

FAITHFUL MINISTERS OF CHRIST
1 Corinthians 4:1-5
October 23, 2005 – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We recently held elections for city council and city school board in Birmingham. As I watched the days prior to the election, I noticed that politics is pretty much the same wherever you live. You cannot pick up a newspaper or turn on the television without seeing a campaign ad that tells you what needs to be done and how that candidate is going to get it done. Each of these ads tries to sway your opinion, to get you to vote for a certain political candidate. In other words, these ads are an attempt to get you to *follow* a certain candidate and/or party. This is the nature of advertising in general. Advertisements appeal to the senses in such a way that they hold the person or product they represent in the most positive light possible while either explicitly or implicitly casting a negative shadow on an opponent or competitor. However, we know that such efforts can get out of hand. In an effort to make a political candidate or product look better, an advertisement often exaggerates the truth of both himself and his competitor. In politics, this has affectionately come to be known as a smear campaign. And as soon as one party cries foul, the same party puts a “spin” on some report in an effort to get a leg up in the race. And on and on it goes. We are bombarded with these images to *follow* a certain political candidate.

While this might be the nature of politics and advertising in general, this sort of conduct has no place in the church of God. Paul addressed this very thing in chapters 1-3 of this letter to the Corinthians. His argument was that there simply is no place for favorites in the body of Christ. To follow one minister is to miss the blessings that God has provided and will provide through others that are called to proclaim the gospel for the glory of God. The problem of favoritism had reared its ugly head in the church at Corinth, as some followed Paul, others Apollos, still others Cephas, and some claimed to be the most spiritual of all as they made the arrogantly claimed that they followed Christ. As a result, the church at Corinth was divided and friction existed between the Paul sect, the Apollos sect, the Cephas sect and the Jesus sect. Corinth had become a dysfunctional church because they had fallen into the trap of emphasizing the non-essentials and neglecting that which was essential. They wrongfully judged those that God had put in their midst to minister to them. As we will see in this text, it is not that they were wrong to judge or examine these men, but it was the criteria they used to judge them that was the root of the problem at Corinth. The main point of this passage, as John MacArthur rightly points out, is that it puts the minister of God in God’s perspective. It deals with what the congregation’s attitude toward the minister should be and what the minister’s attitude towards himself should be—from God’s perspective [MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, 96].

In light of this, there are two things we see in our text this morning: (1) the duty of the minister and (2) the accountability of the minister.

I. The duty of the minister (vv. 1-2)

Paul asked the question in 1 Cor. 3:5, “What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?” In the remainder of chapter 3 he answered his questions illustratively by using the metaphors of the field and the building. In our text this morning, he answers the question directly. Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of the minister’s calling and his duty to fulfill that calling in a way that honors and glorifies God. **“Let a man regard us in this manner.”** The **“us”** puts the reader in the immediate context of Paul’s preceding arguments and into the overall context of the

divisions in the church which stemmed from favoritism. While in its immediate context “us” refers to Paul, Apollos and Cephas, it can be applied to all ministers of the gospel. And in laying the groundwork for his argument, Paul writes that there is an “oughtness” as to how a church member should regard his/her pastor. **“Let a man regard us in this manner.”** In other words, this is how things “ought” to be. It is obvious from what we have seen previously in Chapters 1-3 that this was not the case at Corinth. And I would argue that it is not the case in many churches today. How should one regard those that God has placed over them in the church?

1. Servants of Christ (v. 1a)

Paul’s first statement as to how the minister ought to be regarded is **“as servants of Christ.”** The word here translated **“servants”** is not the common word found in most places in the Greek. The word refers to the rowers in the bowels of a ship that were commonly referred to as ‘underlings.’ So this word for **“servant”** commonly came to be used to denote one that was subservient to another, or a subordinate, one subject to direction or taking orders. Paul writes that those who God has charged with the oversight of the church were not to be looked upon as heads of parties or as CEO types but simply as Christ’s ‘underlings.’ As **“servants of Christ”** they were to be regarded as ones who took their marching orders from Christ and faithfully served Him in obedience to His commands. In other words, *they were not to be exalted because of their status but should be looked upon as lowly, humble servants who have no authority of their own.* So in Paul’s reference to the minister as a **“servant of Christ”** he has the minister’s holy conduct in mind. The minister is one who is to delightfully obey God’s commands in Christ according to his calling.

