

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

4. MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 4:1-21; 9:1-23

In the way that these things often happen, we arrive at this passage at an appropriate time in the life of our church here. This morning, in our studies in *1 Corinthians*, we are thinking about the way in which we move forward together and the leadership that is needed for that – and just last Tuesday, at our Annual General Meeting, we confirmed the appointment of our new eldership, the men and women who, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, will give direction to us for the next year. If you like to follow what’s going on in your Bible, we’re reflecting this morning on the chapter which we’ve just read and chapter nine of this letter which Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth.

As we’ve already seen over the past few weeks, Paul is writing to the people in this young church, struggling to follow Christ in the cosmopolitan seaport of Corinth. The new Christians who form the church are naturally heavily influenced by the context in which they find themselves and the same kinds of problems are raising their heads in the church as in the wider community – immorality, intellectual snobbery, factional infighting, selfishness and so on. Paul, who planted the church about five years before is away from them and responding to reports he’s had about the church from some of the concerned members, both by letter and by visit. And he is very aware that, in his absence, others have tried to impose their influence on the members of the church, effectively calling into question Paul’s own credentials, his own authority.

So Paul, never one to shy away from an argument, nor to mince his words, responds with a powerful defence of his authority and his own calling as an apostle, a leader in the church of Jesus Christ. He emphasises that his authority comes from God and rails against those who consider him to be an intellectual lightweight and a bit of a wimp in terms of dealing with problems. They have obviously criticised his lifestyle and his doctrine, his spiritual pedigree and his apparent lack of concern for them. He recognises that he is not to everyone’s liking and is realistic enough to know that he won’t please all the people all the time – in fact, there may be times when he won’t be able to please anyone! – and responds with various complaints and a great deal of heavy sarcasm (look at *4:8,10*).

There’s an awful lot to consider here – and Paul writes elsewhere in his letters about Christian leadership: maybe there’s a whole series there for a future occasion – but what we are going to do this morning is look at a few of the headline issues and see what Paul says about his own leadership which is applicable to leaders in the church today. The we’ll see what underlies all this, so that we can perhaps apply the principles a little more widely than just to the leadership.

What are the qualities we should see in a leader? That’s a dangerous question, I know, because as I talk, you will be making your own judgements about how well I match up to this – and, just like Paul, I know that there are those who consider it their ministry to keep the minister on his toes and to watch like a hawk for any deviation from the biblical norms (and, indeed, a lot of norms that are anything but biblical). You can get all that off your chest in your housegroup if you’re following this series there.

And let me just get off my chest before we go any further (because I don’t often have an opportunity to do this publicly) my respect and admiration for the people who help lead this church here. In the sixteen or so years that I’ve been here – and, I’m sure, before I came here – this church has been led by a great bunch of elders who have a wonderful array of talents, who do their job diligently and who are, at root, real men and women of God. They’ve been a great support to me, a wonderful resource to this congregation and a powerful witness to this community. When I listen to some colleagues in other churches (of all kinds of denominational and theological stripe) and hear what they have to deal with, I thank God from the bottom of my heart for the people God has called to serve him here. So the things that we have to say this morning are an exposition of Paul’s words not a criticism of the leaders here. However, they are a warning to us all not to become complacent and an exhortation to be ever more committed to the work of Christ’s Kingdom.

1. **ACCOUNTABLE** (4:2)

Those who are called to lead in the church of Jesus Christ are in a very privileged position, and in a position of trust. They are trusted by the congregation to listen to God and convey faithfully what God might be saying to the church. They are trusted to prepare what they have to say and do thoroughly. They are trusted to keep confidences. Their judgement is trusted in all kinds of matters. The elders here are asked for advice and guidance and leadership by the church as a whole and by individual members.

