
So You want to be an Apostle?

1 Corinthians 4:1-21⁴

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The Christian life is full of tensions. There are many constant and opposite pulls. A.W. Tozer write eloquently of many of these in his Essay, "That Incredible Christian".

Many of these are paradoxes which are essential to being a Christian - they define the otherness of the Biblical way. For example, the way up is down, and when we are going down we are actually going up; the way to live is to die and when we are dying are really beginning to live.

Many of these are opposites which are dangerous to Christian living - they pull us down from the balance of the third way. Trust or work, serve or lead, now or later... There are many things in the Christian life that if we say "this or that..." we will go far astray. I have come to believe most things in the Christian life and ministry are "this and that..."

As we come to our text today, remember that our author, the Apostle Paul, has been dealing with congregational divisions and leadership difficulties. In chapter three he has characterized a Biblical leadership and confronted the failed leaders. What he wrote them has direct impact on us today. So much of what passes for Christian leadership today has little to do the cross and with Christ.

Now Paul's tone changes. He begins his ironic, sarcastic tone that sometimes will mark pointed challenges. So they want to be leaders? How about those who want to be... Apostles? How about all those who think they can decide that Paul (and others like with his cross and Christ centered, humble, unglamorous, unattractive, inelegant ministry) are not true leaders?

Their Examination- Right or Wrong? (v. 1-5)

Did they have the right to sit in judgment on the way Paul carried out his ministry?

¹ This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³ But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes,

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who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

The Right Standard (v. 1-2)

The church needs a right standard to apply to evaluating leaders. The standard they have used was simply from the world and pagan. It reflected their sad and carnal immaturity.

The true Apostles, the qualified leaders of the church are to be regarded as servants of Christ. The Lord is their Master. While they serve in the church and they serve with others, they are neither under the church nor under others. Particularly the Apostles were not subject to the church. The democratic impulse in the church, while it might be good political theory, is bad theological practice. So if you are going to evaluate the leadership, the first criteria is: do they formally and functionally serve Christ?

The true Apostles and qualified leaders of the church are to be regarded as stewards of the Scriptures. Frankly, this is not just the text. We are entrusted with understanding the Scriptures a certain way. When Paul speaks of the mysteries of God, he is talking about an approach to the Bible that sees Christ as fulfilling the Old Testament and the New Testament as interpreting and explaining the Old. So, we have not merely been given a Bible, but are responsible as stewards to handle it the way the Apostles did. So if you are going to evaluate the leadership, the second criteria is: do they properly handle the Word of God?

The Right Judge (v. 3-4)

Biblical evaluation must also understand who ultimately decides? Two things to consider here:

- Paul is speaking as an Apostle. He meets all the criteria for an Apostle, something the church at Corinth will actually challenge later. But ultimately no one's assessment of his Apostleship stands over against the Lord's assignment. Essentially, the church cannot approve or disapprove Apostles – that is the Lord's prerogative alone.
- We must be careful attributing this kind of independence of the Apostles to the Elders. We do not have a sovereign calling or assignment from God. Elders are called by the church. But ultimately, if we are faithful to be servants and to be stewards of God's Word, all else is secondary.

Paul sees no court where he can be charged. He sees no charge against himself. His conscience is clear. But even that does not acquit him. The ultimate judge is God. Only God can say whether Paul has served well as a servant and a steward.

This means that we must find the third way between lording it over as having total authority and being totally subject to the preferences and passing whims of the people. There is an authority given to leaders of the church. But it is as servants. And it is in the Word of God. As we see all through the New Testament, leaders also have authority in applying the clear commands of the Bible to people's lives.

There may be times where an elder/pastor has to take a doctrinal or a moral stand. The people will either submit or not. Hopefully, the poise of the people is as Peter says, to be ready to be persuaded and to obey.

The Right Time (v. 5)

The reason is that we are not to pass ultimate judgment is simply because we do truly know people's hearts, particularly their motivations. So while we may need to be discerning as to whether a leader truly is godly servant and a goodly steward, we know that the true disclosure will not take place in this world.

In the world to come, Jesus will open all and disclose all. He will bring forward the leaders' works and evaluate both in the doing and the results. This is not a judgement on sin – that is already done at the cross. This is on our service in kingdom. Why will it wait till that day? Because then the hidden things of God and man will be revealed.

The last sentence is a surprise. Did you hear it? "Then each one will receive his commendation from God." See, there is no condemnation when it comes to the disclosure of our works. There is gain and loss of reward. So Paul takes a surprising turn. In the final day. Unlike the Corinthians, there is an expectation, not of condemnation, but rather of commendation.

That sentence is important. It goes to the heart of the matter. The Corinthians are operating from a poise and practice of critique and condemnation. But not the Lord. He is prepared on that day to praise and commend. Since Jesus will in that day should that not be our poise today as well?

