

ENCOURAGING CHURCH LEADERS

1 Corinthians 4:1-20

More than 70% of pastors do not have a close friend with whom they can openly share their struggles. The dominant cause for pastors to leave the pastoral ministry is burnout. Number two is moral failure. These are alarming statistics. And there are many more:

80% of pastors believe the pastoral ministry has negatively affected their families (Life Enrichment Ministries - 1998)

Only 50% of pastors felt that the education they received adequately prepared them for ministry. Most pastors rely on books and conferences as their primary source of continuing education. (George Barna - 2002)

25% of all pastors don't know where to go for help if they have a personal or family conflict or concern. 33 percent have no established means for resolving conflict. (George Barna - 2002)

40% have no opportunity for outside renewal like a family vacation or continuing education. There is a very clear relationship between the amount of time a pastor takes for personal renewal and his satisfaction in his job. (George Barna - 2002)

At any given time, 75% of pastors in America want to quit. (Church Resource Ministries - 1998)

More than 2000 pastors are leaving the ministry each month (Marble Retreat Center 2001)

The major cause of "burnout" is "unrealistic expectations." Other surveys show that pastors leave because church people are not willing to go the same direction and goal of the pastor. Pastors believe God wants them to go in one direction but the people are not willing to follow or change.

There are many situations in our churches and there can be a number of real problems with which we must deal on an ongoing basis. We can be helpful and encouraging to those in leadership positions by not being critical, by recognizing their contribution to the ministry, and by following their guidance.

Refuse To Be Critical 4:1-5

¹ Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. ³ But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by *any* human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. ⁴ For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. 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. 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 (NASB95)

The Church at Corinth was showing signs of immaturity with regard to alignment with various church leaders. They had been exposed to various leaders of the early church: Paul, Simon Peter, Apollos, and perhaps others. One leadership style may have appealed to someone more than another leadership style and that is understandable. However, it is not basis of forming factions in a local body of believers as was occurring in the Corinth Church.

There is a proper perspective we should have with regard to those in leadership positions in the church. In verse 1, Paul is saying that leaders in the church should never be elevated to be above Christ Himself. Paul referred to himself and others in leadership as "servants" or "employees" of Christ. If we put more confidence in a particular leader's teaching above what the Word of God really says, then we are (in effect) elevating that person above Jesus Christ. The leaders in a church are always UNDER (servant, minister of, assistant to, or one who executes the orders of) the Master Jesus Christ. The way the church leaders are to carry out the role of Christ's assistant is that he is to guide those in the church in discovering the mysteries of God.

Regarding the mysteries of God, Paul described himself and others as "stewards" or

“trustees” of God’s plan of salvation. Although Paul was addressing issues related to designated or recognized leaders in the local church, some of the ideas and conclusions regarding responsibilities can be applied to each of us. In fact each of us has been entrusted with God’s Plan of Salvation. So what follows has application in my life and in your life.

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. (4:2)

Being a “trustee” is a privilege; however, **privileges** have associated **responsibilities**. If you were a trustee of an estate or executor of a will, then you are answerable or responsible to someone for the conduct of the way you carry out the assignment. In a similar way, those who are entrusted with God’s Plan of Salvation are answerable for the execution of that trusteeship. If there is accountability, then we should know to whom we are accountable. Is it to those whom we minister, the court of public opinion, to ourselves, or to God?

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. (4:3-4)

People try to interpret us (personally) and what we do. They will make *comparative* judgements about who is the best and will rank people they know in some sort of order. In our humanity we tend to “care” what people say or think about us and what we do. Paul was not concerned about how they or anyone else ranked him as compared to Peter or Apollos. We can define our role and communicate it to others; however, the assessment of how well we carry out that role is left up to God. His is the only opinion that really matters. We are not even to judge (comparatively rank) our own performance. We may think that we are doing very well (compared to others we know) but that does not mean we are where we ought to be. Others tend to comparatively judge us on the basis of outward appearance and we tend to judge ourselves on the basis of “what we think others are thinking about us.” On the other hand, God judges on the basis of the intent of the heart and on the basis of what He has called us to do.

In this same letter, Paul had a lot more to say about judging. In fact, he tells us that we have a responsibility to carry out value judgements. We are to be able to determine if something obviously is right or wrong. We also have to judge between alternatives as part of life. Those are different issues than doing comparative judging or ranking of one person versus someone else.

If we want to be able to judge ourselves before the “appointed time,” then we must be able to distinguish between the “thought and intents of the heart.” We are told in Hebrews Chapter 4 that “the Word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword and is able to separate the thoughts and intents of the heart.” So when Paul wrote to this church (in 1 Cor 11:31) that they should judge (discern the thoughts and intents of) themselves (their hearts) so they would not be judged (come under judgment), he was writing about an evaluation against a standard (in this case, the Word of God) rather than comparing themselves with their neighbors.

It is very difficult to discern the thoughts and intents of our own hearts. We need to use the sharp scalpel of the sword of the Spirit on ourselves to accomplish the task. If it is difficult to discern what is in our own hearts, then it is next to impossible for us to know the thoughts and intents of the heart of someone else. This fact would lead us to agree with Paul’s advice:

5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men’s hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.

