

THE CHURCH AND GODLY LEADERSHIP

1 Corinthians 3:1-9a

October 2, 2005 (AM) – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

More has been written about church leadership since the dawn of the church than one could imagine – and certainly more than could be read in one lifetime. A search for “Church Leadership” resulted in nearly 10,000 books on the subject and nearly 30 million links (www.google.com). While some of these books and links might be helpful, I believe we have in our text this morning one of the richest texts in all of Scripture as it pertains both to the leadership of the church and to the congregation.

The church at Corinth was a young, struggling church that, quite frankly, was in a mess. And while not giving them any excuses, we must acknowledge the truth that they did not have 2000 years of church history as an example (positive or negative) or 10,000 books written on effective church leadership (again, good or bad). And they certainly did not have the Internet! They did not even have this text until they received it from Paul, nor did they have the canon of Scripture that we have today. But I would suggest that perhaps even if they did have all of these helps or perhaps even live in our day, they probably still would have experienced many of the same problems that Paul exposed in this letter because they struggled with what many leaders and congregations struggle with today – what I will call *celebrityism*. At Corinth, Paul faced a problem with celebrities that caused divisions in the church. There was a “Paul” group, an “Apollos” group, a “Peter” group, and an arrogant “Christ” group (1 Cor. 1:12). However, as we will see, Paul was a godly leader. As one writer put it, “One of the things that separates good leaders from celebrities is that celebrities often believe their press. They think more of themselves than they should. Leaders, however, know their limits and understand that they are not all that others think they are or want them to be... He (Paul) knew better than to believe those who wanted to make him a celebrity, and insisted that believers should follow only one person: Jesus Christ” [Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Divisions and Personalities in the Church,” *IIM Magazine Online*, Vol. 3, Num. 35, August 27-September 2, 2001].

The problem at Corinth was that they had enthroned the man of God rather than the God of the man. So we ask the question: What was it that Paul understood that makes him such a good example of a godly church leader? There are two things we see in our text this morning: 1) *Godly leaders understand their congregation*, and 2) *Godly leaders understand their calling*.

I. Godly leaders understand their congregation (3:1-4)

While Paul was not the pastor of the church of Corinth, per se, he still had a vested interest in their welfare. While at a distance, he sought to keep close tabs on all of the churches he had planted. We see this clearly in the book of Acts. Paul would go into a city, plant a church, remain with that particular church until he thought the church was on a solid foundation, and then move on. Of course, at times he was unable to remain because of things beyond his control. But regardless of the circumstances surrounding his departure from a city, he always followed up with keen interest in the spiritual condition and growth of a particular congregation. This was the case at Corinth. Paul knew what was going on in the church from reports he received from others. And the reports he received were not favorable. So Paul sets out, in this letter, to correct those things that had gone awry since his departure. He would not have been able to do this if he had not taken time to establish the fact, compassionately, that he cared for their spiritual well being. We see in these verses that Paul understood what was going on at Corinth, which is the

first principle of godly leadership we see set forth for us in this text. What was it that Paul understood about this church?

1. Spiritual condition (v. 1, 3-4)

Some have taken these verses as an indication that Paul was setting up some special category of believer, what has affectionately come to be known as the “carnal Christian.” These would say that that Paul establishes the fact that he is writing to believers in calling them “**brethren**” and within this group of “**brethren**” are those that are “carnal” or “**men of the flesh.**” While there is no question that these were “carnal” or “**fleshly,**” these would further say that Paul seems to condone the carnality of this group. However, this interpretation is taking Paul entirely out of context. Paul was not condoning the actions of these at Corinth. He was rebuking them. These at Corinth thought that they were living according to the Spirit. They believed that they were right on track in living the Christian life. But it is plainly seen from the rest of the letter that nothing could be further from the truth! So Paul here sets out to rebuke this congregation in many areas of moral and spiritual failure. And right at the core of the issue was their thinking more highly of themselves than they ought in relation to spiritual things and their sanctification. Paul bursts their spiritual bubble by calling them “**men of flesh,**” “**infants in Christ.**” It is important that we understand what it is that Paul is really saying here.

Notice Paul says that they *were* “**men of flesh**” or “**infants in Christ.**” When he came to them initially, this was certainly the case. They were new believers, babes in Christ, unable to spiritually comprehend the deeper things of God. Therefore, he gave them “**milk to drink**” just as a newborn infant needs to survive, not “**solid food**” that would choke them. This is a good and proper practice for those in leadership. Leaders need to ascertain the spiritual condition of those with whom they are dealing and feed them accordingly.

