

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Responsibility and Humility**

*1 Corinthians 4:6-13*

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# Responsibility and Humility

## Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is an appropriate response to church leadership. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "Responsibility and Humility."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 4:6-13:

**<sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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?**

**<sup>8</sup> 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! <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. (1 Corinthians 4:6-13)**

## Introduction

Helen Roseveare was an English missionary doctor in the Congo, Africa from 1953 to 1973, where she served as the only

doctor at a large hospital. There were constant interruptions and shortages, and she was becoming increasingly impatient and irritable with everyone around her.

Finally, one of the African pastors insisted, “Helen, please come with me.”

He drove Helen to his humble house and told her that she was going to have a retreat—two days of silence and solitude. She was to pray until her attitude adjusted.

All night and the next day she struggled; she prayed, but her prayers seemed to bounce off the ceiling.

Late on Sunday night, she sat beside the pastor around a little campfire. Humbly, almost desperately, she confessed that she was stuck. With his bare toe, the pastor drew a long straight line on the dusty ground.

“That is the problem, Helen. There is too much ‘I’ in your service.”

Then he gave her a suggestion: “I have noticed that quite often, you take a coffee break and hold the hot coffee in your hands waiting for it to cool.”

Then he drew another line across the first one.

“Helen, from now on,” he said, “as the coffee cools, ask God, ‘Lord, cross out the “I” and make me more like you.’”

In the dust of that African ground, where a cross had formed, Helen Roseveare learned a great principle of Jesus: freedom comes through service, and service comes by letting go of our pride.<sup>1</sup>

One could call this *a theology of the cross*. It is understanding how we live our lives as believers in view of the cross.

This was one of the major challenges that faced the Corinthian believers. They had come to faith in Christ through Paul’s ministry to them. He had planted the church, and he was their spiritual father in the faith. After 18 months of church planting Paul moved away from Corinth. Apollos came to Corinth as the pastor of the congregation. People in the congregation were divided over

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Woodley, in the sermon “Servant,” PreachingToday.com.

who they followed as their leader. Some followed Paul, others followed Apollos, and others even followed Cephas (who was also known as Peter). The believers in Corinth were struggling with pride in their favorite leader, and it was tearing the church apart.

In today's passage Paul focused their attention on an appropriate response to church leadership.

## Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we learn about an appropriate response to church leadership.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. The Responsibility of Believers (4:6-8)
2. The Humility of the Apostles (4:9-13)

### I. The Responsibility of Believers (4:6-8)

First, let's examine the responsibility of believers.

The apostle Paul was concerned about how the Corinthian believers were responding to himself and Apollos. He wanted the believers to respond appropriately to their leadership in the church. And so he set down several responsibilities for the believers about how to respond appropriately to church leadership.

#### A. *Believers Should Submit to Scripture (4:6)*

First, believers should submit to Scripture.

Paul began by saying in verse 6a, **“I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers. . . .”**

**These things** refer to what he said in the previous paragraphs, particularly in 1 Corinthians 4:1, where he called himself and Apollos “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.” They were merely “under-rowers” and “household managers.” In other words, they were in submission and in service to their Lord Jesus Christ.

The reason Paul shared that with the Corinthian believers is as he said in verse 6b, “. . . **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.**”

Paul knew that the believers in Corinth were being **puffed up in favor of one leader against another** leader.

That was not appropriate. And so Paul offered his outlook on how believers should respond appropriately to church leadership, which is that believers should submit to Scripture. That is what Paul meant when he said, “. . . **that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written.**”

The expression “**what is written**” usually refers to the entire Old Testament (2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chronicles 25:4; 35:26; Luke 10:26; 22:37). Paul was indicating his own submission to Scripture and he wanted the believers in Corinth to do the same.

Paul had already referred to several Old Testament Scripture texts (1:19; 3:19). It is likely that he had these passages in mind as he wrote this instruction to the believers in Corinth. Believers respond appropriately to church leadership by submitting to Scripture.

