
What Happened to Leadership?

1 Corinthians 3:1-23⁵

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How do we measure Biblical leadership?

Who do we look for to appoint?

Why do we follow those we do?

Preliminary considerations:

We are in a sustained argument from 1:10 - 4:21. This is important to recognize.

Although Paul directly addresses the bitter factionalism of the Corinthian believers in these chapters, he does so in part by tackling two deeper problems that lie behind the factionalism and undergird it. The first is the Corinthians' implicit misunderstanding of the gospel, and in particular of the centrality of the cross. Pragmatically, their love of pomp, prestige, rhetoric, social approval, publicly lauded "wisdom" – in short, their raw triumphalism – demonstrated that they had not reflected very deeply on the entailments of the gospel of the crucified Messiah. That is why Paul spends so much time on these points in the first two chapters of his epistle. But the second implicit misunderstanding displayed by these squabbling Corinthians concerned the nature of Christian leadership. [Carson, D. A.]

The first evidence of their worldly immaturity, their lack of growth is their following of the "superstars". This is not division in and of itself. Paul recognizes that they

The Problem with their Understanding of Leadership (v. 1-17)

Paul challenges their understanding of leadership through three interesting metaphors

Babies and Food (v. 1-4)

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

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There is a lot of debate about these 4 verses. Is Paul saying that they are natural, fleshly, carnal and therefore not believers? Or is he addressing people he considers to be Christians, but sees as being dominated by the world, the flesh?

He calls them *brothers* so that means that they are Christians.

He cannot address them *as spiritual* but must speak to *as fleshly* particularly the kind of "carnality" associated with new believers. He had to speak to them like that at the beginning. But now, after all these years it still has not changed much.

There are Christians who are international-class projectile vomiters, spiritually speaking, after years and years of life. They simply cannot digest what Paul calls "solid food." You must give them milk, for they are not ready for anything more. [Carson]

So they are believers whose lives are marked by worldly immaturity. The word "flesh" or "carnal" should not be taken to refer to sexual sin. It simply means that they thought and lived similarly to the culture around them out of which they have been saved. Yet they are still characterized by that kind of behavior.

What evidence does Paul produce to prove his point? Verse 3, there are jealousies and quarreling among them. This is most evident in the way they think about leadership. Verse 4. They are behaving in a pure human way when they identify themselves by leaders they idolize. This is the way of the world and it is the way of immature believers. They tend to elevate people they think of as meeting their standards for leadership and then identify themselves as connected to or following that leader. Their wrong views of leadership are a part of their immaturity.

So they are acting like people of the world, people of the flesh, people without the Spirit. They are acting like pagans.

They are infants still and display their wretched immaturity even in the way that they complain if you give them more than milk. Not for them solid knowledge of Scripture; not for them mature theological reflection; not for them growing and perceptive Christian thought. They want nothing more than another round of choruses and a "simple message" – something that won't challenge them to think, to examine their lives, to make choices, and to grow in their knowledge and adoration of the living God. [Carson, D. A.]

Servants and Farming (v. 5-9)

The second analogy corrects their human and idolatrous view of leadership.

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

A Biblical view of leadership is easily illustrated through the agricultural illustration Paul uses. This farming illustration is a common way of understanding many aspects of the Christian life. Here are some important principles that correct the immature, childish view of leadership.

Biblical leaders are servants, not stars.

Christians do not come to belief because of certain leaders. It is God who ordains the means to your salvation. It is God who signs each servant their role.

God causes fruitfulness, not leaders.

Even if you have the right leaders, without God's work, there will not be growth. Having good leadership does not guarantee the results. And conversely, good results are NOT the evidence of a good leadership.

Leaders serve according to their abilities and will be rewarded according to God's standards.

Even though the workers are assigned different tasks, they "have one purpose" (3: 8). No one worker's task has any independent importance. It is in the bringing together of the tasks, crowned by God himself who makes things grow, that the harvest is finally brought in. Doubtless each worker "will be rewarded according to his own labor." Paul does not want to deny the importance of individual faithfulness and industry. But in terms of the great task at hand — making things grow and bringing them to harvest — it is important to get the big picture straight. [Carson, D. A.]

Leaders understand they are working for God with other fellow servants.

Leaders are serving along with all of God's people. Though they have been appointed by God and assigned their place by God, that does not mean that they are God. We are serving with God's people even when given a limited shepherding authority over them.

Biblical leaders are working for God! We are not working for the people. We are not working for the church. We are not working for ourselves. We are in the field, planting, watering, weeding, reaping under and for God. We are here for Him.

God is the owner of the field and fruit.

Christian leaders are only servants of Christ and are not to be accorded allegiance that is reserved for God alone. It is not that gratitude to Paul or Apollos or some other worker is inappropriate. Rather, what Paul finds inexcusable is the kind of fawning and defensive attachment to one particular leader that results in one-upmanship, quarreling, and jealousy. [D. A. Carson]

We can't say this often and loud enough. You are God's field. God gave His Son's life's blood to purchase you, to own you, to make you his people. Often, leaders see the people as *theirs*. And people are not to look at leaders this way. You do not

belong to leaders. Leaders did not die for you. Leaders may be a help and guide and guard and teacher to you – but you do not belong to them. You belong to God. It is childish, immature, infant carnality to say, “I belong to so and so...”

