

Spiritual Leaders and Their Followers

Lessons from 1 Corinthians 4

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Bible Text

KJV

¹Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. ²Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. ³But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. ⁴For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified: but he that judgeth me is the Lord. ⁵Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God.

⁶And these things, brethren, I have in a figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes; that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another. ⁷For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it? ⁸Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us: and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you. ⁹For I think that God hath set forth us the apostles last, as it were appointed to death: for we are made a spectacle unto the world, and to angels, and to men. ¹⁰We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised. ¹¹Even unto this present hour we both hunger, and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; ¹²And labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: ¹³Being defamed, we intreat: we are made as the filth of the world, and are the offscouring of all things unto this day.

¹⁴I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you. ¹⁵For though ye have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have ye not many fathers: for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. ¹⁶Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me. ¹⁷For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church. ¹⁸Now some are puffed up, as though I would not come to you. ¹⁹But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord will, and will know, not the speech of them which are puffed up, but the power. ²⁰For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power. ²¹What will ye? shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?

NET Bible

4:1 One should think about us this way – as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 4:2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 4:3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4:4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of

this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 4:5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God.

4:6 I have applied these things to myself and Apollos because of you, brothers and sisters, so that through us you may learn “not to go beyond what is written,” so that none of you will be puffed up in favor of the one against the other. 4:7 For who concedes you any superiority? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as though you did not? 4:8 Already you are satisfied! Already you are rich! You have become kings without us! I wish you had become kings so that we could reign with you! 4:9 For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to die, because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to people. 4:10 We are fools for Christ, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, we are dishonored! 4:11 To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, brutally treated, and without a roof over our heads. 4:12 We do hard work, toiling with our own hands. When we are verbally abused, we respond with a blessing, when persecuted, we endure, 4:13 when people lie about us, we answer in a friendly manner. We are the world’s dirt and scum, even now.

4:14 I am not writing these things to shame you, but to correct you as my dear children.

4:15 For though you may have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, because I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. 4:16 I encourage you, then, be imitators of me. 4:17 For this reason, I have sent Timothy to you, who is my dear and faithful son in the Lord. He will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. 4:18 Some have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. 4:19 But I will come to you soon, if the Lord is willing, and I will find out not only the talk of these arrogant people, but also their power. 4:20 For the kingdom of God is demonstrated not in idle talk but with power. 4:21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline or with love and a spirit of gentleness?

Introduction

- Project a slide containing pictures of prominent evangelical leaders—pastors, teachers, broadcasters, authors, and musicians. Point to each picture on the slide and ask the class to identify the leader portrayed there.
- Ask if anyone present “knows” any of the leaders. If so, inquire to learn if they have a personal relationship with those leaders. (The answer will likely be negative.) Point out that it is easy to fall prey to a celebrity culture wherein we “follow” leaders whom we have little chance of knowing personally, and look negatively at someone who “follows” another leader.
- Observe that the early chapters of 1 Corinthians describe an ancient situation that sheds light on ours.

Structure/Context

Chapter 4 is situated within an extended discussion about wisdom and divisions within the church (1:10-4:21). The argument of chapter 4 cannot be separated from the rest of the discussion—especially that of 3:5-23.

“Scholars are unanimous in their opinion that 1 Cor. 1:10-4:21 forms a rounded and coherent unit within the first letter of Paul to the church at Corinth. Upon further consideration of the coherence of this much-discussed passage they all go their various ways” (Smit 231).

The Corinthian church had divided into parties that professed allegiance to various spiritual leaders—most notably, Paul and Apollos, but also Peter/Cephas and “Christ” (1:12-13; 3:4-6; 3:22; 4:6).

The context from chapter 3 includes the following:

- Spiritual leaders as servants in the Lord’s work
- Imagery of building and field
- Multiple workers involved in planting and reaping a harvest
- Divine blessing the key to growth
- Jesus as foundation of temple indwelt by the Holy Spirit
- Quality of building materials tested by fire
- Rejection of worldly wisdom
- Christian heritage extending far beyond the reach of any Christian leader

The discussion has applications for Christians in their personal lives and in their interactions outside the local church. However, strictly speaking, it addresses the relationship between spiritual leaders and members of local churches. At issue is the Corinthian church’s partisan loyalty to various spiritual leaders.

