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A Competent Shepherd

3: 1-6a

A competent shepherd DIG: How do we know that Paul was not commending himself? Who was the basis for his competence? What were the false apostles saying about Paul? How did Paul defend himself against such false accusations? How does the Spirit enable us to obey?

REFLECT: Why would it be encouraging to know that your competence comes not from yourself but from ADONAI? The false apostles said the Corinthians needed Messiah plus a set of rules to be fully acceptable to God. Where do you see this counterfeit gospel today?

The Spirit allows us to obey the teachings of the Torah which are written on our hearts.

A useful and **competent shepherd** of **God's people** does not need to **commend himself** or depend on the secondhand testimony of others, because **his** virtuous, godly life is well-known. To defuse any allegation that he was commending himself, **Paul** made no overt claims in **his** own defense. Instead, **he** gently rebuked **the Corinthians** by asking **them two questions**, both of which demanded a negative answer from the Greek text.

The first question was: Does **Paul's** apostolic authority exist because **he** says it does, that is, because **he commends himself**? **Paul** began by asking: **Are we starting to commend ourselves again (3:1a NASB)?** **The apostle** used the editorial **we**, because it is a less threatening, humbler, more gentle approach than using the singular **"I."** What may have prompted **Paul's** question were the accusations from **the false apostles in Corinth (to see link click Af - The Problem of the False Apostles)** that **he** was in fact commending **himself** in a proud manner. **They** may have pointed out the occasions in **his** first letter when **Paul** asserted **his** apostolic authority (**First Corinthians 4:15-16, 11:1, 14:18 and 15:10**). But in a letter filled with rebuke and correction, **Paul's** appeals to **his** apostolic authority were necessary for the sake of **God's** truth. In no way was **the apostle** motivated by self-exaltation - a truth **he** reiterates throughout **Second Corinthians (5:12 and 10:12)**.



Paul's disclaimers reveal that what **he** wrote was not designed to elevate **himself** in people's eyes; it was simply to state the truth so as to protect the legitimacy of **his** being a **competent shepherd**. Even **his** bold claim of a clear conscience (**1:12**) was not a braggart's declaration of self-vindication. In **his** first letter **he** wrote: **I am not aware of anything against me, but this does not make me innocent. The One who is evaluating me is the Lord. So don't pronounce judgment prematurely, before the Lord comes; for He will bring to light what is not hidden in darkness; He will expose the motives of people's hearts; and then each will receive from God whatever praise he deserves (First Corinthians 4:4-5).** Paul knew that the only **commendation** that meant anything is the one that comes from **ADONAI**, not from others, nor even one's own conscience.

Though **he** was a humble man, **Paul** was fully aware of **his** vital importance to **the Corinthians** as both a preacher of the Good News supernaturally given to **him** by **God** (see the commentary on [Galatians Ao - God Set Me Apart from Birth and Called Me Through His Grace](#)) and an inspired writer of biblical revelation. Therefore, it was necessary for **him** to defend **himself** so that **God's** truth would not be hindered. The sorrow and frustration of **his heart** over **the Corinthians'** fickleness came through loud and clear when **he** wrote: **Are we starting to commend ourselves again (3:1a NASB)? He** was not trying to prompt **the Corinthians** to **commend him**, but to make **them** evaluate **their** attitude towards **him**. One meaning of **commend** (Greek: *sunistano*) is *to introduce*. After all **they** had gone through together, did **Paul** really need to *reintroduce himself* to **the Corinthians**? Did **they** not know **him** well enough by then? Was it really necessary for **Paul** to start all over **again** and prove to **them** what kind of **man**, what kind of **shepherd he** was? After all the time **they** had known **him**, after **he** had ministered among **them** for at least **eighteen months (Acts 18:11)**, how could **they** believe **the false apostles'** lies about **him**? Surely **they** knew **him** better than that after all the preaching, teaching, fellowship, prayers, love and tears **they** had personally experienced with **him**!

Paul drove home **his** point by asking **a second question**, also demanding a negative answer: **Or do we, like some, need letters of commendation either to you or from you (3:1b NASB)?** In their attempt to discredit **Paul**, **the false apostles** claimed that **he** lacked the proper official **letters of commendation**. Such **letters** were commonly used in the ancient world to introduce people to those who did not know them (**Neh 2:7; Acts 9:2, 18:27, 22:5; Rom 16:1; 1 Cor 16:3**). When **the false apostles** arrived in **Corinth**, they evidently produced deceptive **letters of commendation**, possibly purporting to have come from **the Messianic community in Jerusalem (Acts 15:24)**. They used those **letters** to help **them** gain acceptance by **the Corinthians**.

Not only did **the false apostles** present **letters of commendation to the Corinthians**, but **they** also sought **them from them**. Because **they** were not saved, **the false apostles'** lives were corrupt. As a result, **they** couldn't remain very long in one location before being found out. But before moving on, **they** sought **letters of commendation** from those whom **they** had deceived. Then **they** used those **letters** to enhance **their** credibility with **their** next victims.