Lest we misunderstand and misappropriate what Paul means, we need to understand that *all* believers are in some sense called to be **“servants of Christ.”** All are called to obey the mandate and calling of God upon their lives. *Obedience to God’s commands is not exclusive to pastors.* Faithful obedience to God’s Word is a biblical requirement for all who take up the mantle of Christ, for all who are truly disciples of Christ. The same might be said when we look at the biblical qualifications for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3 and again for elder in Titus 1. The Christian should not look at these lists as some super-spiritual qualifications for a select group of men. Apart from having the indwelt desire to be an elder and perhaps the qualification to teach, these lists contain the same commands as other places in Scripture that deal with the life of every believer. As D.A. Carson aptly points out, “Leaders are not in a special, priestly class. Rather, what is required in some sense in all believers is peculiarly required of the leaders of believers. *There is a difference in degree*” [D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 95; italics mine]. It is with this understanding that Paul later exhorts these at Corinth to imitate him (4:16). A statement like that on its own would make Paul look like some radical revolutionary or arrogant despot. But Paul exhorts them to imitate him only *as* he faithfully and joyfully obeys his calling. To be a **“servant of Christ”** as Paul describes here is to be an example of holy gospel living for others to follow.

So we see, first of all, that the minister is to be a **“servant of Christ.”**

2. Stewards of the mysteries of God (v. 1b)

The second way by which Paul writes that ministers should be regarded is as **“stewards of the mysteries of God.”** Paul had already broached the subject of these **“mysteries of God”** in 1 Corinthians 2:7 to contrast the true, mature wisdom of God with the false, immature wisdom of the world. The **“mysteries of God”** refer to the Word of God in general and more particularly

the gospel. These “**mysteries**” are those things that come to a person through God’s special revelation of His Word by the illumination of the Holy Spirit. These “**mysteries**” cannot be rightly discerned by man’s wisdom alone. It is these “**mysteries of God**” of which the minister is a “**steward.**”

But what does Paul mean by “**steward**”? The word in the Greek refers to a person given the responsibility of overseeing a household. In our day, that would probably refer to the owner of the household, but not in Paul’s day. “**Steward**” primarily referred to a person who was responsible to his master (the owner of the household) for the right handling of finances, for custodial care, for the education of children, for the serving of meals, etc. The “**steward**” was responsible to make sure the house ran smoothly by overseeing every little detail of the normal day-to-day operations. Perhaps that is why G. Campbell Morgan, who has been called “The Prince of Expositors,” translated “**steward**” as “housewife.”

Paul writes that the minister is to be a “**steward of the mysteries of God.**” Therefore, *the minister is responsible to his Master for the spiritual oversight of His house, the Church.* What Paul has in mind here is the *pastor’s responsibility to rightly handle the Word of God.* He must be faithful in his preparation. He must be faithful in his proclamation. He must labor greatly in the Word to present the deep doctrines of God’s Word in a manner worthy of all acceptance. Why? Because *doctrine is what drives a holy life.* A person cannot live according to the mandates of Scripture without knowing and understanding what the Scriptures teach. The minister is responsible for what he teaches as well as how he teaches it. One writer put it this way:

The Christian preacher has a boundary set for him. When he enters the pulpit he is not an entirely free man. There is a very real sense in which it may be said of him that the Almighty has set his bounds that he shall not pass. He is not at liberty to invent or choose his message; it has been committed to him, and it is for him to declare, expound and commend to his hearers... It is a great thing to come under the magnificent tyranny of the Gospel.¹

So we see that as “**stewards of the mysteries of God**” the pastor is to take great care as to how he dispenses the Word, and as a “**servant of Christ**” the pastor is to take heed as to how he lives according to that Word. Which leads to the conclusion of Paul’s argument concerning the duty of the minister and how he should be regarded. The minister is to live as a “**servant of Christ**” and fulfill his role as the “**steward of the mysteries of God**” for one purpose—to be “**found trustworthy.**”

3. Found trustworthy (v. 2)

Paul writes that the one requirement of the “**steward**” is that he be found “**trustworthy.**” *The minister is to be faithful with that which he has been entrusted.* An unfaithful servant or an undependable steward is an oxymoron.

