



## PART 2

# PAUL IN CORINTH: LEADERSHIP UNDER FIRE

## Chapter Seven

### “WHO IS SUFFICIENT FOR THESE THINGS?”

#### HIS CHARACTER

Paul’s response to his critics highlights another fundamental principle of leadership: *A leader doesn’t abdicate his role in the face of opposition.*

#### **LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLE #16**

**A LEADER DOESN’T ABDICATE HIS ROLE IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION**

Did he need to go all the way back to the beginning and establish credibility with them all over?

**Notice:** he doesn’t even appeal at this point to the miraculous element in his ministry, which had been clearly and repeatedly displayed in Corinth. Later, in [2 Corinthians 12:12](#), he mentioned,

**2 Corinthians 12:12 (NASB)**

<sup>12</sup>“The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles.”

But the *starting* point in his defense was an appeal to their knowledge of his *character*.



They knew him. They knew him well. They had observed his life. They had seen his godly character firsthand and up close. They knew what he was like from the inside out. To defend himself on that account would be utterly superfluous.

Thus Paul left the question with them. He did not boast of his own virtue. He had no need to do so.

## HIS INFLUENCE

The second question is as disarming as the first: **“Do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you?”** ([2 Corinthians 3:1](#)).

[2 Corinthians 3:1 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?**

Letters of commendation are useful only when the person being introduced is unfamiliar. As we saw in chapter 2, Nehemiah needed letters of commendation to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall ([Nehemiah 2:7](#)).

[Nehemiah 2:7 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> **“And I said to the king, “If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah.”**

Those letters were essential to prove his legitimacy. They introduced him where he was previously unknown, and they showed that he had the king’s support for his project.

Paul himself—in his life before becoming a Christian—had once sought letters of commendation for sinister purposes. According to [Acts 9:1–2](#), Saul of Tarsus went to the high priest to get letters of commendation proving to the people in the synagogues of Damascus that he had authority to take Christians as prisoners back to Jerusalem.

[Acts 9:1-2 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> **“Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,**

<sup>2</sup> **and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both men and women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.”**

Paul also *wrote* a commendation for Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea ([Romans 16:1](#)). Her letter of referral is a permanent part of the biblical record.

[Romans 16:1 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup> **“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea.”**

When the Corinthians sent an offering to meet the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, Paul said he expected a letter of commendation to come from Corinth with the courier who would deliver the gift to Jerusalem ([1 Corinthians 16:3](#)).

[1 Corinthians 16:3 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>3</sup>“When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”

So letters of commendation are legitimate in their place. Modern job applications often include a request for written references. Churches require such letters for transfers of membership. To this day, letters of referral are a common part of everyday life.

Apparently, when the false teachers originally showed up in Corinth, they had letters of commendation. They most likely came to Corinth from Jerusalem. [Acts 15:5](#) indicates that the *Judaizers* (false teachers who wanted to make circumcision a requirement for salvation) were a sect of Pharisees who had identified with the Jerusalem church.

[Acts 15:5 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>5</sup>“But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses.”

These men are called believers—no doubt they claimed to be Christians—but they had brought into the church the very same kind of legalism for which Jesus condemned the Pharisees (cf. [Luke 11:46](#); [Acts 15:10](#)).

[Luke 11:46 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>46</sup>“But He said, “Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers.”

[Acts 15:10 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>10</sup>“Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?”

Jerusalem was a hotbed for that kind of error, and many who taught it had gone out from the Jerusalem church to sow confusion in Gentile churches throughout the empire ([Acts 15:24](#)).

[Acts 15:24 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>24</sup>“Since we have heard that some of our number to whom we gave no instruction have disturbed you with *their* words, unsettling your souls.”

In all likelihood, that was the source of the trouble in Corinth. It appears, however, that the false teachers had come to Corinth with some pretty impressive credentials, including letters of recommendation, possibly purported to be from officials in the Jerusalem church. When they first arrived in Corinth, they had pulled out of their satchels these letters of reference. That was what Paul undoubtedly referred to in [2 Corinthians 3:1](#):

[2 Corinthians 3:1 \(NASB\)](#)

<sup>1</sup>“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? **Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?”**



The false teachers had come into the church at Corinth as intruders, but they sought and found entrance because they evidently had impressive documents, addressed specifically to the church at Corinth (“**to you**” [v. 1]). They had come with an agenda, and they had planned well.

Notice that Paul also refers to “**letters of commendation from you**” (v. 1, **emphasis added**). Perhaps the false teachers had already sought and obtained references from the church at Corinth to give them further credibility when they took their error elsewhere. That was how such heretics plied their trade. They were always itinerant. They could not settle for long in one place, because their lives were corrupt. They were not truly regenerate. Sooner or later, the real character of their lives would manifest itself. So they stayed on the move. But they were in Corinth long enough to confuse and tear up the church—and long enough to get some letters of commendation from the Corinthians.

Paul was asking, “Am I in the same boat? Do I need written references either *for you* or *from you*?”

The thought was ludicrous. Paul’s authenticity was evident not only from his own life, but also from his influence in the lives of the Corinthians.

*You want a letter?* he asks. *I’ll give you a letter:*

**2 Corinthians 3:2-3 (NASB)**

**<sup>2</sup>“You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men;  
<sup>3</sup>being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for 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.”**