Their Expectation - Exaltation or Humiliation? (v. 6-13)

Paul now exposes their self-promotion and self-importance that has divided the church. What happened in the church at Corinth and happens often today is often the fault of both the people and the leaders.

A Fragmenting Pursuit of Self-Importance (v. 6-7)

⁶ I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. ⁷ For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

They needed to keep their finger on the text of Scripture, whether in the Old Testament or from the New Testament Apostles. It seems that public figures of Paul and Apollos were not actually the leaders who were being super-elevated. But the underlying problem is the leader's tendency to go beyond the Scriptures with self-important pronouncements. They huff and puff with the air supplied them by their followers. Soon they are as bloated as puffer-fish and just as dangerous. The first correction then Paul draws from a popular idiom of the day – this is probably not a quote from the Scripture itself. What must be done is to point firmly to the text and say, "Your authority and pronouncements must not go beyond this..."

Their pride led them to self-promotion and self-elevation. Yes, they were gifted. Yes, they were insightful, eloquent, beautiful, powerful. People admired them and acclaimed them. So they had an inflated view of themselves. And in order to maintain their elevation above others, they had to put others down. Standing on each other's shoulders was no longer a way to make advances in Biblical understanding. It had become the way to make advances in personal position.

They failed to recognize their dependence on God. Through a series of three sarcastic questions, Paul pricks their inflated egos.

Who are the kind of people who are recognizing you as special above the other leaders? If it is only your followers how accurate can their assessment be?

Is there any special ability or gift that you have that was not God's gift? Are you really going to take self-credit for God's gifting?

And worse, are you really going to boast in your abilities and accomplishments as though they were all yours? How can you possibly boast about that which God gave you?

So here is the tension. Leaders are gifted and able. People tend to promote them and follow them. But it is God who gives the abilities and gifts and enables their accomplishments. So we have to learn to honor people for what God is doing through them. In this way, God is glorified by the gifts He gives and the good they do.

A Futile Sense of Arrival (v. 8)

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you!

Paul's sarcasm is aimed right at their foolish sense of arrival. Everything that God has promised for the future they are claiming for the present. They have everything. They are kings. They reign with Jesus now. Wouldn't it be great if the Apostles could also be a part of their super abundance?

Well this is what is called an over-realized eschatology. The Jews of Jesus' day had expressed it. The church at Corinth had adopted it. The modern word-of-faith, health and wealth movement has perfected it (it you can say error can be perfected). So there is an impulse in Christianity to do this. Yes, the present age is the beginning of the new creation. Through the resurrection and through our regeneration, the powers of the age to come have intruded into the world and into our lives. So the new creation has begun. But it has not fully arrived. It has been launched, but it has not fully arrived. What Jesus' resurrection and our regeneration began will come to fulfillment in the New Heavens and New Earth.

So how does this go off the rails? The promises of God which are primarily aimed for the future are shifted to be primarily for the present. With the Jews they thought that the promises of the Kingdom meant that it had to come in their day. For the Corinthians, the promises that we would rule and reign with Jesus in the new creation mean

that they, the leaders, rule and reign with Jesus now. We will find this reoccurring all through the book. This idea had infected nearly every aspect of the Corinthian church life and ministry.

God has promised us no suffering, no tears, no sickness, no disease, rule, glorious unimaginable riches in the garden city of the new heavens and new earth. But the word-of-faith people have taken those promises primarily for the future and made them primarily for the present. We can have all that God promises for then, now if we will just believe and claim it. Now, hear me. God does heal. God does enrichen. God does give leaders ruling gifts and abilities. The Spirit does reverse Babel at times in the work of the gospel. But the guaranteed fulfillment of these promises awaits the future. Praise God for the present manifestations which serve to whet out appetites for the glories of that day.

Want to know how practical this is? I have an African parasite that is replicating in my body. Right now there is no effective cure. I believe God can and will heal me. Godly believers have prayed asking God to heal me. I will be glad if God does in this life. And I will be content if He chooses not to. But one thing I know absolutely for sure is that I will be healed when God gives me a new body. So I pray and ask and wait in hope.

A Foolish Dismissal of Suffering (v. 9-13)

The result is that the church at Corinth had little place for suffering in its own life. It had no framework to understand the suffering of the Apostles and leaders in other churches.

⁹ For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. ¹¹ To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, ¹² and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; ¹³ when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

Paul's sarcasm now rises to a painful level. It would be one thing to say that God has blessed Corinth so that they prosper and have little suffering. But to turn around instead and say that there is something wrong with Paul because that is not his experience.

There is a painful characterization of the Biblical ministry. The picture here is likely taken from when a Roman general returned from war. He led the parade. His officers, mighty men and soldiers followed. Behind them, in chains, came the conquered nobles and leaders. Then came the ordinary prisoners usually of the enemy's soldiers. Last, came the captured slaves. At the end of the captured slaves came those who were condemned to death. There you have it. The Apostles are condemned slaves doomed to die. Their serving and suffering has become a spectacle to all in universe. You want

to be an Apostle? You want to be a leader in the church? Here is the very real possibility.