I remember listening to a message by Pastor Al Martin many years ago in which he said that preachers have no authority to bind believer’s consciences to pious advice (no matter how good it might be), but they do have God’s authority to bind believer’s consciences to the Word of God. And so the reason for obeying what is said is not because the preacher said it but, rather, it is because God said it.

And so, believers respond appropriately to church leadership by submitting to Scripture.

*B. Believers Should Recognize That Their Gifts Come from God (4:7)*

Second, believers should recognize that their gifts come from God.

Paul asked three questions to help the Corinthian believers see that their gifts came from God.

Paul asked in verse 7a, **“For who sees anything different in you?”** The expected answer was “no one.” Although the different groups in Corinth were elevating themselves over one another, they really were not better than anyone else.

To prove his point Paul asked in verse 7b, **“What do you have that you did not receive?”** All the gifts that the Corinthian believers possessed were given to them by the Holy Spirit. They had no basis for pride whatsoever because everything they possessed were simply free gifts from God.

And so, finally, to drive the point home, Paul asked in verse 7c, **“If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”** They did not create the gifts themselves. They were gifts that were freely given to them by the Holy Spirit. So, there was absolutely no room for pride and boasting.

And so Pastor John MacArthur concludes,

If we have a good pastor, God gave him to us. If we have good parents, God gave them to us. If we live in a good country, God gave it to us. If we have a good mind or creative talent, God gave it to us. We have no reason to boast either in people or possessions. Not only ministers, but all Christians, are but God’s stewards. Everything we have is on loan from the Lord, entrusted to us for a while to use in serving him.<sup>2</sup>

And so, believers respond appropriately to church leadership by submitting to Scripture and, second, by recognizing that their gifts come from God.

*C. Believers Should Recognize That They Have Not Yet Begun to Reign (4:8)*

And third, believers should recognize that they have not yet

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 108.

begun to reign.

One of the problems that Paul faced with the Corinthian believers is that they believed that they had arrived spiritually. They had been blessed with every kind of spiritual gift, and particularly the supernatural sign gifts. They believed that they had received all that there was to receive. They had what commentator Gordon D. Fee calls an “overrealized eschatology.”<sup>3</sup> The apostle Paul’s perspective, which he shared with the other New Testament writers, is what theologians call “already but not yet,” which means that the blessings of God have come upon believers but they are not completely realized. The problem with the Corinthian believers is that their view was one of “already” with no expectation of “not yet.” In other words, they believed that they had already received all that there was to receive from God.

That is why Paul said, with biting sarcasm, in verse 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!”**

Believers will reign with Christ one day. But not now. We have many spiritual blessings now, but we have not yet received them in full and final measure. Believers should recognize that they have not yet begun to reign.

And so, believers respond appropriately to church leadership by submitting to Scripture, second, by recognizing that their gifts come from God and, third, by recognizing that they have not yet begun to reign.

## **II. The Humility of the Apostles (4:9-13)**

And second, let’s examine the humility of the apostles.

The Corinthian believers thought that they had everything in themselves, but in fact they did not. Paul knew that he and the other apostles had nothing in themselves. They had a completely dif-

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<sup>3</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 172.

ferent view of the Christian life than the Corinthians.

Paul used four words to describe the condition of the apostles in contrast to the Corinthian believers: spectacles, fools, sufferers, and scum.

A. *The Apostles Are Spectacles (4:9)*

First, the apostles are spectacles.

Paul said in verse 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.”**

The picture that Paul had in mind here was that of a Roman general who had won a major victory. Upon his return to Rome there would be a massive parade that was called a “triumph.” The general led the parade in great military splendor. Behind him were his officers. Next were his troops, all arrayed in their bright, shiny uniforms. Then the spoils of war would be paraded down the street. The conquered army with the king, officers, and soldiers who were now prisoners bound in chains would come at the end of the parade. They would be prominently displayed and sometimes they were naked. All of Rome would see and mock them as they were paraded through the streets. The prisoners were under sentence of death and they would then be taken to the arena to fight wild beasts.