“The *schēma* in I Corinthians 1:18-2:16 excludes any confrontation with these two co-missionaries [Cephas and Apollos], but at the same time it enables Paul to argue against the party disorder. . . . In the text’s background disguised by the *schēma*, Paul argues against the Corinthian parties which absolutize the wisdom of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas; however, thanks to the *schēma*, he manages to avoid stepping openly on the toes of these two other apostles. In other words, criticizing the Corinthians’ praise of Apollos and Cephas, Paul nevertheless avoids hurting the feelings of these two with any direct statement—a genuine masterpiece” (Lampe 130).

As we examine chapter 4, we will see that Paul describes spiritual leaders in three key ways. Each of these descriptions can help us to understand how spiritual leaders and followers should relate to one another.

Body

Spiritual Leaders as Servant-Managers (vv. 1-5)

Spiritual leaders should . . .

- Be faithful (v. 2)
- Be more conscious of divine judgment than of self-concept or followers' criticism (vv. 3-5)

Followers should . . .

- Refrain from judging leaders' motives (v. 5)

Verse 1 refers to spiritual leaders as *huperetes* and *oikonomos*. *Huperetes* is commonly translated as *officer* (NET, KJV), *minister* (KJV), *servant* (NET, KJV), and *guard* (NET). In the New Testament it is used to denote someone who serves a judge (Matt. 5:25) and those who assist religious leaders in any of several ways (e.g., Matt. 26:58; Luke 4:20, John 7:32; 18:3). It is often used of Christian ministers (Luke 1:2; John 18:36; Acts 13:5; 26:16; and, of course, 1 Cor. 4:1)

“Though *hyperetas* (‘servants’) may once have had a more etymological meaning relating to ‘a rower’ on board ship, its more general meaning was ‘servant’ or ‘attendant.’ Here it means a subordinate servant functioning as a free man, not as a slave (*doulos*). Thus, Paul and Apollos were free servants of Christ, fully responsible to him, and not to the Corinthians” (Mare, comments on 4:1).

Oikonomos (4:1) is commonly translated as *steward* (NET, KJV) and *manager* (NET). The New Testament uses this term in reference to a slave entrusted with management of the affairs of a household (Luke 12:42; Gal. 4:2); a manager of a rich man’s goods (Luke 16:1, 3, 8); a city official (Rom. 16:23); Christians in general as trustees of spiritual gifts (1 Peter 4:10); and spiritual leaders (1 Cor. 4:1, 2; Titus 1:7).

“‘Those entrusted with’ (*oikonomos*, ‘house stewards’) refers to a position often held by a slave (Joseph, Gen 39:2-19), who managed the affairs of the household entrusted to him” (Mare, comments on 4:1).

A different word for servant, *diakonos*, appears in 3:5. It is commonly translated *servant* (NET, KJV), *minister* (KJV), and *deacon* (NET, KJV).

“1249 [*diakonos*] represents the servant in his activity for the work; not in his relation, either servile, as that of that 1402 [*douloo*], or more voluntary, as in the case of 2324 [*therapon*], to a person. 1402 opp. To 1249 denotes a bondman, one who sustains a permanent servile relation to another. 2324 is the voluntary performer of services, whether as a freeman or a slave; it is a nobler tenderer word than 1402. 5257 [*huperetes*] suggests subordination” (*NET Bible*).

When Paul says that spiritual leaders are servants and stewards, he is emphasizing the fact that God has appointed them to their position and will ultimately judge their work. This calls for the leaders to demonstrate faithfulness and not to pander.

Christian leaders are ultimately servants, stewards entrusted with divine mysteries—not celebrities. Since their faithfulness is subject to God’s evaluation, we should avoid the extremes of criticizing them or putting them on a pedestal.

“[N]o Christian worker is ever to be idolized. Indeed, those who are idolized can become instruments for fragmenting the work of God. Believers are to realize that Christian workers are simply God’s servants (*diakonoi*)—agents through whom people believe in Christ” (Mare, comments on 3:5).

We would do well to remember and apply Paul’s rhetorical question: “Who are you to pass judgment on another’s servant?” (Rom. 14:4).

Spiritual Leaders as Endurers of Suffering (vv. 6-13)

Spiritual leaders should . . .

- Accept the paradox that successful ministry occurs amid hardship (vv. 8-13)

Followers should . . .

