

14. The first of Paul's present exhortations to the Corinthians pertained to their problem of self-deception (3:18). The natural mind is deceitful and self-deceiving, so that resolving the problem of factions in the church at Corinth (as indeed all of the ills that plagued that body) depended absolutely upon the Corinthians "coming to their senses" and beginning to think with the mind of Christ. The practical issues at Corinth were the product of flawed perception, thinking and understanding; if the Corinthians were to set things right among them, they would have to free themselves from their folly and self-deception.

In that regard it's noteworthy that Paul didn't accompany his exhortation with specific instruction for dealing with their self-delusion. He understood that the saints at Corinth possessed the life and mind of Christ by His Spirit. They didn't need a set of behavioral instructions; they needed to be made aware of the natural-mindedness that was distorting and directing their thinking. Paul confronted the truth behind their attitudes and actions; having done so, he knew they had the spiritual resource to respond appropriately.

Paul refused to provide the Corinthians with a checklist for remedying their self-deception, but he did set before them in two particulars what the operation of the mind of Christ would look like in the instance of dealing with their factions. This instruction took the form of two further imperatives – the first one a positive directive (4:1) and the second its negative complement (4:5). Together these imperatives comprise two sides of the same coin, implying and interpreting each other.

- a. The first of these two imperatives (the third in Paul's grouping of four; ref. again 3:18, 21) directed the Corinthians to properly consider and regard those who led them. The clear implication is that their factions (1:12, 3:4) – and the natural-mindedness that lay behind them – proved their failure to rightly perceive and esteem their leaders. *The Corinthians were deceived about their leaders and their relationship with and responsibility to them as much as they were deceived about themselves and their own maturity and wisdom* (3:1-4, 4:6ff).

Simply put, they regarded those who ministered to them as objects to be boasted in – entities whose ultimate purpose was to serve their own self-affirmation and self-aggrandizement (*I am of Paul; I am of Apollos, etc.*). This is the way the natural mind looks at Christ's ministers (even as it views everything and everyone from the vantage point of self); the spiritual mind has an entirely different perspective and assessment: It regards such men as *servants* and *stewards* (4:1).

- 1) Whether local church leaders or the apostles themselves, all are servants in Christ's Church. And not servants of themselves, or ultimately of other believers, but of *Christ Himself*. This fact may appear so obvious as to be superfluous, but things that are obvious as a matter of principle or doctrine often escape the sort of practical scrutiny and application they deserve. The Corinthians would have roundly affirmed Paul's assertion about those who led them, *even while their attitudes, speech and actions railed against it*. Their factions and the dynamics surrounding them showed that they did indeed regard their leaders as servants – just not servants of Christ.

Paul's statement hearkens back to verse 3:5, and yet there is an important distinction between these two verses in that he here employed a different noun than before. Although some scholars maintain that he was using the two nouns as relative synonyms, two things suggest otherwise. The first is the fact that this is the only occurrence of this noun in the breadth of Paul's letters, which points to a conscious decision on his part to use it here; the second thing relates to the first, namely the remarkable pertinence of this particular term to the surrounding context.

- The two Greek nouns can be equally rendered *servant*, but with a notable point of distinction: Whereas the one in verse 3:5 (*diakonos*) connotes the general notion of servitude – one who serves the interests of others, the present one (*huperetes*) highlights service as it reflects and expresses the authority of a superior; it denotes a person who acts under orders from someone else. Thus the most common use of this term in the New Testament is in reference to an appointed *officer* of a governing authority (ref. Matthew 5:25; Luke 4:20; John 7:32-46, 18:1-22; Acts 5:22-26).
- This distinction is crucial to the point Paul was making in this context as he brought his treatment of the Corinthian factions to a head. The saints at Corinth needed to be reminded that leaders in the Church are servants acting under authority – not an authority of their own that is self-derived or self-directed, but not the authority of other men either. They serve under the charge of the one master who is Jesus Christ, and it is to Him that they are accountable as servants (cf. John 18:36 with Acts 26:16).

