

Challenges Christians Face

The Ministry: Watering, Working, Warning

1 Corinthians 3:5-17

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The Ministry: Watering, Working, Warning

Scripture

We continue our study in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

One of the challenges that Christians face is a wrong view about the ministry, particularly with respect to church leadership. Let's learn about this in a message I am calling, "The Ministry: Watering, Working, Warning."

Let's read 1 Corinthians 3:5-17:

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple. (1 Corinthians 3:5-17)

Introduction

When I served as the pastor in a previous church, several women attended one of the bi-annual Women's Conferences in Atlanta. One of the ladies returned from the conference very excited about what she had learned. In particular, one of the speakers—who happened to be one of our denominational leaders—especially impressed her. She was so excited about one of the messages he delivered that she wanted our entire congregation to hear it. Now, she did not want us to play the DVD of the message in the Sunday school hour. No. She wanted his message to be played during the Sunday morning Worship service in the place of my sermon!

Now, let me say that this denominational leader is an extraordinary preacher. Frankly, I have personally benefited from his preaching, and so have many of you. I realize that we live in a day when it is so easy for us to listen to our favorite preacher. We can listen to virtually any preacher we want to on the radio, TV, internet, or podcast. And so it is easy for us to develop loyalties to our favorite preacher.

But there was something about the request of this lady that reminded me of the situation in Corinth. The Christians in Corinth had developed strong loyalties to different leaders in the church. They had lost sight of the fact that the church has only one Head and Shepherd—Jesus Christ. They had forgotten that the leaders to whom they claimed allegiance were merely Jesus Christ's servants and undershepherds. As a result, they developed loyalties to certain leaders and partisan attitudes toward one another. These attitudes were damaging the church in Corinth.

We can fall into the same thinking that trapped the Corinthians. When we discover a preacher, teacher, or leader whom we respect, we develop loyalties to him, to his thinking, and to his way of doing things. While it is true that we can and do benefit from the preaching of God's gifted preachers, we need to be very careful not to develop unhealthy loyalties to our leaders and partisan attitudes

against one another. Many problems in our modern church develop over egos and personalities in the church.

The Corinthians displayed their immaturity by forming loyalties to human leaders in the church. Paul rejected this practice by reminding them of the true nature of the church and church leadership.

Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we are warned against a wrong view of the ministry, particularly of church leadership. We are reminded of the true nature of the church and church leadership.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. Leaders Are Merely Servants (3:5-9)
2. The Church Must Be Built with Care (3:10-15)
3. The Church Is God's Temple (3:16-17)

I. Leaders Are Merely Servants (3:5-9)

First, leaders are merely servants.

Paul said in verse 5a: **“What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each.”**

Paul began his discussion of church leadership by asserting that both **Apollos** and he were **servants**. The Greek word that Paul used here for **servants** is *diakonos*. It is the same word from which we get the word “deacon.” A servant in the culture at that time was a little higher than a slave, but he was still a servant. The modern equivalent is something like a waiter at a restaurant.

Imagine that you and another person went to a very nice restaurant for dinner. Each of you has been to this restaurant several times over the years. And over the course of time you have each come to like a particular waiter. You like James and your friend likes Sam. When you arrive at the restaurant you end up fighting over which waiter to have serve you. Well, of course, this is absurd

because James and Sam are only the waiters. The restaurant belongs to Mr. Smith. James and Sam are each doing a good job, but they are doing exactly what Mr. Smith wants them to do.

This is what was going on at Corinth. The Christians were fighting over who was the greatest preacher. So, Paul emphatically cleared up the issue for them. He said that he and **Apollos** were nothing more than **servants through whom** the Christians in Corinth **believed**. As **servants** of Jesus Christ, the owner of the church, they were simply carrying out their responsibilities **as the Lord assigned to each**.

Paul is reminding the Christians at Corinth—and us—that Jesus Christ is the true Lord of the Church. To exalt servants rather than the Lord would be absurd.

Paul then used an agricultural illustration to explain further what he meant. He said in verse 6, **“I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.”** Paul played a role: he **planted**. **Apollos** played a role: he **watered**. Paul started the church, and **Apollos** came along after Paul and was their pastor. But Paul made it clear that it was only **God** who **gave the growth**. Paul understood that he and **Apollos** were simply instruments used by God to further his purposes.

On the basis of this agricultural illustration, Paul concluded in verse 7, **“So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”** Church leaders are not **anything**. The **only** one who deserves all the credit and exaltation is **God who gives the growth**.