So it is important – no, vital – that they “*prove faithful*”. They are accountable for their actions, for their words, for their attitudes. There should be some way of showing that they are taking their duties seriously. And that will be obvious by the way in which the church moves forward. If they are being faithful, if they are being accountable, then things will happen which show that God’s will is indeed being done. If, over the next year or so, nothing really happens in this church, if there is no progress, if our spiritual life is not deepened and strengthened, then I would suggest that there is a failure of leadership: we have not been proved faithful. The leadership needs to be held to account.

2. **NOT IN IT FOR POPULARITY BUT FOR GOD** (4:3-13)

The interesting thing, though, is who Paul sees himself accountable to. He doesn’t really care what the people think of him. He is not to be judged by the church members (4:3). He holds himself accountable to a much higher authority – God. “*It is the Lord who judges me,*” he says in 4:4. It is God who calls the shots, who directs and inspires the leaders. Many people will tell you that the minister and elders are the servants of the congregation, so logically they should judge them. Not so, says Paul: we are “*servants of Christ*”.

In most organisations, people spend their time and energy trying to get to the top, climbing the ladder of success, ensuring that they are promoted and praised. In the church, though, it happens the other way round. Paul likens the leaders to those who are trailing along at the end of the triumphal procession (4:9). We are “*fools for Christ*”. He lays on the sarcasm really thick here, ironically cheering the clever, rich, feted leaders of the Corinthian church who are clearly revelling in the notion that they are top dogs, while he and his fellow apostles are, as Eugene Peterson paraphrases these words: “*something everyone stands around and stares at, like an accident in the street. We’re the Messiah’s misfits*”.

There are times when some of the things which Paul writes of here are very true of our own leaders here – elders who have to cope with criticism that actually ends up abusive, elders who find themselves clearing out gutters, shopping for cat food for those who are stuck indoors, mopping up after problems in people’s homes, rushing to the side of a hospital bed in the middle of the night, making sandwiches for young mums. They’re not the things you do to court popularity, to win plaudits, to appear glamorous and powerful in the eyes of the world. But they’re the kind of things you do in obedience to God. It’s not always popular. It’s not always appreciated. Which is why Paul describes himself and his fellow apostles as “*scum of the earth, the refuse of the world.*” Maybe we should have that printed on top of the Elders’ Ballot slips at the next AGM – “Elections for the Scum of the Earth”!

3. **EXEMPLARY** (4:16)

This is behaviour which is, according to Paul, exemplary in the proper sense of the word. It sets an example, the kind of example you really want others to follow. Paul urges the new Christians in Corinth to imitate him (4:16). Now, you have to be pretty confident that you’re doing the right thing if you say that. You need to be living a transparently holy life, to be clearly following God’s ways, to be sure in your own mind that there is nothing that people could justifiably point the finger at in terms of Christian

lifestyle. Is your conscience clear, as Paul's was (4:4)? Are you at peace with your neighbours, as far as it is within your power? Are you doing your very best to follow God's will and listen for his leading? Because if you are not, then it will be very difficult to set the kind of example that Paul advises here.

4. **ENTITLED TO SUPPORT** (9:3-14)

Paul is obviously writing as one who is above all else engaged in the proclamation of the gospel, so he expresses his need for material support. We know that he continued to earn a bit of money as a tentmaker, but it's clear from his words in 9:4-6 that he could have expected some financial help from the Christians who were in the churches. There are issues here for churches who have paid ministry, but who don't take those responsibilities seriously. I know of ministers whose churches have paid them below the recommended minimum to keep them humble and dependent on the Lord. Now, I need to make it very clear at this point that I have no problem with the generosity of the church here – I have no cause to complain at all. But if we were to look at these words in a rather broader way, we might want to ask ourselves whether we give the leaders here the general support that they need. Do we value and respect what they try to do for us? Do we offer them the prayer support that they need, regularly and faithfully? Do we listen attentively to what they bring us from God? By and large, the answer to those questions is a resounding "Yes!", but let us never become complacent. Many a minister has had his ministry wrecked and his life shattered by Christians who have failed, for whatever reason, to offer their support.