Christ's servant-leaders don't stand alongside Him as complementary or supplementary authorities, much less as alternative or competing ones. They are appointed by Him and act in His authority and on His behalf; they are the servants of His will and work and will give account to Him accordingly (cf. Luke 12:42-44). Again, this truth may appear patently obvious, but all too often it gets distorted, obscured or effectively ignored in the practical outworking of the relationship between the saints and those who lead them. As at Corinth, so in every place and generation: Christians not only separate and play their leaders against one another, they separate them from and play them against Christ Himself (1:11-12). If it's true that Christ's *Church* is not the servant of men's desires, whims and agendas, it is equally true of the *shepherds* He calls to lead His Church.

- 2) The Church's leaders are Christ's servants, but servants whose orders pertain to the truth as it is in Him: They are "*stewards of the mysteries of God.*" This second descriptor clarifies Paul's singular use of this particular "servant" term: A steward is charged with the oversight and administration of another's possessions; he is, in that sense, a servant under orders.

As before (ref. 2:7 and pages 51-52 in the notes), Paul was using the term *mystery* in reference to God's ultimate restorative purpose for His creation which was progressively revealed and worked out in the salvation history culminating with the Christ event. This purpose was mysterious in that the particulars of its accomplishment and effect could not be fully discerned until Christ's coming. Throughout the ages God continued to clarify His promise of creational renewal and the means for accomplishing it. He did so through direct pronouncements as well as His ongoing interactions in the world and the various covenantal structures He put in place. God's ongoing revelation was purposeful and consistent, but *prophetic*: necessarily shadowy and marked by loose ends which called for faith on the part of those waiting and watching. Across the centuries, the Lord's servants looked carefully and longingly to discern the form and meaning of what was to come, but the full light of clarity and understanding awaited the coming of the sunrise from on high (cf. Matthew 13:16-17; Luke 1:57-78, 2:22-32; Colossians 2:16-17; 1 Peter 1:10-12; etc.).

God's mysteries awaited the "fullness of the times," but now they have been fully disclosed and illumined in the person and work of Jesus the Messiah. Jesus thus interpreted Himself to His disciples and then charged them with presenting and interpreting Him to the world of men. Jesus is the True Israel – the Seed of Abraham – through whom God's blessing comes to all the earth's families, and He is accomplishing His Abrahamic calling through those who share in His life as the new-creational "Israel of God." All Christians share in this calling as Abraham's offspring (Galatians 3:27-29), but it is especially the responsibility of the Church's leaders – those who are charged with the ministration of God's gospel.

Some important implications emerge from the above considerations – implications which, the context clearly shows, Paul intended his Corinthian readers to recognize and respond to with the mind of Christ:

- If Christ's leaders are His servants charged with the stewardship of the profound truths of His gospel, then their accountability to Him as leaders focuses on their accountability for understanding and administering His gospel. *They are servants under orders, and discharging their duty depends upon knowing and proclaiming the mysteries of God.* How can the Church's shepherds regard themselves as obedient servants when they fail to understand – or at least fail to preach and teach – the Old Testament scriptures as God's story of His salvation now fulfilled in Jesus Christ?
- And if Christ's leaders are accountable to Him and His gospel, they cannot become the servants of any other "master." Leaders have no right to their own agendas, whether their goal is building an empire or keeping the peace. Neither the Church nor its gospel belongs to or serves them, but they are likewise not the servants of other Christians and their agendas.

The Corinthians were to regard their leaders as servants of Christ charged with a stewardship. But, by its very nature, a stewardship is a *trust*, and therefore the faithful steward will show himself *trustworthy* (4:2). For the Lord's servant-stewards, obedience means faithful execution of their solemn trust. And that means unwavering faithfulness to Christ's gospel and commitment to seeing its fruit produced in the lives of people – those who are the Father's children as much as those who are yet estranged from Him. In all things, Christ's faithful servant-stewards labor to direct men toward *Him* (2 Corinthians 11:2; Galatians 4:19-20, 5:1; Ephesians 4:11-13; Colossians 1:28), not toward themselves (whether they do so intentionally or not; whether by intimidation or domination, deception, manipulation or recruitment, or simply the distraction born of ignorance or folly).

