

Spiritual Leadership 1 Corinthians 4:1-21

Scripture Introduction:

In a world where leadership is abused and cults of personalities form, eschewing all leadership and leaders can become pretty attractive. But when we do that, we throw the proverbial “baby out with the bath water.” History abhors a vacuum; **new leaders arise because leadership is necessary in every human endeavor.** This tension is especially present in the church. How do we honor God’s leaders, yet not fall prey to overly exalting their gifts, unduly depending upon their ministry or hamstringing their efforts?

This is the unanswered question so far in our study of 1 Corinthians. Yet it is just this question that Paul seeks to answer in chapter 4. Here he outlines the appropriate role and expectations we ought to have for those who lead in the church.

Introduction:

I struggled with knowing how to introduce this morning’s sermon on leadership. Nevertheless, I am sure that confusion about what God intends for leadership in the church remains. Recently someone shared with me how one leader pastor, who had been addressed by his first name from a younger, more inexperienced pastor, instructed the young man to refer to him only as “pastor” or “reverend.” Such was the “respect” he demanded.

Of course, such a preoccupation with the pastor as “personality” is exactly what Paul has warned us about. From our study we have seen how the Corinthians were dividing into factions based upon their preferred leader (1:11-13; 3:3-5). Paul taught us that these leaders (Apollos, Peter, himself and inappropriate view of Jesus) were unduly regarded and given credit for blessing, which came about only through the ministry of the Spirit. As a result, a kind celebrity culture of pastoral super stars was emerging. And, it doesn’t take a “rocket scientist” to see that this mentality remains with us today.

To answer this, Paul reminded the Corinthians that their salvation and church community was not rooted in these various personalities, important though they were, but in the one person and work of Jesus Christ. The wisdom of God, though foolish to the world, is what our Christian community and life ought to be rooted in. **When the Cross forms the foundation of our life together, then our personal preferences get pushed to the rear and our temptation to faun over our favorite people gets neutralized.** It is not as though those things do not matter it is that they are not of ultimate importance. Instead, Paul wants us to focus on Jesus and his work first.

Nevertheless, that doesn’t mean God has no role for leaders. In fact, as we have said, there was most likely a faction that made this sort of claim, those who said they were “of Christ.” **Therefore, Paul revisits the theme of leadership here in chapter 4, but this time for the purpose of giving us a positive vision for it.**

Main Idea: While Paul certainly wants us to avoid the excesses that arise from leaders being unduly celebrated, **he does not want us to neglect the important contributions leaders make to the health of the church.** In other words,

Paul’s counsel outlines the appropriate role leadership ought to serve in the church.

Key Question So, what ought we expect from those who lead us? Paul straightforwardly answers our question in verses 1-2:

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 trustworthy.

Here Paul reveals the two things: stewardship and trustworthy service.

1) It is stewardship.

By stewardship, Paul refers to his official capacity as an apostle. He says his role is a “steward of the mysteries of God.” What does he mean?

a) Steward (1-2)

A steward was one who managed the affairs in the household of another. Their authority derived from the one who had given it. Accordingly, Paul’s authority derived from God himself. He had been entrusted with this leadership. **A steward’s authority was real, but it was also delegated.**

b) Mysteries of God (1)

Secondly, Paul elaborates further on the nature of this stewardship. He states that this stewardship specifically has in view the “mysteries” of God. Now, this word “mystery” does not mean Paul had intuitive or mystical insights into God’s will or ways. He is not referring to a perspective gained irrationally or experientially. Rather, a “mystery” according to Paul, referred to a divinely revealed truth or message that had been held secret at one time. What was once secret was now revealed. Seen this way, the “mysteries” Paul refers to is the message regarding the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. **So, Paul was entrusted with the stewardship of the revelation of Gospel!**

Summary Idea: Paul held a stewardship on behalf of God to make known the message of the Gospel, regarding Jesus Christ. This and this alone was to be the focus of his ministry.

So far, so good; right? **However, a danger lurks (6-8).** Paul’s stewardship does not become challenging until we realize that he aims at more than informing us. Notice verse 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? 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 makes clear that his stewardship is not simply one of counsel or information, but of confrontation. Paul doesn’t hold anything back in exposing their pride. In this way, he brings the Gospel of God to bear on the divisions among the Corinthians so that they are transformed by it.

In other words, their divisions are not only wrong they are contrary to the Gospel! By favoring Apollos over Paul, the Corinthians had gone beyond what Paul had written about the nature of his calling. **Their prideful judgment had denied the authority of the Scriptures and divided the congregation.**

Key Question: How do these insights shape our view of spiritual leadership in the church?

