

Life Together

*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?
If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.
For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.
(1 Corinthians 3:16-17. ESV)*

*And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same
image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.
(2 Corinthians 3:18. ESV)*

Stewards Of The Mysteries Of God

November 2nd, 2014

1 Corinthians 4:1-17

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 4:1. You will recall from the last couple of weeks that the problem the Apostle Paul has been addressing in the church at Corinth stemmed from their foolish adoption of worldly wisdom and worldly thinking with respect to leaders in the church. Paul showed them the foolishness of worldly thinking and then last week he began to teach them positively about who they are as the church, who leaders are within the church and who they are collectively for God in Christ. Now he moves from the general to the specific. He talked about leaders in general in the church, now he is going to talk specifically about Apostles. Apostles are a special class of leader in the church and the Corinthians need to begin by thinking rightly about them. Last week he told us that all leaders in the church are merely humble servants of the Lord. They are just farmers and brick-layers in the Garden Temple of God. When you picture them in your mind they should be wearing overalls, a big floppy sun hat and carrying a shovel – they are TOOLS ONLY, servants through whom you believed. This week the Apostle says, ‘We too are servants of the Lord, but a special kind of servant’. He uses two words here that are roughly synonymous to describe the kind of leader that the Apostles are in the church; look at verse 1:

¹This is how one should regard us, as **servants** of Christ and **stewards** of the mysteries of God. (1 Corinthians 4:1 ESV)

The first word, translated as “servants” is not the same word that Paul used back in 3:5. There Paul was speaking generally. He said:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. (1 Corinthians 3:5 ESV)

There Paul is introducing the general category so he uses the general word, he says that all leaders in the church are DEACONS – that’s the word he uses in 3:5; the Greek word *diakonos* which means “humble servant”. All leaders in the church are deacons, but not all deacons are apostles. We could say that another way: every apostle is a deacon but not every deacon is an apostle. An apostle is a special kind of deacon and so in 4:1 Paul uses a different word. In 4:1 the word translated as “servant” in the Greek is the word *huperates* which means “under rower” or “subordinate officer”. In the Roman Navy the ships were powered and steered by rowers – usually slave rowers – who lived under the main deck. They couldn’t see where they were going and so there was an officer on the slave deck who had access to a tube that went up to the main deck. The captain on the main deck who could see and who was in charge of the vessel would speak instructions down through the tube to the *huperates* – the under rower or “subordinate officer” and the subordinate officer would then communicate those instructions to the rowers. Paul says, “Apostles are like that. We receive our instructions from the Captain, from Christ, and we relay them to you. You row the boat.”

The second word he uses is a syntactical parallel meaning it is a word which is almost the same but which is just different enough to supply some new information. The word translated as “steward” in verse 1 is the Greek word *oikonomos*. An *oikonomos* in Greco-Roman culture was an estate manager. He was Jonathan Quayle Higgins if you grew up in the 1980’s. He was not Robben Masters, he was the guy who worked for Robben Masters so that Robben Masters could live a life of luxury and ease. In Greco-Roman culture the estate manager was an incredibly important person. Without him, rich people would quickly become the slave of their slaves. The estate manager wielded the full signing authority of the master – he could make purchases, he could buy land, he could hire and fire slaves; he effectively ran the business and the property on behalf of the noble Lord. It was said of the estate manager: “He was slave to the master and master to the slaves”. Paul says, “That’s what the Apostles are. We are slaves to Christ and we

are masters to you.”

That’s the outline of this text. Paul wants the Corinthians to think rightly about the Apostles and so Paul says, “This is what you need to know. We are slaves to Christ and we are masters to you.” Let’s read the text according to those headings. We’ll read verses 1-5 under the heading “Slaves To The Master” and we’ll read verses 6-17 under the heading “Master To The Slaves”. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Slaves To The Master:

¹This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. ³But 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. ⁴For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, 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. (1 Corinthians 4:1–5 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

The main thing we are meant to see in this paragraph is that:

1. Apostles are subject to Christ

Paul does not claim ultimate authority for his ministry, or for the ministry of any other apostle. He says very clearly:

It is the Lord who judges me. (v. 4)

I am a SLAVE to Christ. In fact that is Paul’s favourite description of his ministry. He regularly delights in using the most pejorative word in Greek to describe his status before Christ. He often begins his letters that way.