But **Paul** wasn't like those **false apostles**. **He** didn't need **letters of commendation** to prove **his** credibility to **the Corinthians**; **they** had first-hand knowledge of **his** righteous, godly, sincere life and powerful preaching. For **the Corinthians** to demand **letters of commendation** from **Paul** would have been ridiculous. That **they** could be so foolish and deceived as to doubt what **they** already knew was true about **the** beloved **apostle** was tragic. **Paul's** blameless life and effective ministry was **his letter of commendation**.⁹³

Paul then answered **the second question** more specifically. **His** authenticity was evident not only from **his** blameless life, but also from **his** impact on the lives of **the Corinthians**. **You yourselves are our letter of commendation, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone**. The only testimony **Paul** needed to verify the divine source of **his** labor was the reality that **the Corinthians** had been saved and were being sanctified through the truth **he** preached and taught. **You make it clear that you are a letter from the Messiah placed in our care (3:2-3a)**. It's as if **Paul** was saying, "**You** are the evidence that our ministry is genuine. Just look at **your** changed lives. When **we** came to **you** the first time, **you** received our message - the message of the cross of **Messiah** - and led by **the Spirit of the living God**, it did its work for you. Others have seen **your** changed lives. They have read in **the letter** of **your** lives the genuineness, authenticity, and sincerity of **our** ministry. **You** are all **we** need to establish the validity of **our** credentials." That was **Paul's** argument. A compelling argument indeed. Compelling because if anyone had reason to doubt **Paul's** genuineness, all they had to do was look into the mirror.⁹⁴

Unlike **the false apostles' letters of commendation**, Paul's was **not written with ink**, silent, fading from a page, **but by the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on human hearts (3:3b)**. The reference to being **written on human hearts** refers to the nature of the New Covenant. In contrast with **the Torah written in stone** (see **Av - A Glory Transformed**), the New Covenant is **written on human hearts**, literally, *on tablets [which are] hearts made of flesh*, the TaNaKh uses the same imagery in **Proverbs 3:3, 7:3** and **Jeremiah 31:33**. The prophet **Ezeki'el** says that when **ADONAI** regathers **the Jewish exiles** at the Second Coming, **He will take the stony heart out of their flesh and will give them a heart of flesh (Ezeki'el 11:19)**, and **YHVH** will put a new Spirit within them (**Ezeki'el 36:26**).⁹⁵

Paul was quick to give the glory to **God** and not **himself**. **Such is the confidence we have through the Messiah toward God (3:4)**. **The Spirit's** work in **his** ministry justified and explained **his confidence as an apostle**. It was not an illusory feeling of **self-confidence** based on **his** own abilities, strengths, or praise from others. **Paul's competence** to fulfill **his** ministry assigned to **him** by **YHVH** (see the commentary on **Acts Bc - Sha'ul Turns from Murder to the Messiah**) came only by **God's** grace through **Messiah (First Corinthians 15:9-10)**. We see more clearly our human limitations when we come face-to-face with **Divine** omnipotence. But we also see more clearly the power of **ADONAI** that can work powerfully through human imperfections and frailties.

*Dear Wise and Loving Heavenly **Father**, Praise and thank **You** for **Your** great wisdom and **Your** loving care for each of your children. It is such a comfort to know that **You** live within those who love **You**. **Yeshua answered and said to him: If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word. My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our dwelling with him (John 14:23)**. **You** are always right there whenever I need **Your** help or advice. **You** never get too sleepy, nor do you ever get too tired to think. **You** are always wise, alert and with me 24/7 - on dark days and on sunny days, on gloomy, busy days and on quiet days.*

*It is wonderful to live knowing of **Your** love. And it is a joy to share **Your** love with others. Sometimes we are not sure what to say or how to say it and sometimes situations come up unexpectedly before us and we don't know what to think or how the situation can best be handled. Praise **You** that you are our **competence**. **You** guide us with the right words to use or the wisest action to take. We do not need to worry for the solution does not rest with us; for as we call on **You**, and **You** have promised to answer. **But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all without hesitation and without reproach; and it will be given to him (James 1:5)**. **You** are a wonderful and awesome*

Father and I always love to please You. In Your holy Son's name and power of His resurrection. Amen

Lest anyone misunderstand **him**, **Paul** hastened to add the disclaimer: **It is not that we are competent in ourselves to count anything as having come from us; on the contrary, our competence is from God (3:5)**. **Ha'Shem** had demolished **Paul's** former confidence in **himself** as a **Hebrew of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee** who was **blameless** when it came to **righteousness** under **the Torah (Philippians 3:5-6)**. **He** no longer placed any trust in **his** own heritage, devotion, or natural powers. **He** knew the only resource from which **he** could draw was the infinite reservoir of grace provided by **God's** empowering **Spirit**. In saying that believers do not have any **competence** in ourselves, **Paul** wasn't resorting to false humility. **He** would argue that **he** was fully **competent** to carry out **his** ministry; yet, at the same time, **he** fully admitted that **his competency** came entirely from **the Ruach Ha'Kodesh**, who works in and through **him**.⁹⁶

He has even made us competent to be shepherds (Greek: *diakonous*, meaning *servants*) **serving a B'rit Chadashah, the essence of which is not a written text but the Spirit (3:6a)**. Once **Ezeki'el 36:25-26** and **Jeremiah 31:31-34** are seen to be the keys in **Paul's** thinking here, the meaning of the contrast between **the written text of the Torah** and **the Spirit** becomes easier to understand. The passages from **Ezeki'el** supply **Paul's** references to the work of **the Spirit** in **3:3b**, while **the Jeremiah** passage provides the focus on the obedience to **the Torah** and our transformation of **the heart** that makes that obedience to **it** possible. Evangelical Christianity, in the early decades of the Twenty-First Century, has suffered significantly from dismissing **the Torah's** instruction as a blueprint for living and the witness of the TaNaKh in general. And sadly, when faced with the **Ezeki'el 36:25-27** and **Jeremiah 31:31-34** passages, that the B'rit Chadashah not only provides forgiveness from sins, but also the ability to obey **the Torah** of **ADONAI**, it can be seen how some will merely dismiss or ignore the biblical text.⁹⁷