

LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH: 1 CORINTHIANS

Week 5: The Role of Human Leaders in the Church

ANALYSIS

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The argument to this point has been dealing with the problem of strife in the church. At issue, however, is not simply quarreling but also the Corinthians' misguided perception of the nature of the church and its leadership, in this case especially the role of teachers. So Paul now takes up the this question of how they are to regard their teachers, using the farming metaphor of vv. 6–9 and the building metaphor of vv. 10–17.

- a. Human leaders are God's workmen, 3:5–23

- (1) A direct statement, 3:5

(3:5) What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task.

The Corinthians' boasting in leaders like Paul and Apollos is clear evidence that the Corinthians are acting like "mere humans," and therefore not yet what they should be. But beyond that, their boasting misses the point of the Christian ministry. Paul seeks to bring this out with two rhetorical questions: "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul." "Servants, through whom you came to believe." Paul and Apollos were servants "through whom" the Corinthians came to believe. The emphasis is on the fact that the Corinthians did not believe *in* Paul or Apollos, but *through* them came to believe in Christ. And each servant worked according to the task given him by Christ himself.

- (2) An illustration from farming, 3:6–9

(3:6) I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.

As v. 9 and the rest of the argument indicate, Paul is not thinking of the conversion of individual Corinthians, but of the planting of the church as such (v. 9, "you [plural] are God's field"). The one who "planted" was Paul, who founded the church. The one who "watered it" was Apollos, who continued a teaching ministry among them. The one who "has been making it grow" is God to whom they all belong (v. 9). The "field" or farm is the church in Corinth.

(3:7) So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

The problem in Corinth is with perspective. They think altogether too highly of their teachers. The questions “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul?” are answered with a unqualified “Nothing!” Paul and Apollos do have essential tasks to perform, for which they will receive their own rewards. But they have no independent importance.

(3:8) The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each will be rewarded according to their own labor.

Those over whom the Corinthians are bickering only serve under God. Therefore, their mutual concern is singular: the growth of the crop to a rich harvest.

(3:9) For we are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field, God’s building.

With an explanatory “for,” Paul picks up the main points of the analogy (that Paul and Apollos are workers together in a common cause and belong to God, and that the Corinthians, therefore, do not belong to Paul and Apollos because they, too, belong to God) and drives them home: “We are co-workers in God’s service; you are God’s field.”

This whole paragraph can be summarized with these emphatic words. Everything is God’s—the church, its ministry, Paul, Apollos—everything.

(3) An illustration from building, 3:10–17

At the end of the previous analogy, Paul made a change of metaphors (to “God’s building”), which he now sets out to elaborate. He is concerned to warn, in the strongest possible language, those who are currently “building the church.” The paragraph is dominated by the indefinite pronouns “someone else,” “no one,” “each one,” and “anyone.” Since Apollos is not mentioned, and since the urgency both here and in the further application of the metaphor that follows (vv. 16–17) is specifically with what was happening in the church at the time of Paul’s writing, the particulars therefore shift from Paul and Apollos to Paul and those responsible for the current “wood, hay or straw” of “wisdom.”

(3:10) By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care.

In this new illustration three of the comparisons remain the same as in the illustration from farming: (1) The church in Corinth is the building, not the individual Christian, (2) God is the owner (v. 9), and (3) Paul again is presented as the founder of the church—the one who “laid a foundation as a wise builder.” The phrase “wise builder” (*architektōn*) refers to someone who serves as architect and chief engineer.

(3:11) For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Paul warns the Corinthians that there is only one genuine foundation, the gospel itself with its basic content of salvation through Jesus Christ.

(3:12) If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,

This is the primary point of this entire paragraph. The point being that the quality of the superstructure must be appropriate to the foundation.

But what does Paul intend by the six building materials, “gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw”? Although the materials represent a scale of descending value, Paul’s own use of the illustration makes no point of it. Nor does he place emphasis on the “value” (i.e., costliness) of the first three in contrast to the last three. His own explanation in vv. 13–15 picks up a singular theme, namely that some materials endure fire while others are consumed.

(3:13) their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.

A day of judgment is coming, and it will test everyone’s “building,” that is, how one has built, whether of perishable or imperishable materials. The test, with its resultant disclosure of the quality of the materials, will determine the reward.

“Fire” was a well-known figure for judgment. Here, as vv. 14–15 will make clear, the emphasis is on the “testing” quality of fire. It will judge each one’s workmanship to see whether it has been made of “quality” material.

(3:14) If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. (3:15) If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

In vv. 14–15 Paul spells out the results of the “testing by fire.” Those who stay with the gospel as Paul preached it, who build the church in Corinth with “gold, silver, and costly stones,” will see their work “survive” the test, and they “will receive their reward.” Those who persist in pursuing worldly wisdom, who are building with “wood, hay, or straw,” will see their work consumed and they themselves “will suffer loss”—although their loss, Paul is quick to qualify, does not refer to their salvation.

(3:16) Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?

In vv. 16–17 Paul carries the imagery of vv. 9b–15 a step further by specifying the kind of building that he and the others have been erecting, namely God’s temple in Corinth. Paul begins with a question: “Do you not know who you are?” It is clear from their current behavior that they do not know, or at least have not seriously considered the implications of who they are as God’s people in Corinth.

