

"Perspectives on Church Leadership" 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Introduction

- Do you know what this is? It's an image produced by a kaleidoscope. Interesting thing about a kaleidoscope is that simply by rotating the tube you can produce an almost infinite number of ever-changing patterns.

Transition

I think the way Christians view church leadership is very much like a kaleidoscope. Each of us has a unique image, a unique picture of what church leadership should look like.

- The problem in the Corinthian church, and we are not immune to their problem, was that their view of church leadership differed drastically from God's view of church leadership. They rotated and twisted the tube of the kaleidoscope so that their picture of who church leaders were and what they were to do was completely different from what God said church leaders were and what they were to do.
- There was an immense dissatisfaction with Paul's leadership by the Corinthian church. They may have been the first church to become dissatisfied with their pastors and they certainly haven't been the last. The Corinthians believed they were being shortchanged. Paul wasn't living up to their expectations. But the problem wasn't Paul. It was their warped view of church leadership. Very simply, Paul's aim in the verses we are going to look at today is to correct their view of church leadership, specifically their view of pastors and teachers. I want you to imagine Paul individually adjusting each individual Corinthian kaleidoscope so that each of them sees the same image. Paul's goal is to help the Corinthians see the same kaleidoscopic view of church leaders that God sees. And that's our goal.

Proposition

- **Our goal this morning is that we might see church leaders as God sees them**

Transition

Last week our goal was to see ourselves as we really are. This morning our goal is to see church leaders as God sees them. I want to share with you...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two perspectives on church leadership from 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 that will help us see church leaders as God sees them**

Transition

The **first perspective** comes from **verses 1-2**. **Christian leadership is best characterized by servant leadership**. Listen. *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. 2 Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.*

Main Points

- Found among the catacombs of Rome is the following story. And I have to believe it's true. This is what it says. "A rich man named Proculus had hundreds of slaves. The slave named Paulus was so trustworthy that Proculus made him the steward over his whole household. One day Proculus took Paulus with him to the slave market to buy some new workers. Before the bargaining began, they examined the men to see if they were strong and healthy. Among the slaves stood a weak, old man. Paulus urged his owner to buy this slave. Proculus answered, "But he is good for nothing." "Go ahead, buy him," Paulus insisted. "He is cheap. And I promise that the work in your household will get done even better than before." So Proculus agreed and purchased the elderly slave. And Paulus made good on his word. The work went better than ever. But Proculus observed that Paulus now worked for two men. The old slave did no work at all, while Paulus tended to him, gave him the best food, and made him rest. Proculus was curious, so he confronted Paulus, "Who is this slave? You know I value you. I don't mind your protecting this old man. But tell me who he is. Is he your father who has fallen into slavery?" Paulus answered, "It is someone to whom I owe more than to my father." "Your teacher, then?" "No. Somebody to whom I owe even more." "Who then?" "This is my enemy." "Your enemy!" "Yes. He is the man who killed my father and sold us, the children, as slaves." Proculus stood speechless. "As for me," said Paulus, "I am a disciple of Christ."¹
- If you were to summarize with one word what pastors and church leaders are supposed to be about it's the word servant. *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ*. But see, right there, kaleidoscope. I say that and there are probably 100 different mental pictures of what it means for a church leader to be a servant. Some see a CEO who serves an organization. Some see a peacekeeper. Some see a facility manager. Some see a professional counselor. Some see a church growth expert. Some see a hired lackey. Some see a visionary. Some see a community figurehead. Some see a scholar in residence. What is your view of those in positions of church leadership? And is your view consistent with scripture? Together, let's adjust the image of what a servant is.
- It's interesting; the word Paul uses for servant in verse 1 is a different word for servant than what he usually uses. We're mostly familiar with the *doulo*, the slave, or the *diakono*, the table-waiter. But here Paul uses a third word to describe church leaders. It's a word that originally referred to a rower in the galley of a ship. Here Paul likens church leaders to rowers receiving orders and instructions from a man who coordinates the rowing.² The servant leader of 4:1 sits under an authority. He doesn't operate on his own. He rows on command. He has no significance of his own except in relation to his master.³ And verse 1 makes it clear that the authority church leaders sit under is Christ. *Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ*. They serve Christ. Not individual members of a congregation.

¹ Adapted from Richard Wurmbrand, "Love Pardons the Enemy," *The Voice of the Martyrs* (April, 2002); submitted by Clark Cothorn to preachingtoday.com.

² Garland, p. 125.

³ Garland, p. 125.