- **Spiritual leadership requires our content to be Christ-centered and Gospel-driven.** That is, everything goes back to Jesus Christ and the Gospel. Our lives are **to think out and apply the logic of the Gospel** in every area: church, marriage, family, vocation, recreation, etc. If we're not doing this we are going beyond the Gospel!
- **Spiritual leadership requires a holy confrontation. It calls pastors to become agents of change.** If all of us recognize the tendency we all have to favor self before the interests of Christ, then spiritual leadership forces us to deal with those compromises. When we lead with the Gospel all of us are challenged. Nevertheless, this is hard for those who lead.

"Pastors gradually settle down and lose interest in being change agents in the church. An unconscious conspiracy arises between their flesh and that of their congregations. It becomes tacitly understood that the laity will give pastors special honor in the exercise of their gifts, if they pastors will agree to leave their congregations' pre-Christian lifestyles undisturbed and do not call for the mobilization of lay gifts for the work of the kingdom. Pastors are permitted to become ministerial superstars. Their pride is fed and their congregations are permitted to remain herds of sheep in which each has cheerfully turned to his own way." Richard Lovelace, The Dynamics of Spiritual Life, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 207.

2) Trustworthy service

The notion of leadership as a "change agent" helps us understand what Paul means by his second qualification for spiritual leadership—trustworthy service. **The service we offer is first to the Lord Jesus Christ.** Verse one reads we are "servants of Christ." This helps us understand how Paul qualifies the stewardship we offer; it is to be a trustworthy stewardship. **The focus of the leader's service is first to the interests of Christ and not that of the church member.**

For this reason...

- **Paul does not regard the harsh judgments against him by the Corinthians (3-5).** He recognizes their judgments are informed by prideful, fleshly opinions (3-5). Therefore, spiritual leadership must be willing to endure uninformed and unjustified attacks.
- **Paul does not confuse worldly success with faithful service. (9-13)** These verse ought to comfort anyone who has ever served in ministry. Fidelity to Christ does not mean gaining the favor of the world or even those under your charge. When the Kingdom advances it will always take the shape of the cross. **In other words, faithful service will always be service that suffers.**

This past week I had the opportunity to talk with a former fireman who now serves in a position of leadership in the church. We had been talking about trials in ministry and he said it is like his "bunker coat and pants"—the overcoat and pants that protect a fireman in a fire. He said that there is only one time in their life that they never smell like smoke—that's before they go into the fire. After that they always have the smell of smoke on them. In this way, Paul teaches that spiritual leadership always has the smell of smoke about it! Why?

- **Paul seeks to serve according to the purposes of the Lord and not the agendas of man.** Paul is clear about whom he is accountable to and so he will not kowtow to the Corinthians' competing agendas. His agenda is set by the Lord Jesus Christ. So, if you want to understand what Paul seeks to do we must follow the logic of the Gospel.

It doesn't take much for us to understand how conflicts arise in the Church. Given people's expectations we have for those who lead us in the church, nobody could ever

fulfill them perfectly. I can remember the frustrations I have had (and still have) over the people who had been tasked to lead me. From our leaders, we want them to...

- Be available for pastoral counsel
- Craft informative, theologically accurate, motivating and challenging messages
- Have an amiable, upbeat spirit and never have a bad day
- Be able to “run the church” or ministry competently, yet remain humble and approachable
- Follow up on every phone call in a timely manner
- Talk with the people who need them and want them, yet never disagreeing with them

Truth be told, some guys are incredibly gifted and are able to handle an amazing and diverse workload. They have a breadth of talents and a depth of pastoral insight. By the sheer force of their will they can keep the balls in the air. I fear for these guys the most. Yet no matter whom they are, no matter how fantastic they are; they still are more like you than unlike you. That means pastors and Christian leaders are flawed, emotional, limited, distracted, tempted, anxious, discouraged and like you feel hurt when things are difficult. In the midst of our expectations, we tend to forget that our leaders are dealing with the same struggles, pressures, anxieties and frustrations that the rest of us face.

This was brought home to me recently when personal challenges interrupted ministry goals. My daughter received a concussion in the morning and later in the afternoon I was almost run over while sitting at Starbucks trying to follow up on phone calls.

In a word, we want them to be something God has not called leaders to be—servants of our personal agenda. And this is precisely the area of conflict in Corinth. Paul was not endorsing and condoning certain Corinthian superstars. They were castigating Paul. Yet, Paul's point is that there opposition is the very confirmation of his leadership according to the Gospel.

Leadership in the church is first and foremost service to Jesus Christ and the agenda set by the Gospel. On this and on this alone criteria will every leader be judged.

Conclusion:

I guess the question I would ask all of us is this: Do we want this kind of leadership? Do we want to be these kind of leaders? Chapter four calls us forth a bold, risky sort of leadership that requires the logic of the Gospel to be applied at every point in the life of the Church and in all our relationships. Are we ready for that? What would that look like?

I will speak about it next week, but it is for this reason that Paul assures the Corinthians that his leadership is not a ministry of mere talk, but of power. Only by cross-power can we become this kind of leader. Only by cross-power can we delight in this kind of leadership.