(3:17) If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person; for God’s temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

As God’s temple in Corinth, the church was to be his alternative to Corinth, both its religions and vices. But the Corinthians, by their worldly wisdom, boasting, and divisions, were in effect banishing the Spirit and thus about to destroy the only alternative God had in their city. Therefore, Paul solemnly warns those who were thus wreaking havoc in the church: “If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person.”

(4) Conclusion, 3:18–23

(3:18) Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become “fools” so that you may become wise.

Those who persist in pursuing wisdom, who are thereby destroying, not building, the church, are self-deceived. Therefore, Paul urges that they abandon their pursuit of worldly wisdom in favor of God’s “foolishness,” which is true wisdom.

(3:19) For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: “He catches the wise in their craftiness”; (3:20) and again, “The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.”

Paul now gives the theological basis for the preceding exhortation, plus its scriptural support. The way of stating it is the reverse of 1:18–25. There he set out to demonstrate that “the wisdom of God [Christ crucified] is foolishness to the world.” Here he says, “The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight.” Exactly the same point is made, but now in terms of the divine perspective, which ultimately is the only one that counts.

Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11 are cited to prove that God has always regarded human efforts to understand his ways as foolish.

(3:21a) So then, no more boasting about human leaders!

With a final emphatic “so then,” Paul brings the present argument to its conclusion. The words, “no more boasting about human leaders,” directly addresses the appeal of 1:10–12. In other words, let no one among you still be bold enough to say, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos.”

(3:21b) All things are yours, (3:22) whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,

Paul now gives the theological basis for his statement, “no more boasting about human leaders.” Why not? Because “all things are yours.” These words are based on the final theological conclusion of v. 23, in which this statement is repeated and the ultimate basis added: “All things are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.” With these words Paul completely transforms their slogans. They say, “I am of Paul, etc.” With the analogy of the field (vv. 5–9) Paul changed that to “you are of God.” Now he makes the further transformation, “All things are of you, including Paul, Apollos, and Cephas.”

(3:23) and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

These final words serve as the ultimate theological basis for what has preceded. It is not that “all things are yours” in some selfish, independent, and self-centered sense. They are yours because you belong to Christ; and all things are his (cf. 15:23–28).

b. Human leaders are directly responsible to God alone, 4:1–5

Given the concluding nature of the exhortations of 3:18–23, we may wonder why Paul feels compelled to continue. The Corinthians' theological misunderstanding of the gospel and church and the role of their teachers have now been addressed. But at the heart of much of this is the attitude of many toward Paul himself. These people are not simply *for* Apollos or Peter; they are decidedly *anti*-Paul. They are rejecting both his teaching and his authority. This presents Paul with a genuine dilemma. On the one hand, he must reassert his authority. His understanding of the gospel is the only way to understand it. On the other hand, he must do that without blunting the force of his argument to this point, especially his contention as to the servant role of an apostle (3:5).

Paul begins in 4:1–5 by making an application of the servant model and showing how that relates to their treatment of him. He changes images from farm to household and insists that he is God's servant, not theirs; and they are not allowed to judge another's servant. Paul says that the Corinthians are to regard him and Apollos as servants. But his new point is that although he "belongs" to them (since he is Christ's servant for them), he is not accountable to them. What is required of household stewards is faithfulness (v. 2), and only the master of the house can make that determination (vv. 4b, 5c).

(4:1) This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.

This is not an entirely new topic. Paul is going back to the point of 3:5–9. Paul, Apollos, and Cephas do indeed "belong" to them; but that is to be understood in light of 3:9, where Paul had asserted that they first belong to God. *This*, he says, is how "people ought to regard us, as servants of Christ." In 3:5–9 the word for "servant" was *diákonos* emphasizing the servant nature of their task under God. Now the metaphor changes to that of a household. The first word, "servants [of Christ]," (*hupēretēs*), is a more general term, but often refers to one who has the duties of administering the affairs of another.

"Mysteries" means the revelation of the gospel, now known through the Spirit and especially entrusted to the apostles to proclaim.

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

What is required in "stewards" is faithfulness, that they be trustworthy.

(4:3) I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself.

Paul now applies the general maxim of v. 2 ("it is required in stewards that a person be found faithful") specifically to himself and the Corinthians' attitude toward him. They have been "examining/judging" him. For Paul, v. 2 forbids such activity. Since the criterion for judgment is faithfulness to a committed trust, only the one from whom he had received the trust can judge him—not his fellow servants nor in this case those who might be "under him," the Corinthians themselves.

(4:4) My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.

The reason Paul can make such bold statements as those in v. 3 is finally given at the end of this verse (“It is the Lord who judges me.”). But before he gets there, he feels compelled to add a qualifier to the statement at the end of the last sentence, “I do not even judge myself.” As far as discharging the responsibilities of his stewardship is concerned, Paul says his conscience is clear.

(4:5) Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

Paul brings the imagery of this paragraph to its conclusion in the form of a strong imperative: “judge nothing before the appointed time.” By “nothing” Paul does not mean that they are to make no judgments. In 5:12, in the context of flagrant immorality in their midst, they are commanded to “judge those on the inside,” and in 6:5 they are expected to be able to judge disputes between brothers within the church. Rather, the kinds of “judgments” that must cease are those they are currently making about Paul and his ministry.

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