Paul carried the illustration one step further in verse 8, **“He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.”** The one **who plants** and the one **who waters** have **one** purpose, and that is to see the church grow and bear fruit, that is, to gather and perfect the saints. Paul and Apollos were not working in opposition to each other. They were doing different tasks with the same ultimate goal in mind—the establishment and growth of Christ’s church.

The Christians in Corinth may have thought that Paul and

Apollos were at odds with each other. So Paul wanted them to understand that nothing could be further from the truth. He and Apollos were committed to the same goal—the establishment and growth of Christ’s church. And so because there was no conflict between Paul and Apollos, there was no basis for the Corinthians’ divisions and quarrels.

To support his claim, Paul stated in verse 9, **“For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.”** Paul and Apollos were a team, working together in God’s service. Each one needed the other in order to fulfill the goal.

The church in Corinth, therefore, was **God’s field**, not theirs. Paul then also added that the church in Corinth was **God’s building**. **God** was the owner and Paul and Apollos were simply servants of God, doing what he had called them to do.

So, what does this mean for us today? I would like to mention two things.

First, the church belongs to God. In a very real sense the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is not *my* church. It is *God’s* church. I am merely a *servant* here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church. I try to be very careful not to say that the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is *my* church. I usually say something like, “The Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is the church where I serve.” Or, “The Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is the church I pastor.” I am very conscious that I am merely a servant, and that this church—like every other true church—belongs to God.

And second, leaders are servants. Leaders in the world climb to the top so that they can be served. Oh, they may not say it quite so blatantly, but that is their view of leadership. Leadership in the church however is always servant-leadership. We remember that Jesus said of himself in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Leaders who are servants are not seeking glory for themselves. They understand that all the glory goes to God, and they are simply delighted to serve in such a way as to glorify him.

II. The Church Must Be Built with Care (3:10-15)

Second, the church must be built with care.

Having switched from an agricultural to an architectural illustration, Paul said in verse 10, **“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.”**

Paul started the church in Corinth. He planted it. Or, to use the current illustration, he **laid a foundation**. He was able to do so **according to the grace of God** that was **given to** him.

After eighteen months Paul left Corinth and Apollos came along. Apollos was the **“someone else”** who was now **building upon** the foundation that Paul had laid.

Then, thinking about others who may yet come along and build upon the foundation, Paul added that **each one** should **take care how he builds upon it**. This was a warning that the church must be built with care.

Paul explained the reason for building with care in verse 11, **“For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”** Paul had set the **foundation** of the church in Corinth when he initially proclaimed the good news of the gospel. The Corinthians had believed the gospel, **which is** all about **Jesus Christ**. No one should try to build something different on that foundation.

You remember that some of the people in Corinth were exchanging the gospel of Jesus Christ for the wisdom of the world. Paul wanted them to understand that it would not work.

And so Paul said in verses 12-13, **“Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.”**

These two verses are a conditional statement. A conditional statement is characterized by an “if—then” statement. So, for ex-

ample, we could say, “*If it rains*” (there is the “if” part of the conditional statement), “*then we will not have a picnic*” (there is the “then” part of the conditional statement).

Paul said in effect, “**Now *if* anyone builds on the foundation with certain materials, *then* each one’s work will become manifest**, or revealed on the Day of judgment.”

Paul’s “point is that the quality of the superstructure must be appropriate to the foundation.”¹ Church leaders build either with imperishable materials, such as **gold, silver, and precious stones**, or with perishable materials, such as **wood, hay, and straw**.

A Day of judgment is coming, and *how* one has built, whether with imperishable or perishable materials, will be tested. How the leader has built on the foundation **will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each leader has done**.

Paul said that there were two possible outcomes for the work of church leaders. First, he said in verse 14, “**If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.**” When the leader’s ministry is evaluated on the Day of judgment, and it **survives**, meaning that his ministry has gathered and perfected the saints, **he will receive a reward**.

But, second, Paul said in verse 15, “**If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.**” When the ministry leader’s ministry is evaluated on the Day of judgment, and it **is burned up** because he has built with perishable materials, **he will suffer loss**, meaning that he will **he himself will be saved** but he will receive no reward for his ministerial labors.

So, what does it mean for us today that leaders must build the church with care? Several things.

