

## **FIRST CORINTHIANS**

### **Stewards Of The Gospel I Corinthians 3:18-4:5**

It is not uncommon for pastors to come to me and say, "Jack, I'm so frustrated. I seem to be coming apart at the seams. My church is running my whole life. My leaders want me to preach differently, to teach differently and to change my whole personality. My congregation wants me to tell stories, to be a nice guy so as not to offend anyone and to preach in such a way that everybody feels good when they leave the service. Jack, I can't do it! I can't please everyone! I can't be me and I'm losing my identity as a servant of Christ!" Why do pastors get into this dilemma? First, pastors often do not know their biblical role and if they do they won't stand for the truth because of fear of losing their pastorates. Second, the leadership and congregation have expectations for the pastor which he cannot meet. For sure, I Corinthians 3:14-4:5 will help all of us answer some of these perplexing problems for pastors as they relate to their congregations.

There were deep divisions in the local church at Corinth because the saints were exalting human reason and rallying around their favorite preacher whether it was Paul, Apollos, Peter or someone else. These Corinthians had a gross misunderstanding as to the place of the minister and the true nature of the ministry. In this context, Paul is still writing about men sovereignly called to and gifted for the ministry by God, set apart in a special sense to equip and train the saints to do the work of the ministry.

In 3:18-4:5, the Apostle Paul is going to deal with how Christians are to respond to ministers, how they ought to view a minister of the gospel, and what their attitude should be towards a person who is called and gifted for the ministry and appointed to be their teacher by God. Paul is going to show the Corinthians the lowly place the minister, whom they had set up so high, really occupies in the plan of God for the church.

#### **RELATIONSHIP OF CHRISTIANS TO GOD'S MINISTERS 3:18-23**

Do not deceive yourselves. If any one of you thinks he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. It is quite possible for a Christian to be deceived because he is operating on worldly wisdom rather than God's wisdom which is found in the Bible. This is true of ministers as well as the saints. To give oneself to worldly wisdom is to operate in this world as though there is no God. To view life strictly from a secular perspective is worldly wisdom. A nominal Christian can speak of God with his lips but live like an atheist because he has capitulated to a secular, worldly, humanistic view of life which is all around him and which constantly hounds him to throw over faith in God and go the way of the world. This verse clearly says the way to become spiritually wise is to become a fool in the

sight of the non-Christian world. The world says wisdom comes through power, fame, money, pleasure, manipulation of people to gain selfish ends, and thousands of other ways. For a Christian to become wise, he must renounce all human reasoning and worldly thinking and cling only to Christ by faith as He and His plan is revealed in the written Word of God.

For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile." All worldly wisdom is deplored by God. He hates it because it leaves Him out of the reasoning process. Therefore, worldly wisdom is futile, empty, vain and it will sooner or later backfire on any Christian who depends upon it for his own life or the life of his local church. A Christian must choose to operate on God's wisdom. Divine wisdom is believing what the Lord says is right and acting upon it. But this will cause the world to call the Christian a fool. Every Christian must come to the place where he renounces the world and worldly reasoning as having anything of value for him. It was said of Moses who was immersed in the worldly wisdom of Egypt, "He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Heb. 11:25-26). Jesus said the same thing another way, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it" (Mk. 8:35). Paul's point is that worldly wisdom has no place in the local church. When worldly wisdom comes into the local church, there is always division, strife and conflict as there was at Corinth. It really does not make any difference what the world says or does, for its wisdom will be proven to be utterly faulty in the end. As the hymn writer so aptly said,

"I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold. I'd rather have Him than riches untold.  
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands. I'd rather be led by his nail pierced  
hands than to be the king of a vast domain And be held in sin's dread sway. I'd  
rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today."

So then, no more boasting about men! How do we boast in ministers? We isolate them in our thinking and exalt them above other preachers in such a way we will only follow the preacher we like, even if the ones we dislike are truly preaching the Word of God. We soon begin to see our particular preacher as our only source of blessing and we depend upon him rather than on the Lord. We find ourselves leaning upon a man for spiritual strength, guidance and courage.

