

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

Every church has its problems and the church at Corinth was no exception. One of the problems was that it had groups of church members lining up behind different church leaders and declaring that their leader was better than the other leaders.

In the passage set for today, the Apostle Paul addresses the people first and then the leaders in an attempt to rid the church of these divisions.

Firstly Paul addresses the people.

Don't form factions because they rob the church of Christ's blessings. Read 1 Corinthians 3:18-21

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," 20 and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." 21 So let no one boast of men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; 23 and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

We have come to expect unhealthy competitiveness in the world. Leaders in the world and their parties are constantly seeking power for their advantage. Their methods of gaining power and exercising power are "worldly wise" ways of operating. Rather, as Paul has already argued in this letter, God has given all his church leaders for the benefit of all the church. A group in God's church which confines itself to the ministry of one leader will always be the spiritually poorer.

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How good it is when our parish leaders are working with each other in harmony. All leaders have different gifts – so it follows that there will be great blessing upon a church when God’s talented people work with each other to the benefit of all. But there is even greater promise when people are striving together for the gospel.

We know that Christ Jesus is ruler over all things (Colossians 1:15-20). If we are “in Christ”, and believers are, and if Jesus Christ is the heir of all things in heaven and earth, and he is, then believers can say that because we are “in Christ” then all things in heaven and on earth belong to us (1 Corinthians 1:21-23).

How can this be? When we believed in Christ we were baptised into Christ. We died with him and were raised with him. He is now exalted and we, by faith, are seated with him at God’s right hand. We reign with him. When he appears in glory we too will appear in glory with him (Colossians 2:11-12, 3:1-4). Since all things were made and are sustained by Christ then he is the heir of all things and since we are united with him we share his inheritance.

It follows then that the leaders whether they are Paul, Peter or Appollos are all for the people of God. It is crazy to attach ourselves to one leader and miss the ministry of all the leaders Christ has given us. It is even worse if we begin to compare one leader with another in order to promote one over against another.

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Secondly he addresses the leaders.

Don't worry about what people think of you. Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

*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. **3** But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. **4** I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. **5** Therefore 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 every man will receive his commendation from God.*

The aim of the Christian leader is to be a servant of the Lord Jesus. The word we use in church for the leader is minister. Minister means servant. The Christian leader is especially to be a steward. The master gives his steward the authority and responsibility to administer the master's business. He is to be trustworthy and devote his time, energy and abilities to care for and advance his master's interests. This is how the apostle Paul sees his ministry and thus sees that he is accountable to the Lord Jesus for the truths that he teaches as he serves Christ's people.

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Since he is accountable to Christ alone certain things follow. He is not going to be swayed by what others think of his ministry. Some will be harshly critical and that was certainly happening at Corinth. Others will be warmly approving and the people who formed a party behind him were certainly doing that. But their critical or favourable judgements did not ultimately matter. The only judgement that really matters is the judgement that his master, the Lord Jesus, will deliver on the last Day. Paul then says that while he earnestly tries to fulfil his ministry even his own judgement may be wrong. Since this is the case it is pretty foolish for leaders to look for accolades or fear criticism from God's people for their ministry.

Because Christian leaders are to be judged by God they must treat their ministry very seriously. In fact some might think it is so serious they might consider resigning from such ministries. Well perhaps they should if they think like that BUT also perhaps they should not.

Our leaders, like the apostle Paul, are never to forget that our God is a God of love, mercy and generosity. Paul wrote that he was the chief of sinners but he also knew he was saved by grace and lived under grace. Even in judgement on his ministry, the grace of God forced him to think of the judgement Day as a day of commendation not condemnation.