We see this idea of being “**trustworthy**” in Jesus’ teaching of those things that should be in order at His return. In a list of things of which the believer is to be watchful in Matthew 24, Jesus said in Mt. 24:45-46, “Who then is the faithful and sensible slave whom his master put in charge of his household to give them their food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes.” The word here translated “slave” is the same word

¹ F.D. Coggan, *Stewards of Grace*, pp. 46, 48 as quoted by John Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership*, 105.

we see in our text translated “**steward.**” Jesus proclaimed that the goal of the “**steward**” is to be found faithful at His return.

Paul understood what it meant to be a “**steward.**” In Rom. 1:14-15 – “I am *under obligation* both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.” Paul said that he was “under obligation,” literally, that he was “bound.” The KJV renders it “indebted.” Why was Paul “obligated” to the Romans? Why was he “bound?” What did he owe the Romans?

Stott – borrow from (even/1 to 1) and borrow for (I have something that is yours)

So why has Paul gone to such great lengths to remind these at Corinth how minister’s are to be regarded? Because, as we have seen in chapters 1-3, their judgments, their evaluations of these men had fallen out of these bounds of “**servants of Christ**” and “**stewards of the mysteries of God.**” They evaluated Paul, Apollos, Cephas and others using the wrong criteria. They judged these men according to the world’s standards: intellect, creativity, cleverness, popularity, and oratory skills. It is not that these things are not important and might used by the man of God to enhance his ministry. Paul is not arguing against these things, but these things as evaluated from the world’s perspective. The only criterion by which the minister is to be judged is according to his servanthood and his stewardship. Everything must be evaluated through this lens because it is according to these that the man of God is found to be “**trustworthy.**”

So how is the minister to be judged?

II. The accountability of the minister (vv. 3-5)

Having laid the groundwork for his argument, Paul begins to drive home his point. What was at stake was Paul’s and the other ministers accountability. Ultimately, who is it that renders one’s labors as faithful? In the end, who will deem one “**trustworthy**” in reference to the minister’s servanthood and stewardship?

1. Stated negatively (vv. 3-4)

We see a sort of crescendo in Paul’s understanding of accountability. He speaks of judgments or examinations from different people from all walks of life.

a. Not congregational (v. 3a)

Paul writes, “**But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you.**” Some take Paul to mean that the judgment of man, or more aptly, the examination or evaluation of one’s ministry, is of no consequence. But I think a blanket assertion like this is to miss Paul’s point. Paul would never say that a minister is not to be held accountable for his ministry, particularly as it relates to doctrine and practice. There were ministers in Paul’s day that were in it for all the wrong reasons just as there are today.

“The ministry has always seemed to attract scoundrels and scandals, but never to the degree we see today. Preachers seem utterly committed to destroying the very cause they are called to espouse by plunging headlong into moral collapse, doctrinal error, dictatorial leadership, shady business dealings and sheer laziness” [Roger Ellsworth, *Strengthening Christ’s Church*, 65].

What Paul was calling for was discernment. Paul was exhorting the Corinthians not to condemn them, nor to eulogize them, but to simply examine them according to their calling: as **“servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.”** What Paul was saying is that he could not effectively perform his ministry if he had a constant concern about what others thought about him. Again, Paul is not saying that he, or Apollos, or Cephas or any of the others were above criticism. That would be arrogant. What he was saying was that he would not allow congregational pressures stemming from non-essential matters to divert him from his main responsibilities as a minister. And so he writes, **“But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you.”**

b. Not cultural (v. 3b)

Paul continued, **“But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court.”** The word here translated **“court”** is the Greek word for “day.” It is a reference to the Corinthian culture. Paul uses the term as we would to describe the cultural climate of our day in saying, “In my day...” Paul was not concerned with congregational misjudgments, nor was he concerned about the pressures of the culture. While the culture might have influenced how these at Corinth were serving the Lord, Paul would not allow the world and its opinions squeeze him into its mold. As we read earlier in Romans 12:1-2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Paul refused to give in to the whims of culture.