¹ Paul, **a servant of Christ Jesus**, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Romans 1.1. ESV)

¹ Paul, **a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ**, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness (Titus 1:1. ESV)

In Greek he uses the word *doulos* there which means “slave”. In fact if you know anything about the ESV translation you know that they really struggled with whether to translate this as “slave” or as “servant” because technically the word means “slave” but because that word has such negative connotations in the U.S. they went with “servant” even though that’s not really correct. Paul can and does refer to himself as a “servant” using the word *diakonos* but he takes particular delight in referring to himself with the more lowly and humble term of slave – *doulos*. Paul likes being the slave of Christ. He is comfortable in that identity. He is SLAVE to the MASTER and that is a wonderful thing to be when the Master in question is Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Paul knows that as an Apostle he has a unique charge before Christ. Christ is the head of the church, Christ is the cornerstone of this Garden Temple. Many times the Apostles spoke of Christ this way. Peter in Acts 4 said:

This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. (Acts 4:11 ESV)

Paul in Ephesians 2 said that the church is:

²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Ephesians 2:20–22 ESV)

So again if we go back to our Garden Temple imagery, imagine a garden and at the centre of the garden there is a building – a temple. The garden is built around the temple – it is an extension of the edifice. The entire design is built around the cornerstone. The cornerstone was laid first, it was the stone that established the design; that set out the straight lines – EVERYTHING ELSE WAS SQUARED WITH IT. The Apostles are the foundation – each stone being aligned with Christ the cornerstone. So again, think of the church as being an on-going building in the midst of an ever-expanding garden. The entire pattern traces back to a single stone. The definitive outline was traced by the message and ministry of the Apostles. Their job is to be square to Jesus – our job is to be square to them. Not them on their own, but them in relation to Jesus.

That’s why Paul says:

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.

“I don’t look at you to see if I am square, I don’t look at myself to see if I am square. I look at Christ. It is Christ the cornerstone that decides whether I am in or out of line. I answer to the cornerstone.”

As we shall soon discover as we read through the entire Corinthian Correspondence, there was a faction in the church that didn’t seem to think much of the Apostle Paul. They were unimpressed with his appearance, they were unimpressed with his speaking style, they were embarrassed by his frequent imprisonments and in general, they found him to be a rather unremarkable character. Paul puts a rather abrupt halt on that sort of gossip and nonsense. He says:

⁵Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time

Now is not the time for me to be judged. I will be judged by Christ and not by you. I will be judged at the resurrection not now, here, by such as you. Be careful what you say about Christ’s appointed agents. Jesus said to his Apostles:

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. (Matthew 10:40 ESV)

Only a fool puts an apostle on trial. Receiving them is receiving Christ. Judge not before the time. Whether I am a good estate manager or a bad estate manager is not for the slaves to decide. The estate manager answers to the owner. I answer to Jesus, Paul says, not to you and not to me. I will be judged by the Lord.

From here Paul goes on to assert his authority over them. Quite without apology. Paul delights to be the slave of Jesus but he is not shy about being master to them. In fact at the end of his appeal, which we will actually read next week because it transitions into the first specific case that Paul wants to address, he says:

¹⁹But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills ... ²¹What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness? (1 Corinthians 4:19–21 ESV)

I will come to your corner of the garden shortly. What do you wish, shall I bring lemonade or shall I bring a stick? Paul is clear on the role divisions here. He is slave to the master and master to the

slaves. Let's read verses 6-17 under the heading:

Master To The Slaves:

Hear again the Word of the Lord:

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! 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.

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. (1 Corinthians 4:6-17 ESV)

This also is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

First of all then in this section of text we notice Paul's concern that the Corinthians not:

1. Do not go beyond what is written

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**

Paul is saying: "We do not improvise in the Garden Temple of God. We do not freelance.

Apostles do and say what they are told to do and say by Jesus through the Holy Spirit and you do what we say. You too are bound by the same Scriptures that we are bound by and you are bound by our Word which also is the Word of God. Stick to the blueprint and sing the notes that are on your page."

The Garden Temple of God, my friends, is not characterized by unbounded creativity. It is not a place where everyone dances to his own drummer. The Garden of Eden became such a place and God was not amused. Sin is disregarding the Word of God and making the decision to become morally autonomous. The original sin was deciding right and wrong for ourselves. Eating from

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This garden is not that garden, Paul says. In this garden we do what we are told. That is the pre-condition for being in this garden. Jesus made that very clear.

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? (Luke 6:46 ESV)

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. (John 15:14 ESV)

You are my friends IF you do what I command you. That’s a pretty big “if”. Christians are famous for writing songs on half a verse. You know that song: “I am a friend of God?” “I am a friend of God – he calls me friend.” IF. He calls you friend IF you do what he commands you. Why don’t we sing that? Why is that not in the song? They must be referencing this verse in that song because this is the only verse in the Bible where Jesus says that we are his friends. This is the verse they are singing about but where is the IF? Obedience is not optional in the Garden Temple of God. Our service will be rewarded, our community will be enhanced, Paul says, if we learn to stick with what is written.

Next we notice Paul saying:

2. Consider the Apostolic example both as a guide and as a warning

Paul says that the words of an apostle are authoritative but he also says that the example of the apostles ought to be imitated and should serve as a warning. “If your life doesn’t look like our lives, Paul says, “then you should pause and wonder why. Cause it seems like your lives look nothing like our lives. You are strong when we are weak. You are rich when we are poor. You are well thought of when we are despised. You should think about that and you should be concerned.” Look at verse 10:

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 says: “I’m looking at my life. I’m looking at your life and they are not the same. We’re over here working hard to know nothing but Christ crucified – you’re over there consuming massive quantities of worldly wisdom and worldly thinking. We’re over here suffering and

sacrificing for the sake of the Gospel – you’re over there living your best life now. We’re over here facing persecution, ridicule and imprisonment, you’re over there being popular, well thought of and at ease. What’s wrong with this picture? Clearly you are living outside the lines!”