First, leaders must be careful when building on the work of someone else. Paul started the church in Corinth, and Apollos came along after him. He was to be very careful to build on what Paul had started. I have never planted a church. I was the third pastor in

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 140.

the first church I served, and I am the second pastor at this church. In both churches, and particularly in this one (because of Pastor James Saxon's faithful labors), I have been very conscious and aware that I am building on someone else's labors. My goal has been to continue and advance the gospel foundation that has been laid so that God's church can continue to grow and flourish.

Second, leaders must be careful to build according to God's directions and not according to their own designs. God has given us his blueprint for how he wants his church built; it is called the Bible. Leaders are to build God's church in accordance with the directions that he has set forth in his Word. I am currently reading through the Bible in a year, as I hope you are too. A week ago I finished reading 2 Chronicles. As you know, there are two books each in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. These books tell about the kings of Israel and Judah. I was struck again by how easy it seemed for kings to be bad. And the reason they were bad is that they did not follow God's directions for leading his people. I constantly wrestle with my leadership of God's flock here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church, knowing that one day my work will be judged by God. And so I never want us to slip into anything that runs contrary to the directions that God has given us in his Word.

Third, faithful labor does not necessarily mean success. I want to be very clear that sometimes ministers labor faithfully for years and see little fruit as a result of their labors. That does not mean that they have been unfaithful. Sometimes ministers or missionaries have to plow the field of hardened hearts for many years. Then, someone else may come along and plant in soil that is now fertile for the gospel. Samuel Zwemer was nicknamed The Apostle to Islam. He labored for many years with almost no fruit. According to church historian Ruth A. Tucker, Samuel Zwemer's converts were "probably less than a dozen during his nearly forty years of service," but his "greatest contribution to missions was that of stirring Christians to the need for evangelism among Muslims."²

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Zwemer.

Fourth, this text is about leaders and not about individuals. Even though Paul does use the terms “anyone” and “each one” several times in verses 12-15, he is manifestly not talking about individual Christians. He is talking about leaders building up the church of Jesus Christ. He is talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church, and then he is referring to how successive leaders come along and build on that foundation either with imperishable or with perishable materials. If a leader labors faithfully and well, he will receive a reward. But if a leader does not labor faithfully and well, he will not receive a reward. Indeed, he will be saved (because he is a blood-bought child of God) but he will not be rewarded for his faithless labors.

And fifth, this text has nothing to do with the doctrine of purgatory. You may be surprised that I mention this. However, let me explain. As you may know, the doctrine of purgatory says that “purgatory is the condition or process of purification or temporary punishment in which, it is believed, the souls of those who die in a state of grace are made ready for heaven.”³ This is the *only* text in the entire New Testament that is used to support the doctrine of purgatory. However, I hope as you can see that this teaching is not about an individual suffering some sort of purification. Rather, this teaching has to do with the testing of church leaders’ ministry.

III. The Church Is God’s Temple (3:16-17)

And third, the church is God’s temple.

Paul said in verse 16: **“Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”**

The church is not a human institution. The church is not a human invention. The church is not a human organization. The church is not a human society.

The church is **God’s temple**. It belongs to God. It was designed by God. It is built by God. It is protected by God. It is

³ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purgatory>.

grown by God. Furthermore, it is where **God's Spirit dwells**.

That is why church leaders must be so careful what they do. And so Paul issued an extremely stern warning in verse 17, **“If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.”**

The Corinthian leaders needed to preserve the unity of the temple, not destroy it with divisions. If they divided the fellowship, they attacked God's holy temple, his body (Colossians 1:18, 24) and his bride (Ephesians 5:23–27), thereby provoking God's wrath.⁴

And so, what does that mean for us today? *It means that God himself, by his Spirit, dwells with his church, that is, with the people of God.* The church is precious to God. It is a living organism, empowered by the Holy Spirit himself. We must take every care to keep in step with the Spirit as he carries out his sovereign work among us. We must not exalt human leaders. They are merely servants of Jesus Christ. Rather, we must exalt Jesus Christ, the only Head of the Church. When we do that, we will affirm that the church is God's temple, where he dwells by his Spirit.

Conclusion

I hope you can see that Paul warned against a wrong view of the ministry, and particularly against a wrong view of church leadership. May God help us to remember that leaders are merely servants, that the church must be built with care, and that the church is God's temple. Amen.

⁴ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 50.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
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PRAAYER:

Oh Lord our God, so often we find ourselves more devoted to human leaders than to you. Help us see our leaders for what they are—mere servants of Jesus Christ. Give us strong convictions of who we are as well. And grant that we and our leaders may always look to you as the only head of the Church.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go from here today and live like people who have a right view of ministry, and particularly of church leaders!