

A CALL TO FAITHFULNESS

1 Corinthians 4

Introduction

Competition was a deeply ingrained Corinthian mind-set. The Greeks, including the Corinthians were known for their love of philosophical debate, and their quest for recognition among the cities of Achaia, most notably, Athens. The church was not immune to this attitude either. Their disposition to debate influenced their conversations as Christians. Word of their tendency to compete came to the ears of Paul, and he has spent the first major segment of this letter dealing with this problem.

In their quest to be identified with the “best”, the Corinthians were separating into jealous, quarreling factions, each claiming to be disciples of a gifted Christian leader, and claiming that their chosen mentor was “the best”, which of course indicated that they, by association, were also “the best”.

In these chapters Paul points out that their divisiveness is foolish, worldly, and destructive, rather than wise, spiritual and fruitful. He concludes his instruction at the end of ch. 3 with the clinching argument: there is no need to divide up over spiritual leaders. Spiritual leaders belong to every Christian, and every Christian belongs to Christ, who belongs to God. (3:21-23)

So, what are Christian leaders anyway? He asked and answered that question in 3:5-9. Now, in 4:1 he returns to that question and responds in another way, intent on finally putting to rest the senseless argument over which Christian leader is most important. As we look at Paul’s words in chapter 4 we realize that NT style church leadership is very different from the world’s approach to leadership.

The first thing we notice is that ...

Christian Leaders are Servants

Paul uses two interesting terms in verse 1:

1. “*Servants of Christ*” – (Ministers – KJV). Look back at 3:5. This is a different word from the word Paul used in that instance. There it was *diakonoi* – a word that refers to servers, table-waiters, (deacon) – Acts 6:2. Here in 4:1 the word is *huperetes*, a word which originally referred to a rower on the lower levels of a galley ship – the slaves who pulled the huge oars – literally, an under-rower. The *huperetes* labored under the orders of a slavemaster-pilot who set the direction of the ship. Paul says, that’s what we are – under-rowers. The Master-pilot is Jesus Christ.
2. “*Those entrusted*” – the word is *oikonomos* - stewards – ESV. A steward was very often a slave, but one in whose hands the master of the house entrusted the oversight of his household. The steward was responsible for his master’s possessions and periodically had to give an account of his stewardship. Christian leaders are “stewards of the mysteries of God.” Think of Joseph in Egypt in the house of Potiphar – Gen. 39:1-6

One commentator has given us this distinction between these two terms, “Paul and his fellow workers were underlings of Christ and overseers for God.

So, the distinctive aspect of Christian leadership is that the Christian leader is a servant, but a servant of God. Christ is the one who appoints His servants and they must give account of their service to God.

Christian Servant-Leaders are Accountable

In the following few verses there are several important truths regarding the accountability of the servant of Christ.

1. Leaders (stewards) are called to be faithful – *pistos* – the word carries with it the thought of unshakable loyalty, steadfast endurance, and complete trustworthiness in the carrying out of responsibilities.
2. Leaders are accountable to God. – vv. 3-4 – go through Paul’s argument.
3. God will make the truth known – v. 5 – At the Lord’s coming, He will expose the motives and other hidden things – things that none of us can see.
4. God will reward His servants based on His judgment, not man’s.

Now, given this accountability factor—that as God’s under-rowers we are accountable to Him, Paul makes a very strong case against the

Corinthians in vv. 6-7. He warns them not to take pride in one man over another. Why? Because they have no adequate way of judging the relative value of one man's ministry over another. Go through vv. 6-7 briefly.

So, Christian leaders are servants... Christian servant-leaders are accountable to God. Third...

Christian Leaders are called not to honor but to sacrifice

In vv. 8-13 Paul uses a series of contrasts to challenge the Corinthians. He still wants them to see the fallacy of their pride in themselves and their leaders. Their view of leadership has become distorted. They are viewing the authority of leadership as being that of a boss, a ruler, a king. They see a leader as one who possesses dictatorial authority, one who can enforce his way by superior strength, one who exercises power over others.

By contrast, Paul uses himself as an example to show that true spiritual authority is just the opposite. The true leader is ready to lay down his very life for those he serves. He ministered from a position of weakness and vulnerability and identified himself with those he served.

Read verses 8-13 to show the way Paul served others. Note the sarcasm he uses in these verses, to attack their arrogance.

Christian Leaders are willing to be Firm when Necessary

vv. 14-17 – Paul did not intend to humiliate or shame his readers. He simply wanted them to see the error of what they were doing.

vv. 18-21 – He shows us that he can be tough when it is needed.

It's important to understand that when Paul spoke of servant-leadership, he was not advocating passivity. Leading from weakness is not the same as weak leadership. Servant-leadership does not rule out candid truth-telling and sharp confrontation when the situation demands such. But, while we recognize our own weakness, we also recognize that through God's Holy Spirit and His Word, we are strong.

Conclusion

The Corinthian believers had a confused view of Christian leadership. That confusion, coupled with their naturally competitive spirit, had led them to a place of division and quarreling over human leaders. It is easy for us or anyone, or any church, to fall into the same trap. I trust that as we have gone over these chapters the past few weeks, you have been able to grasp the significance of their error and that we can avoid that same mistake.

As I close, and wrap up this whole section of Paul's letter, let me leave you with three statements:

1. God has given leaders to the church to serve his people.
2. We cannot judge them – certainly we cannot rank them in terms of importance. That is not to say we cannot challenge leaders if they are teaching false doctrine or living in sin. But the idea of placing one person above another in terms of importance or value is absurd as we have no valid way of determining that.
3. To leaders – as leaders, we need to serve from a position of weakness, not weak leadership, but recognizing our own weakness and resting and serving in His strength. That means being vulnerable, open and not self-seeking.