Beloved, we are servants, working in God’s field for His pleasure. Beloved, you are God’s field and God’s fruit among whom we labor for His glory.

Builders and Construction (v. 9-17)

Verse 9 is a transition. It introduces the final analogy is that of builders and construction.

⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

This analogy serves as a warning. It was needed in Corinth. It is desperately needed today.

The Apostles have laid the foundations for the church.

Their teaching is the basis on which the church is going to be built. There is no other foundation and all other substitutes will not produce the spiritual building God intends.

Jesus Christ is the only foundation.

There is no other. Paul and the Apostles ground the church on the person and work of Jesus. Those who are saved believe in Jesus. Those who are growing in holiness and maturity do so as a result of being taught all the Bible teaches about Jesus with a special emphasis on what the New Testament says.

Respected leaders are not themselves the foundation. We have already seen that the carnal, childish immaturity of these people expressed itself in leader-worship. So Paul did not lay a foundation of himself, or Peter or Apollos, or James. Paul laid the foundation, and others as well. But the foundation that was laid was Jesus Christ.

Biblical leaders build up the church on the truths the Apostles taught.

This means that we must be teaching the Bible and stay true to its message. We must be preaching the Scriptures. We are deeply warned that, having the foundation of Jesus Christ we had better not be building with anything else. This has always been a problem in the church. We think that we can build up the church with ideas, principles, teaching that is not grounded in the Apostolic deposit.

Biblical leaders recognize that *people* are the church they are building up.

Notice that this is not addressed to the stones or the house, but to the builders. In the church at Corinth and all over the world today, leaders are trying to build with all different kinds of materials. This is described as their works, their labors. But it is also the stones that they build with. We are responsible to be careful over who is being added to the church as well as to how we are building into your lives.

God will test by fire all that the leaders have produced.

This text is aimed at the leaders Paul is correcting. While popular interpretations apply it to all believers, that won't fit the context. The architects are Paul and the Apostles. The builders are those who serve God to build up the church: evangelists, preachers/prophets, shepherds and teachers. It may well be that the works of all believers will be tested and rewarded. But you cannot make that argument from this text. The "all", "any" and "everyone" is referring to all the builders.

God will determine what is genuine, lasting and valuable. All that we have done in the people we serve and build up the church with will be submitted to fierce fire of God's refining testing. Then we will know who is authentic.

There will be leaders who will see the labors of their ministry pass through the fire and they will receive rewards. There will be leaders who will see the labors of their ministry go up in smoke. They will come out on the other side of that Day with nothing to show for their labor.

This is a sobering thought to all who have been appointed by God through the church to

It is "that Day" whose fire will disclose what is real, authentic. This is the Day of the Lord and the final judgment. I want then to suggest that possibly the works, the building materials here are *people*. All the false professors and fake Christians will be revealed by the fire of that Day. The genuine believers and all that was built into their lives will remain.

As if to drive that point home, Paul asks a rhetorical question in verse 16.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Verses 16-17 are referring to the church as the Temple, not the individual whose body is the temple. That will come later. The context sets the church up as being the building of God, the temple that was as a whole, constructed as a habitation of the Spirit.

This is part of the New Covenant aspect of ministry leadership. The Old Testament focused on leaders, prophets, kings. But the new Covenant focuses on Christ. The Old Covenant had a Tent and a Temple, a physical structure where sacrifice and worship took place. The New Covenant is not about building edifices, but edifying people. It is about building up the living stones into the habitation of God. The Old Covenant had the cloud and pillar of fire, the Shekinah Presence. The New Covenant has the indwelling of the Spirit of God in the living temple, the church.

Given the church's place in redemptive history, there is a serious warning about harming the church. What leaders do in evangelizing and edifying people *can be destructive of the church*. The leaders at Corinth were destroying God's people. Therefore, they were destroying God's church. Paul warns them that in turn, God may destroy them.

The Reversal of their Failed Leadership (v. 18-23)

How will this failed leadership be reversed?

18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," 20 and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." 21 So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

Rejection of the world's way of thinking (v. 18-20)

First there must be a rejection of the world's approach to leadership. It is a self-deception to think that the wisdom of the world will do the work of the ministry.

End boasting in man (v. 21)

We must also end our elevation of leaders and our boasting in them. This is the highlighted imperative. Stop boasting in man. Stop boasting in human ability, human accomplishments, human attainments.

Affirm the oneness of God's people. (v. 22-23)

All are making their contribution in the church. The leaders and the people are all belong to the church, the field, the building. Each has his part; but all serve together. Seasons of blessing come and go, times of hardship come and go, but our work in God's field is used by God.