However, spiritual infancy was not the problem at Corinth. The problem was that they should have been well beyond the elementary principles of the faith. They had sat under Paul’s teaching and preaching for the better part of two years, and godly men like Apollos continued Paul’s work. And yet, as we see in v. 3, they were “**still fleshly.**” They had not grown up. They were spiritually immature. As D. A. Carson writes, they were “wretchedly, unacceptably, spiritually immature” [*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 71]. Does this sound as if Paul was condoning their spiritual immaturity, excusing their carnality? Paul understood their spiritual condition and rebukes them for being satisfied as infants. The very source of their dissension was their being controlled by their fleshly nature, literally “hearts of flesh” rather than by the Spirit of God. The desires and affections of their hearts were controlled by the flesh and not by the Spirit.

Paul repeatedly comes back to this as the source of the problem in the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 13:11 – When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

1 Corinthians 14:20 – Brethren, do not be children in your thinking; yet in evil be infants, but in your thinking be mature.

These at Corinth were spiritually stagnant. The proof of their spiritual immaturity is in the effect (v. 3) – “**for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?**” Again, Paul was not condoning the fact that they were spiritually immature. He was rebuking them. And he proves his point by

illustrating where their immaturity had gotten them. They could not get along! Their continued devotion to men and not Christ was renting the church apart. So we see that Paul understood their spiritual condition, the first principle of godly leadership.

2. Spiritual appetite (v. 2)

“I gave you milk to drink, not solid food.” Paul’s criticism of their spiritual immaturity stems from the fact that they still did not grasp the essential truths of the gospel. This is why he makes such an effort to remind them of the centrality of the gospel in chapters 1 & 2.

Compare with **1 Peter 2:2** – “like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation.”

Peter here refers to the longing that a believer should always have for the Word of God. There should always be a dependence upon the Word for spiritual nutrition. A continual affection to be fed by God’s Word is a mark of a true believer. If we do not have this longing, we are not growing in Christ.

Paul, on the other hand, is telling these at Corinth that it was time to grow up! (*Childlikeness vs. childishness*)

1 Corinthians 13:11 – When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things.

It would be quite wrong to infer from this that Paul was teaching that new believers need a *different* doctrine that mature believers as if he preached the elementary doctrines to beginners and reserved the advanced teaching for the mature. He always preached ‘the whole counsel of God’ [Acts 20:27]. He believed, as Calvin after him, that the Word of God “is milk for babes, and solid food for adults.” He did not water down the truth for the babe in Christ. He just presented it in a more elementary way. As Geoffrey Wilson wisely put it, “The distinction is not between two sets of doctrines but between two ways of presenting the same gospel” [*1 Corinthians*, 49]. Matthew Henry, the great Puritan expositor, commented on the necessity of the minister knowing the spiritual appetite of his congregation.

It is the duty of a faithful minister of Christ to consult the capacities of his hearers and teach them as they can bear. And yet it is natural for babes to grow up to men; and babes in Christ should endeavour to grow in stature, and become men in Christ. It is expected that their advances in knowledge should be in proportion to their means and opportunities, and their time of professing religion, that they may be able to bear discourses on the mysteries of our religion, and not always rest in plain things. It was a reproach to the Corinthians that they had so long sat under the ministry of Paul and had made no more improvement in Christian knowledge. Note, Christians are utterly to blame who do not endeavour to grow in grace and knowledge. [*Matthew Henry’s Commentary*, vol. 6, 416]

While it was a rebuke, notice Paul begins this section by calling them **“brethren.”** They were his brothers and sisters in Christ. They were part of the same body of Christ as he was, with the same head, which is Christ. They had been saved by the grace of God just as he. So he calls them **“brethren”** and then rebukes their worldliness. From the outset Paul neutralizes any perceived arrogance or pride that might be associated with his rebuke and shows that he is rebuking them with love and compassion. Paul’s goal was not to prove that he was right and that

the Corinthians were wrong. Their actions were affecting the entire body. It was of crucial importance that they be corrected but also to understand where they were wrong and why they needed to be corrected.

We as church leaders can learn much from Paul, not only in his understanding of the congregation, their maturity, but in the way he presented the doctrine to them.

Value of internships – practice of the ministry

There is a second principle of godly leadership in our text.

II. Godly leaders understand their calling (3:5-9)

Paul begins this section by asking a rhetorical question in verse 5: **“What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?”** Notice the question Paul asks is not “Who then is Apollos? And who is Paul?” but **“What then is Apollos? And what is Paul?”** Paul’s question placed the emphasis on the work itself, not the person of the work. It was the “what” that counted, not the “who.” Paul again reminds them that the work that he and Apollos had done at Corinth was not about them, but God, and it was not their work, but God’s work. Their devotion should be to God in Christ and not to them. Paul hopes to diffuse the problem of *celebrityism* at Corinth by offering up as an example how he and Apollos worked when they were with them. And in doing so, he provides for us a wonderful illustration of how leaders, called of God, should do the work of ministry. There is also wisdom to be gleaned for the congregation in relation to these leaders.