Ministers today need to heed Paul’s warning here. Many pastors are quick to take stands against those issues that are blatant violations of God’s Word. We need to be thankful for those that take these courageous stands against the culture and stand with them against things such as abortion, homosexual unions and rights and any other of the numerous issues that show the evil of the age. We should stand and proclaim the exclusivity of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in a pluralistic culture that contends that all ways are right.

However, the minister needs to also guard against the seemingly “small things” that creep in, the subtle things that come into the life of a congregation from the secular and erode spiritual discernment. For instance, these at Corinth had a problem with baptism. Because of their misunderstanding of baptism as to its purpose or intent for the people of God, they had turned it into almost a sideshow. Baptism had become a requirement for membership at the First Church of Corinth for all the wrong reasons. This led to the factionalism that was dividing the church.

What does that have to do with today? Consider this: In many churches today the leadership has given into culture. The philosophy of this age can be summed up in two words: *entertain me*. Our churches are filled with people that live 6¾ days of the week seek to be entertained and then expect to leave it outside the church doors for 3 hours on Sunday morning. It can’t happen. And so, under the guise of feeding the flock and meeting their need, many pastors have given into the entertainment mentality in their worship. And some have carried this way too far. One large Southern Baptist church in another city actually baptizes children in a fire truck. When the child is immersed, bells and whistles and sirens go off and laser lights circle the room. You could probably guess why they are one of the fastest growing SBC churches in the U.S. and annually lead in baptisms by percentage. A friend of mine told me of a pastor who has written a book on church growth. In the book, the pastor actually states that it is good church practice for ministries to keep in touch with Disney, Looney Tunes and Nickelodeon because that is what

gets children's attention. According to this minister, if we want to keep our children in church, we need to be on a level that they are used to.

Paul would have none of this. He warns against evaluating one's ministry in light of the cultural norms of the day. So he writes, **"But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court."**

c. Not personal (v. 4)

Paul continues, **"in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted."**

Jeremiah 17:9 – "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Psalms 139:23-24 – "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."

As Curtis Vaughan so poignantly points out, "This fact, however, speaks more of his ignorance than his innocence. An unaccusing conscience does not mean absence of guilt. Only God has adequate insight to evaluate the true sources of action and service" [Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 47].

2. Stated positively (v. 5)

"Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."

a. Things hidden in darkness

Paul himself wrote that he still saw through the glass rather dimly. He knew that the veil has only partially been lifted and that there remains more, perhaps much more, that remain hidden for the glory of God and the good of His people. Paul knew that all would be revealed on the day of the Lord's return. That which we know in part will become crystal clear on that day.

You see, we only know part of the story, and perhaps we do not know that very well. We are limited in our insight into what is true as it relates to an individual. How many of you, in any arena of life, have been wrong in your judgment of an individual? How many of us know some minister who started well but finished poorly? Is it not also possible that some start slowly but finish their ministries faithfully?

b. Motives of hearts

We do not know the motives of the people we are judging. As D. A. Carson points out,

That is a prerogative preserved for God alone... There are some leaders who function competently and can please great crowds, but whose hearts are seething swamps of lust, arrogance, and ambition. There are others, less gifted perhaps, who struggle quietly and faithfully against major disappointments and pressures, but whose heart cry is, 'Here am I. Send me. Make me as holy, as loving, as useful, as a profound sinner can be.' Should not hidden motivations be taken into account? And who can do so, except God alone?"

(The Cross and Christian Ministry, 100-101).

Positive statement, “**praise**” rather than a neutral statement of reward based on good or bad deeds. “The implication may be that the Lord in his omniscience will find cause for approval where another judge would find none”(F.F. Bruce). Or, as Carson concludes, “What this way of concluding the paragraph shows is that in this case, at least, God judges less sternly than the self-appointed judges in the church” (101).

Here should be the minister’s motive: “Well done my good and faithful servant.”

Conclusion

How do you evaluate those who God has placed over you in the ministry? We have a vivid reminder in this text that we take great care in how and when we judge those in leadership. Are we to hold them accountable? Absolutely! But here is our criterion for evaluation: Are they living as servants of Christ? And are they good stewards of God’s Word?