are going to need to defend our Christian beliefs. We need to know what we believe.

If you find yourself lacking in these areas, I have two assignments for you: 1) Write down an explanation for why you're a Christian – What's your story? Why do you believe in God and Jesus Christ and the Christian message? What happened in your life to bring about your faith? Why do you believe? 2) Write down what you believe about God and why you need to be a Christian to be saved. What are your basic Christian beliefs? If you can do these things, you will be well on your way to being ready to defend your faith.