All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God. Everything in this universe belongs to the Christian because he is related to Christ who possesses all things. Christ will inherit the world. In Christ, the Christian will inherit the world also. In Christ, a Christian possesses everything. There is no limit to a believer's possessions in Christ. Paul's point is obvious—as heirs of all things in Christ, Christians possess even the ministers of the gospel. All ministers belong to and serve the church; therefore, we should never claim to follow just one particular minister. These Corinthians were limiting themselves by clinging to only one

minister. God has given many teachers and preachers to the Body of Christ, the church, to build it up. Instead of enriching themselves, these Corinthians were impoverishing themselves by following one particular minister in preacher worship which is a form of idolatry. Idolatry is putting anything or anyone above Jesus Christ the Lord. God has told us He will never share His glory with any mere man. These Corinthians did not belong to any human leader. They belonged only to Christ and owed allegiance only to Him. By exalting human leaders, these Corinthians were acting like their own masters rather than as people who belonged to the Master, Jesus Christ. All of us must stop exalting ministers and see them as mere men with a special calling from God who are appointed to serve God and the church.

The seeds to be men followers were in the church at Corinth but today it can clearly be seen in narrow minded denominationalism.

Instead of saying, "I am of Paul," or , "I am of Apollos," We say, "I am of the Baptists," "I am of the Methodists," "I am of the Assembly of God," "I am of the Church of Christ," "I am of the Presbyterians." And then we build our fences so high that none of us can see the other, and we make our doors so thick that none will walk through and associate with the others as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. We have come full circle. We are living out today the seed of what the Corinthians started. They were not divided into separate groups, but we are today. We are so sharply divided that many of us do not believe that there are any Christians in any other group. We believe that all things that belong to God are ours and no one else's (Knofel Staton, First Corinthians).

#### RIGHT POSITION OF MINISTERS 4:1

So then, men ought to regard us (Paul, Apollos, Peter). Paul will now tell the Corinthians how they should view the minister. They were not big shots or top brass over the church with the church as their slaves. No, ministers are servants and stewards.

As servants of Christ. The Greek word "servants" is *huperetes* and literally means "an under-rower." In I Corinthians 3:5, Paul used another word for servant which was *diakonoi* meaning "errand boy," but here he used *huperetes* which every Corinthian would readily understand. Corinth was a seaport and it was a common sight to see the Roman war galleys. On the lowest level of these warships was a single row of benches on both sides of the deck where the rowers sat. Facing the rowers on a platform was where an officer (sometimes the captain) would stand so the rowers (oarsmen) could see him. It was the oarsman's task to row according to the cadence set by the officer. The whole ship moved and stopped on his orders. These rowers were slaves in the Roman navy who had been forcibly put in the position of under-rower; it was not their choice. The word *huperetes* implies subordination and insignificance. A minister is an under-rower who takes his orders from Jesus Christ, his Captain. What the Lord Jesus tells His servants, they are to obey, fixing their eyes on Him, their spiritual Captain, for orders. An under-rower did all the work; the captain gave the orders and got the glory. Ministers labor at the Lord's command but it is Jesus who gets the glory.

While the word "servant" tells us that the minister is not the big shot, the domineering leader or the lord over the flock, it does indicate a biblical independence of ministers as far as from whom they ultimately take their marching orders. They are not ultimately servants of an elder board, a deacon board, a congregation or a denomination. They are servants of Christ. Ministers are not to be paying heed to what the congregation or any one group within the congregation wants to hear, but they are to say what the Lord tells them to say out of His inspired and infallible Bible. To harness a minister of the gospel is to rob him of being a true servant of Christ and it also robs the congregation of listening to a man preach who has been listening to God. To harness a man of God is to stifle his creativity, hamper his zeal and cool his heart for the Lord.

And as those entrusted (stewards) with the secret things of God. A minister has been given an entrustment from God. "Those entrusted" are actually called stewards in the Greek. Every Greek knew what a steward was. He was a privileged slave, picked out and set apart from the other slaves by the master of the household to oversee the household. He was a slave who was elevated above the other slaves and given the responsibility of dispensing to the members of the household the provisions and the stores of the master. A steward was not the master but a slave of the master. Today the nearest equivalent would be an administrator. The steward was entrusted with certain valuable commodities which he was responsible to dispense. The minister is called by God, in a special sense from other saints, to dispense "the secret things of God." The "secret things" or "mysteries" are the truths of the gospel and the whole counsel of God as found in the Bible and which cannot be known by any human reasoning. Ministers are primarily dispensers of truth. The Lord Jesus, the Master, has entrusted His ministers with His truth and they are to faithfully preserve it and dispense this truth as preachers and teachers of the Word of God. The ministers must not teach human, worldly wisdom to the flock but divine, godly wisdom which is found only in the Bible and nowhere else. Ministers are to dispense divine truth so that lives are changed and lived on the basis of divine wisdom, revealed truth as found in the Bible.

