

# 2 Corinthians 3:6

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

## Analysis

---

**Who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.** This verse contains one of Paul's most quoted—and misunderstood—statements. God has made (hikanōsen, ἱκάνωσεν, "qualified" or "made sufficient") Paul and his colleagues **ministers of the new testament** (Greek diakonous kainēs diathēkēs, διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης). The term diathēkē means "covenant," not merely "testament"—Paul refers to the promised new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The contrast **not of the letter, but of the spirit** does not mean literal vs. figurative interpretation. Gramma (γράμμα, "letter") refers to the Mosaic law written on stone; pneuma (πνεῦμα, "Spirit") refers to the Holy Spirit who writes God's law on hearts. **The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life** describes two covenantal functions: the old covenant law, though holy and good (Romans 7:12), exposes sin and pronounces death on transgressors; the new covenant Spirit transforms hearts and imparts resurrection life. Paul is not denigrating Scripture but contrasting covenantal administrations—external law vs. internal Spirit, condemnation vs. life.

## Historical Context

---

The "new covenant" concept comes from Jeremiah 31:31-34, written circa 600 BC, promising a future day when God would internalize His law and forgive sins

permanently. This prophecy shaped Jewish messianic expectations. At the Last Supper, Jesus declared the new covenant inaugurated in His blood (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Paul now applies this to his Gentile ministry: the new covenant is not limited to ethnic Israel but includes all who believe. The contrast between "letter" (written code) and "Spirit" (divine person) defines two eras of redemptive history.

## Related Passages

---

**Romans 1:17** — The righteous shall live by faith

**Hebrews 11:1** — Definition of faith

## Study Questions

---

1. How does understanding "the letter" as the old covenant law (not Bible literalism) change your reading of this verse?
2. In what ways might you be trying to live under "the letter"—external rules and self-effort—rather than "the Spirit"?
3. How have you personally experienced the life-giving power of the Spirit's internal work versus the condemning power of external law?

## Interlinear Text

---

ὅς	καὶ	ἰκάνωσεν	ἡμᾶς	διακόνους	καινῆς	διαθήκης	οὐ
Who	also	able	us	ministers	of the new	testament	not
G3739	G2532	G2427	G2248	G1249	G2537	G1242	G3756
γράμμα	ἀλλὰ	πνεῦμα	τὸ	γὰρ	γράμμα	ἀποκτείνει,	τὸ
of the letter	but	of the spirit	G3588	for	of the letter	killeth	G3588
G1121	G235	G4151		G1063	G1121	G615	
δὲ	πνεῦμα	ζωοποιεῖ					
but	of the spirit	giveth life					
G1161	G4151	G2227					

## Additional Cross-References

---

**John 6:63** (Spirit): It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.

**Romans 7:6** (Spirit): But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.

**Jeremiah 31:31** (Covenant): Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah:

**Romans 8:2** (Spirit): For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.

**1 Corinthians 15:45** (Spirit): And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

**Hebrews 7:22** (Covenant): By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.

**Hebrews 12:24** (Covenant): And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

**Romans 3:20** (Parallel theme): Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

**2 Corinthians 3:14** (Covenant): But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ.

**Hebrews 13:20** (Covenant): Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,