So, there is a pointed contrast between their perception of themselves and the experience of the Apostles. Believe me, this statement is making fun of them. They have contrasted themselves to the hard situations and sufferings of the Apostles. They are strong, honored and reputable. The Apostles? They are weak, dishonored and constantly in trouble with the authorities, including the church at Jerusalem.

There is a powerful rebuke to their fundamental thinking. In all this trial and trouble, poverty and persecution, the Apostles have responded in a way that is pleasing to the Lord. The piercing question then is: how have the Corinthians church responded in all their abundance, wealth, giftedness and apparent graces and blessings? The rest of the book will answer that with a resounding, badly.

Their Examples - Guides or Fathers? (v. 14-21)

Paul has been rough on them. Now he changes his tone a little to appeal to them. Who has set the example for them?

¹⁴ I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. ¹⁵ For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. ¹⁶ I urge you, then, be imitators of me. ¹⁷ That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. ¹⁸ Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. ²¹ What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

Their Relationship (v. 14-15)

His purpose for writing he is not trying to shame them, but to correct them. Should they be ashamed? Yes, absolutely. They should be humbled and embarrassed. But Paul is not writing to manipulate them into some sort of guilt trip. He has written to speak truth into their minds and hearts with the hope that the Spirit will help them to receive it. He wants them to understand that he loves them as his spiritual children. This means that he **must** correct them and even sharply when needed.

His place in their life then is as a spiritual father. They may have many coaches, counselors, spiritual guides... but they only have one spiritual father. Paul was used by God to bring them faith. Paul now is being used by God to help them live the faith.

Their Responsibility (v. 16-17)

God has set Paul and example in the church for them (and us) to imitate. What was the church to imitate? Dress like Paul? Be single like Paul? No, they were to imitate his cross-centered, Christ-loving, gospel-proclaiming, life-sacrificing ways. Who

cares what deodorant Paul wore or what sandals he favored or tablet he thought best. But we care a lot about being molded by his ways that grew out of the Word.

So Paul sent them Timothy to learn what Paul wanted them to learn and to imitate. Timothy would be to them what Paul had taught and modeled for Timothy. It was more than truths, but Paul's "ways". Timothy is to say and show the sacrificial life of the cross. Here is what that looked like.

1 Corinthians 2:2-5 (NLT)

² For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified. ³ I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴ And my message and my preaching were very plain. Rather than using clever and persuasive speeches, I relied only on the power of the Holy Spirit. ⁵ I did this so you would trust not in human wisdom but in the power of God.

1 Corinthians 4:11-13 (NLT)

¹¹ Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home. ¹² We work wearily with our own hands to earn our living. We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. ¹³ We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash—right up to the present moment.

This would be what Timothy would say and show. His very manner of life would be a rebuke to all that they held high. It would show them the true way. Even as this presses on us, the true way. How does a text like this land on us? How does it cause us to think differently about our own sacrificeless lives? How does this speak into our self-focused, child-centered, ministry-optional lives? What does the pattern of Paul mean for us? What comforts need to go? What casualness should be focused? What treasures reevaluated? What relationships, entertainments, distractions should be released?

Their Rod (v. 18-21)

Lest they and us miss the importance of this, Paul now brandishes the rod. If he is a parent, there will be a need for more severity if there is no change... Listen to this final paragraph as rendered in the New Living Translation.

¹⁸ Some of you have become arrogant, thinking I will not visit you again. ¹⁹ But I will come—and soon—if the Lord lets me, and then I'll find out whether these arrogant people just give pretentious speeches or whether they really have God's power. ²⁰ For the Kingdom of God is not just a lot of talk; it is living by God's power. ²¹ Which do you choose? Should I come with a rod to chasten you, or should I come with love and a gentle spirit?

Their arrogant assumption that Paul would not come to them again is the reason they are behaving the way they are. He won't know. He won't care. There is nothing he can do about it. This is our church. This is our way. If the Lord allows, Paul will come

and check them out. He has the authority to do this – he is an Apostle. He will determine if they are just talk or are they the real thing. They have to decide. How they respond to his letter and to Timothy will determine whether he comes with a severe chastening or with strong care for restoration.

Reflect and Respond

Paul and timothy cannot come to us now. But they still speak to us in the Word. There the precepts, principles and patterns of the crucified life speak strongly into our situations. Will we listen?

Paul has presented a challenge to all in leadership here at the Chapel. Do you hear it?

Do you see yourself first as a servant?

Do you take seriously being a steward of God's Word?

Is sacrifice and hard, comfort breaking toil the norm rather than the exception?

What does it take for you to not serve, shepherd, suffer?

For you who aspire to leadership, are you prepared to live a crucified life? Will you pay the cost? Or are you seeking leadership in order to be in control at the top in the know, have power to say what goes on?

Are you ready for: (1 Corinthians 2:2-5; 4:11-13 [NLT])

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