1. Recognize their position – humility of a servant (*diakonoi*) (vv. 5 & 7)

In verse 5 Paul described both he and Apollos as **“servants”** from the Greek word *diakonoi*. The word literally means “table waiters.” We get our word “deacon” from it. Paul’s use of this word is intentional. He wanted the Corinthians to understand his and Apollos’ position as ministers of the gospel. They were merely **“servants,”** not “servants of the church” but “servants of Christ” (4:1). Their position was one of inferiority; they were under God’s authority. Here again we see why Paul chose the word **“what”** in his questioning. **“What”** and **“servants”** was Paul’s way of minimizing their personalities in hopes of eliminating the *celebrityism* entrenched in the church. Notice Paul does not say “Servants *in* whom you believed” as if they were the objects of their faith. He does not say “Servants *by* whom you believed” as if they were the source of their faith. Paul understood that those who sow and those who plant are merely instruments **“through whom”** God accomplished His work of bringing the Corinthians to faith. And this was only **“as the Lord gave opportunity to each one,”** or, “As the Lord assigned to each” (ESV) (v. 5). The master assigns the task and the servant performs it.

Congregation – Remember that leaders are God’s servants.

(1) Guard against unwise elevations – This was the source of the problem at Corinth. They had given allegiance to the servant rather than the Master. Leon Morris echoes this warning of elevating man to an undo position:

“The term (servant) stresses the lowly character of the service rendered and ridicules the tendency to make much of preachers. Who would set servants on pedestals?” [Leon Morris, *TNTC: 1 Corinthians*, 63]

(2) Guard against unrealistic expectations – Pastors are often expected to accomplish more than should be expected of them, and sometimes to accomplish only what God can accomplish. I am not talking about having more on their platter than they can possibly accomplish. This is often the fault of a pastor who does not know how to say “no” or does not delegate well. However, the pastor is often looked upon to make adults out of babies, and then overnight! This is a sign of spiritual immaturity. The real danger inherent in this immaturity is that the believer often lives his spiritual life vicariously through the pastor or other leader in the church. Leaders cannot live your spiritual life for you. It is easy to become too attached to leaders.

Plurality of leadership is important (biblical & practical)

2. Lead by example – Paul *did* sow, Apollos *did* water (v. 6) *No room for laziness!*

What makes a strong church? Where pastor’s lead out in the work! Each did what he was called to do.

ILLUS: What makes a strong missions church? Pastors that lead in the work of missions.

However, while this should be true it is not always the case. Corinth was founded on a strong foundation of leadership and went astray. Why? They did not follow the godly leadership that God had placed among them.

Congregation – Follow as sheep; each has his own responsibility, each has his own contribution. In one situation, you might be a sower, in another a waterer. *ALWAYS REMEMBERING. . . .*

It is **“God who causes the growth” (vv. 6-7)**. The tense of the verbs in these verses show that the work of Paul and Apollos was completed, but God’s activity in giving the increase goes on.

Agricultural illustration – “Now the agricultural analogy is laid out. In a large farm, one person may sow the seed and another may water it, but only God can make it grow. To heap unqualified or exclusive praise on the sower is to focus too narrowly; to praise those who handle the irrigation and forget those who sow the seed is myopic. In any case it is God alone who makes things grow. Should not he be praised?” [Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 76]

v. 7 – “So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.” So godly church leaders remember that all the work is for the glory of God!

3. Guard against a competitive spirit (v. 8 & 9) There must be unity!

vv. 8-9 – “Now he who plants and he who waters are one. . . For we are God’s fellow workers.”

The work of the ministry is not a competition. It is a calling.

Illustrate situation at Corinth (Apollos following Paul)

What about those who follow?

a. With others in the church

b. With other churches – we should strive for the advancement of this church and churches of like-mindedness in knowledge and holiness

Congregation – Also guard against a competitive spirit. Be ever reminding others that the work we are accomplishing is *kingdom work*, which is true church growth.

4. Labor for the reward (v. 8)

There is a unity in the work, but our individuality remains in tact. You do what you are called to do.

“The criterion for reward will be labor and not success.” [Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 41]

Congregation – “The estimate of the fidelity of each servant will not rest on the comparison of it with another’s, but on the labour of each compared with his own task and his own gift. Now who else than God could pronounce such a sentence?” [Godet, from Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 42]