- Let's get more specific. There is a twofold function of this servant leader. Paul says the servant is expected to function as a steward and he is expected to be faithful. *Men ought to regard us...as those entrusted with the secret things of God and those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.* These facets get at the heart of what it means to be a servant leader. Let's take each individually.
- The entrusted one or "steward" was an estate manager. Remember Luke 16 and the parable of the dishonest steward who has the authority to cancel the debts owed to his master? That's the steward. "The office normally included responsibility for overseeing a household budget, purchasing...resource allocation, collection of debts, and general running of the establishment, but only as instructed within guidelines agreed by the employer or the head of the house."⁴ Stewards operate under authority. The key aspect of a steward is that they hold in trust the well being of some larger entity.⁵ And it's their responsibility to manage that trust properly. And that's the aspect of servant leadership Paul's highlighting here. Church leaders, true servants of Christ hold in trust something very specific. What does he say? Look at the text. *So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God.*
- From God's perspective the chief function of pastors and elders as servants of Christ is to manage *the secret things of God*. What does that mean? In the context of 1 Corinthians it means teaching and preaching the message of Christ crucified accurately, boldly, with fidelity, and in the power of the Spirit. Let me say it this way, with all of the competing and confusing messages and pictures and images about who and what church leaders should be and give their time to, their primary function is to labor as stewards of the Word of God. The best way for pastors and elders to serve Christ and you, his church, is to teach and preach the Word, correctly handling the word of truth so that each of you might be thoroughly equipped for every good work. That's the essence of servant leadership. Pastors and church leaders who lose sight of this aren't serving Christ, they're serving someone or something else. And they don't really love the flock because if they did they would labor to faithfully preach and teach the Word.
- There's another facet to God's understanding of a servant leader. Servants are first and foremost good stewards but they are also faithful. I love how [Anthony Thisleton](#) describes the faithful servant. "Like a dispensing chemist who makes up a medical prescription prescribed by a doctor the requirement is to do the job as instructed, and not to try to make self-devised improvements of one's own."⁶ Faithfulness. **Verse 2.** *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.* For Paul faithfulness doesn't mean eloquence or wisdom but absolute fidelity to the gospel as he received it and preached it.⁷ The key task of a steward is not playing to the crowd but faithfulness to the gospel. What God wants from pastors and elders more than anything else, more than initiative, more than success, more than programs, is faithfulness—fidelity to their entrusted task of preaching and teaching the mysteries of God. God's requirement is faithfulness.

⁴ Thisleton, p. 336.

⁵ Peter Block, *Stewardship*, p. 41.

⁶ Thisleton, p. 336.

⁷ Fee, p. 160.

- I think this principle can be extended to servant leaders of all kinds—Sunday school teachers, worship leaders, small group leaders, prayer warriors, nursery workers, encouragers, givers. You name it. What matters most in your ministry and in mine is faithfulness. Isn't that refreshing? I think all too frequently the church has bought into an unbiblical and deadly view of success. For most churches success is a growing budget, more people in the pews, the appearance of church buildings, or the number of programs.⁸ And God says what matters most is faithfulness. The foreign missionary who never sees a convert, has she failed? Not necessarily. From God's perspective she might be completely successful if she's been faithful. As God unbelievably said of Moses, *he is faithful in all my house.*⁹ May the same be said of us in our ministries.

Transition

How do you measure faithfulness? It's hard to do.

- Part of the problem in the Corinthian church was their evaluation of Paul and his ministry. Church leaders are to be servants who operate as faithful stewards. But how in the world do you do you measure that? I think Paul's point in verses 3-5 is that you can't. Some things we just won't know the answer to until God reveals it. That's the [second perspective](#) on church leadership. **God has the final say about the quality of each leader's ministry. Verses 3-5.** Listen. *I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*
- Anybody care to take a guess as to what this formula is for? Believe it or not this is the formula for the perfect bacon sandwich. I'm not kidding. Researchers at [Leeds University](#) in England spent more than 1,000 hours testing 700 variants on the traditional bacon sandwich and they believe they've succeeded in decoding the formula for the perfect bacon sandwich. Ideally, 0.4 newtons should be applied to crunch the sandwich, creating 0.5 decibels of noise. The formula uses these values: N = force in newtons; f_b is the function of the bacon type; f_c is the function of the condiment or filling effect; T_s is the serving temperature; t_c is cooking time; t_a is the time taken to insert the condiment or filling; c_m is the cooking method and C represents the breaking strain in newtons of uncooked bacon.¹⁰ Put it all together and you have the formula for the perfect bacon sandwich.
- You see, the problem is that we like to reduce ministry to formulas. There is no formula for success in ministry—there is no perfect bacon sandwich. Do this and do this and do this and get XYZ successful result. The Corinthians decided that Paul didn't fit into their idea of what a successful pastor looked like—he didn't fit the formula. They deemed Paul a failure. Basically Paul says in response to that, what you've decided Corinthians, about my ministry, doesn't really matter. *I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court.* In fact, Paul says he doesn't even judge himself. His own conscience is an unreliable source when it comes to determining his success or failure. *My conscience is clear, but that does not make*

⁸ Blomberg, p. 97.

⁹ Numbers 12:7

¹⁰ *The Perfect Bacon Sandwich Decoded: Crisp and Crunchy*, by Alan Cowell, msnbc.com, April 10, 2007.

me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Only God can determine who has been successful and who hasn't. Therefore, *judge nothing before the appointed time* as it says in verse 5.

- Think about your ministry for a second. It is very difficult to make an accurate assessment of one's own achievement for the Lord. The temptation is to determine either success or failure. We do it all the time. You do it of me. I do it of you. We each do it of ourselves. But only **God has the final say about the quality of our ministry.** We could spare ourselves endless agony and our churches endless grief if we were to just humble ourselves and admit that only God knows. How do you measure faithfulness? How do you determine who's been successful and who hasn't? You can't. There is no formula. What God asks us to do is serve. Be servants. Serve your neighbor. Serve your kids. Serve your parents. Serve your friends. Serve your enemies. Be a good steward. Manage well the ministry responsibility that's been entrusted to you because each of us is accountable for how we manage our trust. Strive for faithfulness. Be faithful. In season and out of season. When things are favorable and when they're not. Be faithful. Be faithful. Be faithful. And leave the results and the evaluations up to God.

Conclusion

- Already, just in the first four chapters, I think this is the third or fourth message that personally deals with pastors and church leaders. These words are incredibly challenging to me. You need to know I haven't yet figured out how to become the kind of pastor and leader I've been talking about. The best I can do is what Paul says in [verse 6](#). *I have applied these things to myself.* And I'm trusting that *he who began a good work will carry it on to completion. God, who has called us into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.* He never gives up on us.