I want you to listen to an extended quote from D.A. Carson. He writes:

The five things that follow "Paul or Apollos or Cephas" represent the fundamental tyrannies of human life, the things that enslave us, the things that hold us in bondage. (1) The world squeezes us into its mold (compare Rom. 12: 1- 2). It demands

so much of our attention and allegiance that we seldom devote thought and passion to the world to come. This world ties us down; it does not encourage us to soar into the unexplored dimensions of the new heaven and the new earth. (2) Similarly, this present life clamors to be treated as if it were worthy of ultimate respect. We cling to life as if the Bible had never told us that our lives are but vapor that quickly vanishes when the first puff of breeze passes by... So where is the wisdom in endlessly serving the noisy pressures of this life if we take no thought for the life to come? And at the end of this life, there is only (3) death, which hovers over us, the ultimate specter. Death is a tyranny that no one escapes. Its power extends far beyond the mere experience of it. Because it looms just over the horizon, it casts its long shadow backward and constrains us all our lives. Even the attempt to live our lives by suppressing the thought of death is an abysmal response that mutely attests the power of its tyranny. So also does our habit of setting "life goals," on the morbid assumption that all we have is threescore years and ten, more or less. How would our life goals change if we were planning not only for seventy years of existence here, but also for eternity? Isn't this partly what Jesus meant when he told us to lay up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6: 19- 21)?

But we find it very hard to heed his admonition, because death tyrannizes us. (4) Thus the constant urgency of the present and (5) the vague promises and threats of the future combine to divert our attention away from the God who holds both the present and the future in his hands. For that, surely, is Paul's point. If we truly belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God, then we belong to God. And what a God! He is sovereign over these petty tyrannies; he has shown his great love to his people; he has paid for their redemption at the cost of the death of his dear Son. All five realities look very different if we examine them from the secure position of belonging to Jesus Christ. (1) This world becomes the gateway to the next. Here God has placed us, and, recognizing his sovereign sway, we delight in the good gifts he has given us here, even as we recognize that allegiance to Christ means we can no longer "belong" to the fallen order in rebellion against its Maker. No, we do not belong to it anymore; but in one important sense, this world belongs to us. Everything belongs to our heavenly Father, and we are his children; so everything belongs to us. Of course, the world is not "ours" for our ruthless and selfish exploitation. It is "ours" only in connection with our relationship to our God and Father. But that means we belong to the One who will one day create a new heaven and earth and will enable us to delight in it. We are the heirs of God; we are coheirs with Christ (Rom. 8: 17). If we suffer in this world, as he did, it is a relatively trifling matter, considering that God in his grace has joined us to the "winning side." We can no longer be tyrannized by this world, for its sway is not absolute; our allegiance belongs to another, and our vision is cast beyond this world to the world to come. Similar things can be said about the other four tyrannies. (2) This present life is no longer merely something to cling to. It is the sphere in which we may serve our God and Redeemer, in anticipation of the life to come. (3) Death, that fearsome "last enemy" (1 Cor. 15: 26), cannot have the last word, for our Master has vanquished death. His resurrection presages our own. At one level death can

even be embraced, for, with Paul, we recognize that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5: 8). We even understand what Paul meant when he said, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1: 21). (4) The present is where I live and serve God, but it cannot devour me. God is no less sovereign over the present than he was over the past and will be over the future. (5) And if he is sovereign over the future, then the future, too, is not something to be feared, but to be embraced – simply because I belong to Christ, Christ belongs to God, and God controls the future. So none of these tyrannies – “the world or life or death or the present or the future” – control us any longer. They have been decisively beaten. They are under the sway of the sovereign Redeemer, and since we are the company of the redeemed, they are ours. There is an exquisite compass of vision here that is tragically lost when all of our Christianity means nothing more than “finding fulfillment” or seeking personal peace or – worse yet – identifying with the “right” party or Christian guru. We are God’s, and that transforms everything. If we truly understand this, there are no tyrannies left. We will want all that God has for us, both in this life and in the life to come. [Carson, D. A.]

Reflect and Respond

God has established what leadership is to be like in the church, God’s farm and field:

- Biblical leaders are servants, not stars.
- God causes fruitfulness, not leaders.
- Leaders serve according to their abilities and will be rewarded according to God's standards.
- Leaders understand they are working for God with other fellow servants.
- God is the owner of the field and fruit.

God has warned the leadership in the church about the work they do in the church, the temple of Jesus Christ.

- The Apostles have laid the foundations for the church.
- Jesus Christ is the only foundation.
- Biblical leaders build up the church on the truths the Apostles taught.
- Biblical leaders recognize that *people* are the church they are building up.
- God will test by fire all that the leaders have produced.

God cares about his church, and he holds its leaders accountable. That is a desperately important lesson. If leaders are too greatly elevated in the popular mind, they can do almost anything, and large numbers of their followers will trail along unquestioningly. [Carson, D. A.]

Will you live believing that God is all and in all? Will you live within that wonderful circle where all of us, shepherds and sheep, have such a heavenly mindedness that we humbly and diligently serve here?

Notes