God's ministers have no authority of their own. They have authority but it comes to them by Christ. They are subordinate to Christ. They merely handle truth. Therefore, Christians ought to exalt the originator of truth, Christ, and not the handlers of the truth, God's ministers.

#### RESPONSIBILITY OF GOD'S MINISTERS 4:2

Now it is required that those who have been given a trust (stewards) must prove faithful. The first responsibility of a steward in the master's household was to dispense the provisions. The second responsibility was that he should be faithful and trustworthy to do exactly what the master told him to do. The steward was left on his own and the master might wonder, "Can I trust him with my house?" God has entrusted the gospel and the whole Bible and His church to the minister of Christ, and he must be faithful in dispensing the secrets of God so people can understand them. If a minister is to be faithful to Christ, he will not take to himself any authority which Christ has not given him. For a minister to preach and command the congregation to do something God has not commanded would be unfaithfulness to the

Master, Christ. To keep some part of God's Word from the flock when they need it would be unfaithfulness to the Master. To be faithful to the Master means not to withhold in any sense what the Master has entrusted to him to give to others. God's ministers are to be judged according to their faithfulness. The minister must be faithful in teaching God's Word and not be a man pleaser, for the only one he must please is Jesus Christ.

God will judge His stewards on faithfulness, not success, numbers, big churches, huge buildings, the number of books written, or whatever else man conceives as success. God's stewards must be faithful, faithful, faithful! The steward of God cannot neglect to feed the flock the Word, nor may he adulterate the Word, nor may he take away or add anything to the Word. He must be faithful. The task of the steward is faithfulness to his Master alone, not kowtowing to every demand of other servants whether they be leaders or congregation. He must be faithful regardless of the external results or the consequences.

A minister is to be faithful not a perfectionist who does everything right. The pastor does his ministry for Christ not other people. The pastor who wants to please people and be liked by people will always be performance oriented. Ministers perform for God not people.

"A person who is more concerned about the quality of his service rather than being a faithful steward will become somewhat paranoid over his service to the Lord. In fact, he may easily begin to see service as more of a performance for an audience of people around him rather than a ministry, with God himself as his audience. There is a big difference in ministering to people with God as the audience and performing in front of people with them as the audience. A person who does the latter will easily think he did not do well if he makes a mistake or if he doesn't get praised. And a person can easily then begin to practice flawless performances apart from faithful service" (Staton, I Corinthians).

#### REMINDER THAT GOD JUDGES MINISTERS 4:3-5

I care very little if I am judged by you. Paul now begins to deal with the problem of who ultimately evaluates a minister. Everyone wants to get in on this act of evaluating his faithfulness or unfaithfulness in the ministry. This puts a subtle and constant pressure on all men called to the ministry. The first pressure Paul mentions is congregational evaluation. He does not say it did not matter at how he was judged by the Corinthians, but it mattered very little how they judged him. Paul is not suggesting the pastor should never listen to others nor seek to know how others evaluate him. The minister should always listen to the honest evaluations from his leadership and sometimes from his congregation, but congregational evaluation has its shortcomings. What Paul is saying is that no pastor should lay himself open to the whims and petty wishes of people, for in so doing, he would go crazy. He would become totally paranoid. In essence Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "I know you are thinking about me and I know what you think (and its not good), but I want you to know I do not think it very significant." He really did not care whether they thought him, faithful or unfaithful. His ultimate responsibility was not to them. They had not called him, or sent him, or told him what doctrines to preach, nor was he their steward; he was the steward of God. A minister answers ultimately to Christ not men.