Kept within the larger context, Paul's point was this: Christ's saints must possess and employ a spiritual mind if they are to truly regard and esteem (in heart and action, and not just in doctrinal assent) His leaders as His servants and stewards of His gospel. Where they operate with natural minds, as was the case with the Corinthians, Christians will ultimately view and treat their leaders as servants of their own desires and agendas. So it is with Christ's leaders: Their faithful stewardship depends upon them employing the mind of the Spirit; otherwise, they, too, will be given to self-serving ends. As it was at Corinth, so it is in every church community: *Christians are naturally inclined to raise up and follow men and movements and Christian leaders are naturally ready to accommodate them.*

The Church's leaders have a solemn duty to discharge their trust as servants of Christ and His gospel, and that duty implies its complement, namely their *accountability to Jesus* for the way they carry out their stewardship (4:3-4). Again, a couple of important implications follow:

- 1) The Church's leaders are not subject to the judgment of men, whether those outside the Church or those within it. Indeed, they aren't even subject to their own self-judgment. Here it's critical to recognize that Paul wasn't suggesting that Christ's shepherds are untouchable, autonomous men free from all accountability to those they lead; he was merely affirming that they have *one* master – the Chief Shepherd. They serve *Him* – and so His sheep – according to the stewardship He's charged them with (1 Peter 5:1-4), and thus they cannot serve another master or subject themselves to another's examination as judge – not even their own.
- 2) Christ's leaders serve Him and His gospel and that is where their accountability lies. Men have no ability to determine ultimate faithfulness to that charge; who can finally decide another man's faithfulness to Christ? And who has so thorough an understanding of the mysteries of God that he can stand as judge of others respecting their conformity to it? Paul acknowledged that no one knew him like he knew himself (2:11), and even so he couldn't yield himself to his own self-examination. The one who assures himself that he's come to know reveals the depth of his folly.

- b. Whether those who lead or those who are led, every believer is obligated and accountable to his Master. Christ is their judge, both now and in the last day, and no man has either the capability or the prerogative to usurp His lordship by taking on the role of examiner and judge (cf. Romans 14:1-13). So Paul's fourth and summary imperative: "*Do not go on passing judgment before the time when the Lord comes...*" (4:5a). This exhortation brings to a climax the pointed contrast Paul has been drawing in this passage – a contrast grounded in the larger context and its overarching antithesis of natural versus spiritual wisdom.

The contrast in the immediate context involves the matter of judgment as it pertains to the Lord Jesus versus human beings. More specifically, it pertains to the situation in the church at Corinth in which believers were assuming the prerogative to judge Christ's servant-stewards, evident in the factions that had emerged in the church and with which they were aligning themselves. Though they doubtless believed they were acting in the interest of Christ and His lordship, the Corinthians had actually usurped His authority as Lord and Judge and made themselves lords over those whom He'd given to shepherd them.

This truth is powerfully punctuated by Paul's terminology in verses 3 and 5. Unfortunately, most English versions take a translational liberty with Paul's language which makes it impossible for the reader to catch his word play.

- In 4:5, Paul's expression "*the time*" refers to the ordained time of Christ's appearing when He will enter into judgment with all people, believers and unbelievers alike (cf. Matthew 25:1-33 with 2 Corinthians 5:9-10 and 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10; also Revelation 20:11-15). This judgment event will be the culmination of the biblical concept of the ***Day of the Lord***.
- All judgment belongs to the Lord Jesus and His "day" (John 5:19-30), and yet men (sadly even Christians) proudly appoint for themselves their own "day" to take their seat as judge. So Paul's language in verse 3: "*It is a very small thing that I should be examined by you or by a day of man.*"

In the name of faithfulness to Christ and His gospel, Christians are all too ready to strip the judge's robe from Him and array themselves in it, thereby becoming judges with perverse reasoning and motives (James 2:1-4). They enthrone as "lord" *their* perceptions and conclusions regarding men and *their* understanding and convictions regarding God's truth (contra 4:5b). Christ's servant-stewards are thereby rendered *their* servants and stewards, not of God's mysteries in Christ, but of *their* notions of truth. In that way such men ordain a "day of man" – a day in which they sit on Christ's bema as sovereign judge. This is the marrow of the great evil bound up in the Corinthian factions, an evil that highlights the pernicious nature and fruit of natural-mindedness: *Proclaiming oneself of Paul, Apollos or any other man (including Jesus Himself as another "spiritual leader") amounts to judging Christ's servant-stewards and thereby both deposing and judging the rightful Judge whom they serve and to whom they are accountable.*