We have to remember that for Paul, believing has consequences. If you believe a certain way, you will live a certain way and so Paul is saying: “Use the life of the apostles to evaluate your own behavior. If things are out of line, then maybe your faith is out of line. We believe certain things and therefore act certain ways, if your actions are different than our actions then perhaps your faith is not apostolic.”

Once again we see Paul thinking in terms of this stewardship dynamic. Paul is slave to the master – he must be squared to Christ – but he is also master to the slaves – they must be squared to him. “You are not square to me,” Paul says. “You are way off and that concerns me. Imitate me as I imitate Christ.”

That’s the message of the text. It’s a pretty straightforward passage; but it does have some fairly significant implications for Christians living in the 21st century Evangelical church. Let me spell out two of them.

Implications of The Text:

First of all it seems quite clear that:

1. The Apostolic Gospel should be the standard for speaking and teaching in the church

That’s an implication I feel very confident in making because its one the Apostle makes emphatically later in this same letter. In chapter 14 he says:

³⁷ If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that **the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord**.³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Corinthians 14:37–38 ESV)

Paul is talking about public worship here and he states quite clearly that anyone who does not recognize his unique authority as an Apostle of Jesus Christ is not to be recognized – that is he is not to be permitted to speak or to teach in the church. This principle seems transparently

obvious: if your teaching does not align with the Apostolic pattern then it is not permitted in the church. Period.

Sadly, the fact that this is brutally obvious does not serve to make it universally accepted in the church. As many of you will know this was the heart of the issue that we had with our denomination last year. There was a pastor that was saying publically, from the pulpit, in sermons that remain available on-line that she did not believe that the teaching of the Apostle Paul was authoritative in the present day. He was a product of his time, she said. He was a little bit chauvinistic, she said. He made mistakes, she said. Based on that, she said, she is not prepared to say that homosexual marriage is a sin.

Well, as you can imagine, that didn't sit well with many of us pastors in the CBOQ. Sadly, it sat just fine with many, and perhaps most. I won't rehearse all of that with you, I'll just make sure you know the truth. The truth is this: I only have the right to speak in this pulpit when the words that I speak align with the Apostolic Gospel. The moment I step out of that pattern I am to be removed. The Scriptures are clear on that. If I deviate from that pattern on purpose, then I am to be rebuked publicly and to be removed. Now to be clear, this does not apply to simple mistakes of memory or poorly chosen anecdotes. I will make some factual errors by accident and I may even make the odd joke that isn't funny and that in retrospect, was ill conceived. The Apostle James spoke of that, he said:

²For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man (James 3:1-2 ESV)

We're not talking about that. We're talking about doctrine. If my doctrine strays outside the Apostolic boundary, I am to be rebuked publicly. Paul says that in 1 Timothy 5:

¹⁹Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses. ²⁰As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear. (1 Timothy 5:19-20 ESV)

Paul will explain in 1 Corinthians 14 that it is the job of the elders to discern the doctrine of the teachers in the church. If two or three of you members are concerned about the teaching that you are hearing, you should take it to your elders. If the elders deem your concern to be valid, they will confront me or whoever the teacher is. If the teacher repents, and reforms, then case closed;

brother corrected. If however, he persists in the error he is to be rebuked publicly and should no longer be recognized for pulpit privileges. That's what the Bible says. You don't get to disagree with the Apostle Paul! You don't get to climb up onto your high horse and look down your nose at Paul's teachings. You get in line or you get out! That ought to be obvious to Bible readers, though sadly, too often, it is not. According to the Bible, the teachers in the church must be subject to the Apostolic Gospel.

Secondly and lastly as we close,

2. In the Garden Temple of the Lord, faithfulness should be the highest aspiration of all God's humble servants

Faithfulness is awesome. Faithfulness might just be the most under appreciated word in modern day Evangelicalism. People who can faithfully steward the Gospel and faithfully pass on the Gospel are the absolute treasure of the church. Do you want to be USEFUL – GLORIOUS USEFUL in the Garden Temple of God? Then be faithful. Faithfully learn the Gospel as it is taught in the Apostolic witness to the life and death of Christ. Read the whole Bible through the lens of the Apostolic witness and cling to it without change or deviation throughout all your days. Parents – do you want to change the world? Then faithfully teach the Gospel to your children. We have overvalued the word “innovation” in the church and we have undervalued the word “faithful”. Let's turn that around in our generation. Work your patch. Sing the notes on the page. Colour inside the lines. Square yourself with the foundation of the Apostolic Gospel with Christ as cornerstone. That what will change the world! Do not underestimate the power of faithful Gospel proclamation. It is the power of God for salvation for all who will believe. Why would we go beyond what is written? This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God.