Paul is **not** writing about overt and obvious actions of various people with regard to our needing to wait until Jesus returns in order to judge whether something is right or wrong. Paul is writing about those who appear to be one way but have hidden agendas that are not readily discernable. In such cases, we may have suspicions about their motives but have no proof. For

example, some will see a preacher on television and conclude that “he’s just doing that for the money.” In fact, many people outside the church have that opinion about all churches. You might hear them say, “They just want me to come to church so they can get my money.” There may be some preachers on radio or television who are just there for the money and there may be some churches who have robust evangelism programs because they want to have the biggest church in town so the staff can have higher salaries; however, there is no way to judge that unless you have inside information. Therefore, it is sheer speculation to judge the motives of someone else and we should simply trust the Lord to sort it all out in the end.

Recognize Service 4:9-13

⁹ For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. ¹¹ To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; ¹² and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now.

1 Corinthians 4:9-13 (NASB95)

Paul’s comments attest to the fact that the Christian life is not an idyllic life of ease and position and power and being honored. The Corinthians thought they were at the front of the line when it came to giftedness but the reality that Paul experienced was just the opposite.

Paul had been in the service of Jesus for several years and it had not gotten any better. He continued the contrast of the fate of the apostles with the false security and success the church at Corinth envisioned it had. They were full; he was hungry. He had experienced thirst and not having adequate clothing or housing. They were comfortable in their homes and did not know the persecution and prejudice of those who would be uncompromising in their faithfulness.

This is a rather sobering passage. When we look at ourselves in our plenty and in our comfort and in our position, do we look more like Paul or like the “baby” carnal Christians of Corinth? Does this embarrass us to do this comparison?

We sometimes think that if we observe all the commandments then we will prosper and be successful and enjoy a long life. Yet those who will live godly lives in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution. Our response to persecution is prescribed by the Sermon on the Mount. In Col 1:24, Paul wrote, “Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.” Paul realized that the suffering he was going through had a purpose of putting the carnal nature to death. He took up his cross daily.

Accept Guidance 4:14-20

¹⁴ I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet *you would not have* many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. 1 Corinthians 4:14-20 (NASB95)

The position of the Church at Corinth was such that they needed to be ashamed because of their pride and their neglect of other Christians who were suffering persecution. However, Paul was not interested in embarrassing them. He did want them to wake up to the reality of the situation. Paul intended the comparison to be a warning to put their life in order and to get their priorities right.

The reason Paul did not want to “shame them” into making a change was that he recognized that prideful people will become “shameless” when subjected to “open shame.” In other words, people get defensive when they are criticized and they will try to rationalize their positions and thus strengthen their faulty position. Paul’s appeal was through the relationship he had with them as the “spiritual father.”

Paul offered himself as an example to follow if they needed a real life person with whom to identify. He had been faithful to his calling. He was consistent in following the principles and value he knew to be consistent with the mind of Christ. When we do that, then we do not need to be hesitant in telling someone to follow our example.

If we are not living our life so that we feel comfortable in suggesting to someone to follow our example then we should change the way we operate until we can say with confidence "Follow me, as I follow Christ."

If most of us examine our lives, we may find that we come closer to following the Corinthians than to following the example of Paul. So Paul’s warning to them is also for us. We need to know the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings and be made conformable to His death (Phil 3:10). God does not leave us without an example: There will be some among us to remind us of the right way of life.

If the only examples you have around you are bad examples, then changes for the better are very difficult to accomplish if there is not a readily available “how to” manual. In our day, with the word of God being readily available, it is difficult for us to identify with the early church members who did not have the canon of scriptures we have. They might have had a copy of the Torah but they probably did not know the Hebrew language if they came from a Gentile background. They may have had only a letter (or just part of a letter) from Paul or Peter. A real live example of someone who was walking faithfully in the Spirit would be invaluable to someone new in the faith. Such a person (as Timothy would have been) would have been able to provide quick feedback on behaviors and practices so that bad habits and practices would not get entrenched in a church or an individual’s life.

Not everyone will be teachable enough to readily follow a good example. It takes humility to be able to follow the leadership of another person. So often, we think that our way is best and will not even consider adopting a better way unless there is a crisis or someone puts pressure on us to change. Paul was ready to starting putting pressure on those who were so unwise as to be arrogant. The arrogant ones thought they had arrived and reached the pinnacle of spiritual maturity but this very arrogance was keeping them from becoming who they thought they were.

So many Christians have not submitted themselves to sufferings but have “stood up for their rights.” This arrogance hinders the work of the cross in our lives to transform us into the image of the resurrected Christ. The lack of dying to self robs us of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We want to hold on to our earthly power and ability, not realizing that it is a hindrance to spiritual power in the Kingdom of God. Jesus told the Pharisees, “But if I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you.” Paul said earlier that the gospel message came to them not in word only but also in power. So much of the message of the time in which we live is in word only but not in any semblance of spiritual power.

Today our concern should not be with a visit from Paul or some other minister. Our concern ought to be “what will Jesus find when He comes.”