Paul felt that the apostles had become **a spectacle to the world**. Everyone, both **angels and men**, watched the painful suffering and humiliation of the apostles as they served Christ. That the apostles suffered so greatly further emphasized the error of the thinking of the Corinthians that they had already become kings.

B. *The Apostles Are Fools (4:10)*

Second, the apostles are fools.

Paul said in verse 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.”**

Paul was sarcastic here. He said, in other words, “You still really think of the gospel as foolish and of its ministers as foolish. You are ashamed to be known as Christ’s servants. You want glory, honor, and worldly recognition.”

The Corinthians were enchanted with the world’s wisdom. They had come to think of worldly wisdom as superior to the gospel. They could not imagine themselves being **fools for Christ’s sake**, but rather thought of themselves as **wise, strong, and held in honor**.

Speaking to the Knights of Columbus Council in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia said: “God assumed from the beginning that the wise of the world would view Christians as fools and he has not been disappointed. . . . If I have brought any message today, it is this: Have the courage to have your wisdom regarded as stupidity. Be fools for Christ. And have the courage to suffer the contempt of the sophisticated world.”<sup>4</sup>

### *C. The Apostles Are Sufferers (4:11-13a)*

Third, the apostles are sufferers.

Paul said in verses 11-13a, **“To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat.”**

Only about 18 months after writing his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote a second letter to them. Among the many things he said to them in that letter, he also described in vivid detail the suffering he had endured as a servant of Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:23–28:

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<sup>4</sup> See Penny Brown Roberts, “Scalia: Faithful Live for Christ,” [theadvocate.com](http://theadvocate.com).

## Challenges Christians Face

I am a [servant of Christ] . . . with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

The apostle Paul spent roughly one-quarter of his missionary career in prisons. John McRay wrote in *Christian History*:

Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged—a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter.

Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.

In settings like this, Paul wrote encouraging, even joyful, letters and continued to speak of Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

### *D. The Apostles Are Scum (4:13b)*

And fourth, the apostles are scum.

Paul said in verse 13b: **“We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.”**

The **scum** and **refuse** refers to the scrapings and offscourings

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<sup>5</sup> Elesha Coffman, “Christian History Connection” in *Christian History* (Issue 47).

that are cleaned off a filthy dish or pot. It is good for nothing, and is then thrown away. The words were often used to describe the lowest and most defiled criminals, who were often sacrificed in pagan rituals. That is how the world looked at the apostles. They were viewed as religious scum and refuse. The world thought of them as criminals, and often treated them as such.

Paul's point in referring to the apostles as spectacles, fools, sufferers, and scum is to show that no Christian leader is above experiencing these things. If a Christian leader is faithful in his service to Christ, he will experience being thought of as a spectacle, a fool, a sufferer, and scum. The Corinthians believed that they were somehow above experiencing that, but they were wrong, as is every Christian today who thinks that following Christ somehow puts him on a superior plane.

### **Conclusion**

As believers we should not think that we have arrived spiritually. We need to submit to Scripture, recognize that our gifts come from God, and realize that we have not yet begun to reign.

We should not become puffed up with pride. We should relinquish our pride so that we can serve as the apostles did. Like Helen Roseveare, we need to ask God, "Lord, cross out the 'I' and make me more like you."

Only when we live and serve like that will we respond appropriately to church leadership. Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, help us not become puffed up with pride. Help us to relinquish our pride so that we can serve as the apostles did. Enable us to realize that we need to submit to Scripture, recognize that our gifts come from God, and to understand that we have not yet begun to reign. Help us to cross out the “I” and make us more like Christ.

And for this I pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, as you leave here today, cross out the “I” so that you can be more like Christ in your service to him!