

Letters Not Commercials

Text: II Corinthians 3:1-6

"You show you are a letter from Christ." J.B. Phillips

How many of you this past week wrote a personal letter? By that I mean you took a piece of stationary/paper, pen, or a word processor and wrote someone? I have an idea that emails, blocs, face book, my space, texting and the cost of stamps have replaced the letter writing of my generation.

Today we celebrate our fifty third anniversary. In the year prior to our wedding we were separated 1600 miles for nine months as I completed my college education. Telephone calls were prohibited because of the costs. We wrote each other every day. Stamps were only three cents. In the dorm we called those letters "sugar reports." I would read between the lines squeezing all the sweetness I could from every word.

The apostle Paul looked upon the people whom he had led to Jesus as "Living Letters." The Corinthian congregation had become well known and itinerate teachers were coming to them with expectations of teaching this exciting congregation. They were prepared with letters of recommendation from other church leaders. This was not unusual because Paul did the same thing for Timothy and Epaphroditus in Philipians two.

Some of these applicants were "smooth operators." They portrayed themselves in a way that irritated Paul. Their letters sounded like commercials. Once in seminary a student asked me to look at the poster he had printed in order to encourage people to come hear him. He had in large bold type the words, "Dynamic Preacher." The competitors of Paul took the image of "super apostles." See II C. 11:5 and 12:11. Paul accused them of making a business out of their preaching. See chapter 2:17. On the other hand they pictured Paul as a weak preacher, 10:10, and no doubt questioned why he was so often ill and wondered why he was vocational and spent a good deal of time in jail.

Upon hearing these things Paul' heart was broken. In essence he wrote this letter saying "I suppose you want me to draft a "letter of recommendation." "Well," he says "You believers are my recommendation. Your changed lives show God's power in my ministry."

In our heavy charge commercial world it's easy to get an advertisement mind set. In my years of ministry I have seen this in mottos used by churches:

- Come to the fastest growing church in Arkansas.
- Come to the friendliest church in Houston.

- Come to the largest church in Alaska.
- The communicator only has to go to web sites or the Yellow pages to find evidence of this.

Some name their churches to show superiority. I observed this in a city in which I pastored. The church started as Mt. Zion Baptist Church, after a division the new church was named The Greater Mt. Zion Church. While I was a pastor in San Francisco the well-known liberal pastor has a fulltime public relations man.

Paul felt that the best promotion was the product of the gospel of Jesus Christ, i.e. a person who has the testimony BC (before Christ) and an AC (after Christ) story. People read our lives every day.

[To the communicator from your own experience and understanding that life should have at least the following characteristics. You may want to add others, but I believe these are vital.]

- A life that is **grace based**. See Titus 3:5, Eph. 2:8-9 One of my favorite verse in the Bible in this regard is Galatians 5:5.
- A life that is **glowing**. The believer who delights in the finished work of Jesus on the cross is enriched by the vibrancy and victory he/she has in those words, "It is finished." I believe this point is fully supported in II Corinthians 3:16-18.

A strong story that can conclude this message is found in the life of Amanda Smith. She was a slave who became a Methodist holiness evangelist. Her fame leaped the Atlantic Ocean. She ministered in Africa. She was called, "God's image in ebony." I'm sure you can find her name and life on the internet.

Conclusion: Be a letter in which "forgiven" is written across your heart. Be a living letter showing that you are loved in spite of being unworthy of such affection. Let your life be so human that the reader says, "There is hope for me, too."

Prayer: "Father, help us not be false advertisement. Save us from being "junk mail."