- Think of leaders in biblical terms (v. 6)
- Avoid the pride of partisanship (v. 6)
- Accept that blessings are gifts from God (v. 7)
- Refuse to associate ministry with glamour (vv. 8-12)

The Corinthians thought too highly of their favored leaders and of themselves as well. Paul confronted them for their pride, aiming to convey to them a more accurate view of himself and Apollos (v. 6).

“The saying ‘Do not go beyond what is written’—since it contains in it the familiar *gegraptai*, ‘it is written,’ used often to introduce OT quotations—seems to be a general statement advising the Corinthians not to go beyond any written doctrine in the OT. . . . If they learn not to go beyond the teaching of the Scripture about how they should treat God’s teachers and all of God’s people, then the result will be that they will not be conceited in taking a stand for one teacher or person over against another” (Mare, comments on 4:6).

Everything that we have comes from God, so it is pointless for us boast about how we may differ from others (v. 7).

Paul displays an ironic tone in vv. 8-13. He contrasts the experience of the apostles—death, folly, suffering, dishonor, and need—with that of the Corinthians—victory, wisdom, strength, and honor. Whether the Corinthians actually had experienced such blessings, or merely thought themselves to have done so, it is clear that the apostles had been called to persist through hardship.

“The irony is that the Corinthians were trying to ‘reign,’ while their spiritual fathers and examples were far from ‘reigning.’ Actually, Paul goes on to explain that God has publicly displayed the apostles as humble, despised men—men worthy of death. . . . He pictures those of the apostolic band as condemned to death and led forth by a

conqueror. By his use of *theatron* ('spectacle') he seems to be alluding to the figure of condemned men tortured and exposed to the wild animals in the colosseum" (Mare, comments on 4:9).

The experience of the apostles argues against the success theory of leadership. Both spiritual leaders and followers need to grasp this concept. Difficult circumstances may provide just the sort of context in which God can best use a minister.

Spiritual Leaders as Parent Figures (vv. 14-21)

Spiritual leaders should . . .

- Provide a parental example for followers (vv. 14-17)
- Find a balance between sternness and meekness (vv. 18-21)

Followers should . . .

- Distinguish between spiritual parents and mere teachers (vv. 14-16)
- Accept "parental" guidance (vv. 16-21)

Paul wrote these words of confrontation—not so he could bring shame on the Corinthians, but out of a heart of parental concern (v. 14). And it was in this regard that he set himself apart from other leaders who might have claimed the Corinthians' allegiance. He was responsible for imparting spiritual life to them, and that was something that no other teacher could legitimately claim (v. 15). Therefore, he called on them to imitate his own example (v. 16) and to pay particular attention to Timothy, whom he had sent to the Corinthians (v. 17). Furthermore, he assured them of his intent to return to Corinth for a visit (vv. 18-19)—if necessary, to carry out the discipline of a father (vv. 19-21).

"In speaking of the leaders of the Corinthians as *paidagogoi* ('guardians'), the apostle is calling attention to the distinction between himself, their spiritual father, and those leaders, many of whom could be called 'guardians,' or 'guides.' In the ancient Roman Empire, *paidagogoi* indicated 'slave-guides,' who escorted the boys to and from school and were in charge of their general conduct. So, in a sense, they could be called instructors (cf. Gal 3:24)" (Mare, comments on 4:14-17).

Conclusion

- Spiritual leaders should put their focus on honoring Christ rather than pleasing their audiences.
- Followers should position themselves first in relation to Christ, and only secondarily in relation to human leaders.
- Spiritual leaders are servants above all else. We should beware of those who claim to provide spiritual guidance but seem interested in self-promotion.
- Followers should avoid the extremes of idolizing and criticizing spiritual leaders.

- We should not expect spiritual leaders' lives to be comfortable, but rather difficult.
- As followers, we should not allow our affiliation with a given spiritual leader to divide us from faithful brothers and sisters who happen to "follow" another leader. Jesus said, "whoever is not against us is for us" (Mark 9:40).
- We should value leader-follower relationships that result in spiritual growth, giving preference to those that allow for reciprocal relationship.

“. . . the Corinthian problems have resurfaced in the general human tendency to line up behind favorite leaders—in convention rallies behind candidates who express the “right” view in the “right words,” in the local church where members pit one pastor or staff member against another, in the individual minister who seeks to emulate the style of some popular preacher or preaches only from the sermons of some homiletical patriarch of a day long past. It is easy to substitute a human leader or human style or human idea for the gospel. When this happens factions develop, and the wisdom of this world is substituted for the gospel” (Polhill 338).

Sources

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