Stuart Briscoe says there are three kinds of congregational pressure. Adulation which swells the head, causing many ministers to believe all the nice things people say about them. Manipulation in which people try to manipulate the pastor by force. Every local congregation has its power structure. There are people who seek to influence the preaching and teaching by iron-fisted, authoritarian bullying, by stopping all giving to the church, by threatening to leave the church, by persistent hounding and complaining. There are many things a congregation can do to put pressure on a minister to stop him from being a servant and steward. Whenever a pastor begins to listen to the crowd, he is in trouble. Whenever he begins to pass over unpleasant doctrines or spiritual subjects he knows will cause controversy with the power structure, he destroys himself and the spiritual life of his congregation. Manipulation puts a harness on a pastor and ties his hands so that he cannot be effective. Many a man has left the ministry because he ran up against the power structure of the local church. Instead of quitting, the pastor should stay and be a faithful servant and steward, knowing God will take care of him. Antagonism is the last form of pressure applied by a congregation on the minister. This is outright, sharp, open-faced opposition which may take the form of open rebellion or a whispering campaign. Mr. Briscoe says, "Adulation swells the head; manipulation ties the hands, and antagonism breaks the preacher's heart"

Or by any human court. Paul did not get overly concerned about what the unsaved world (societal judgment) thought of his ministry. No minister must answer ultimately to the world but only to Christ, his Master.

Indeed, I do not even judge myself. The second pressure on the pastor is self-evaluation. Paul could not accurately appraise his own ministry. A minister's evaluation of himself is as irrelevant as any other man's evaluation of him. This does not mean Paul never sat down by himself or with his elders or the congregations he taught to evaluate the effectiveness of his ministry. What he is saying is that his judgment was incomplete; his heart was still sinful; he did not have all the facts; he had blind spots about his ministry and he could not know all the motivations of his heart as he was performing his ministry.

My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. Paul looked at his own life and ministry and found nothing condemning about it. Surely he had times of doubt, times of indifference, and times of making mistakes, but he dealt with these things before God. Paul could think of no great matter where he had fallen down in his stewardship. As far as he knew, he carried out his ministry faithfully and at the time of writing the Corinthians was pleasing to Christ. Would that all ministers could say this! Yet, even if Paul's conscience was clear, that did not get him off the hook. The only impartial, competent and final judge is the Lord Himself. As to whether Paul was faithful would not be settled by conscience, but by Christ at the Judgment Seat. The Lord was continually examining Paul's ministry as He is examining every pastor's ministry, and He will judge not only one's works but the motives behind the works.

Paul did not mean we should not examine our own works as ministers, or that an elder board or a deacon board, or a bishop, or a congregation should not evaluate the works of a man's ministry. If any minister is in doctrinal error, moral error or is not being faithful to his calling, then he is to be judged. But Paul is talking about motives, and this is where no one should seek to judge a minister or any Christian. We must judge actions

but not motives. We should not assume we know what has made somebody act the way he did.

We must remember it is the Lord Jesus who calls the minister, commissions him, and entrusts him with the Word, and the minister is ultimately, finally, completely and primarily responsible to the Lord Himself, his Master.

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. The third pressure put on a minister is premature evaluation. These Corinthians were to stop judging Paul and the other ministers so as to find all kinds of fault with them, following only the one's they liked. All ministers will be judged by Christ. He will bring out the secrets and motivations of the human heart on judgment day, and then the minister will find out whether his ministry was done to exalt self or God, to please men or please Christ. If there was any jealousy, pride or carnality, Christ will drag it out into the light. "There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known" (Matt. 10:26). Many a servant who looked attractive and sounded good on this earth will be terribly embarrassed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Every minister of the gospel should be constantly aware that one day his whole life is going to be examined by his Lord. Christ is going to walk back through his life and reward him for the things that were done for Christ. At that moment, ministers will be praised (rewarded) for the things that were done for Christ and not for their own glory. Until that time, we Christians are not to exalt and praise our ministers so as to give them glory. Nor are we to criticize the motives of their hearts. God will take care of His called servants. What should the church do? They should pray for their pastor and ask God to make him God's man so he can minister to the church with real power.

Notice carefully that each minister will have some praise. This implies the Lord Jesus in His Loving omniscience will find cause to praise and reward every true minister of the gospel.

Where mere human judges may find no place for praise. God alone knows the motivations of the heart and will reward accordingly.

## CONCLUSION

Are you a Christian? If not, you will also face a judgment. It will not be for reward but will be the terrible, horrible, awful judgment at the Great White Throne where men will be judged according to their works. Billions upon billions will present their good works to God and He will declare that no good works can save a man, for all men are sinners and only Christ can save sinners. Person after person will be cast into the Lake of Fire because they did not have Christ as Lord and Savior. How can you escape this judgment? Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved and you will escape the certain judgment to come for all who reject Jesus Christ in this life.