5. **COMPELLED** (9:16)

9:16 reminds me of Peter's words to the magistrates in *Acts 4:20*. Those who are really serious about proclaiming the gospel are really just driven people. They have a compulsion to tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ. That's part of the excitement of being a leader – this desperate desire to let other people know all about it.

I'm sure you've come across people who have a particular bee in their bonnet or passion in their life, who are totally centred on that and seem to be able to talk about nothing else. I bump into someone regularly in Lichfield (not from this congregation, I hasten to add) who is always campaigning about (usually against) something that's going on in the city. And he will follow me down the street talking to me as I try to escape from him. Maybe it's a train-spotter or a soap-watcher or a real ale aficionado who is always on about their pet subject, because it's important to them. Well, if Jesus is important to you, shouldn't he crop up in conversation from time to time? And leaders in Christ's church are those who are always ready to bring Jesus into the conversation, to offer a prayer, to remind you of an apposite line from the Bible. And they should be doing it because they just can't help it.

6. **FLEXIBLE** (9:19-23)

Now some leaders can become very entrenched in particular ways of doing things and expect everyone to follow them in every particular. But Paul isn't like that. He is prepared to reach out to all kinds of people and, in so doing, to try and identify with them. There are examples throughout his letters and in the book of *Acts* of the things Paul mentions in 9:19ff. He continued to keep to some of the Jewish ways in order to ensure that he didn't alienate the Jews. He knew why he was doing it – making a vow, having Timothy circumcised, always going to the synagogue first when he arrived in a town: not to keep to the Law of Moses as such, but to try to keep the Jews on his side. And there were other occasions when he did the opposite – for example, arguing against Peter over keeping dietary laws in order to show the Galatian Christians that they were freed from such things.

Paul sacrificed his own feelings and his own interests and privileges in order to draw others closer to Jesus Christ. The *message* was always the same. He never deviated from the truth of the gospel as

revealed in Jesus Christ. But he was prepared to use any method to get it across. I think most people are agreed now that just having a service and preaching the gospel is not the only way to draw people into the Kingdom of God, but there are all kinds of different methods which are being used by people to reach out to those who need to discover Jesus – and they entail a great deal of flexibility.

Those who are called to be leaders in the church are called to put aside their own personal prejudices and sacrifice their own interests to the interests of the Kingdom. We have to be prepared to identify with people's difficulties and problems, to set aside our own inclinations and to be as Paul puts it in this almost proverbial saying, "*all things to all people*".

7. DISCIPLINED (9:24-27)

At the end of chapter 9, Paul turns to an illustration from the sports arena to emphasise the need for discipline in all that we do as leaders – indeed, all that we do as Christians. He writes of going into "*strict training*". Those of you who have ever been part of a sports team will know what he's on about. I can still remember vividly the kind of stuff we had to go through when I was playing football at university: Monday nights spent puffing through the mud on the sports field, sprinting up the hill towards the halls of residence, an extra hour's training as a goalkeeper, then jogging during the week and two or three matches each week. It was gruelling stuff, but it paid off and brought results.

Many of us probably have workouts in the gym, or go jogging or cycling or swimming to improve our bodies. We put ourselves through courses and exams to improve our careers. We do all kinds of things which take time and energy and resources and grim determination to succeed in various areas of our lives. How much are we prepared to put into the disciplines of the Christian life? Prayer, Bible study, reading, thinking, forming good habits – they are all things that the Christian leader needs to take very seriously, especially if we are to be exemplary, so that others will follow our example.

Now, Paul didn't do all this stuff just because he thought it was good idea. There was, as we've already seen, an underlying desire to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Jesus had changed Paul's life. Jesus had radically changed his outlook. Jesus had given him a reason to live, a meaning to his existence. He had been energised by the Holy Spirit of Jesus and set on fire by what he'd experienced of Jesus. He wanted other people to know about it because it had done him good – and because he knew that they needed to find a way out of their unfulfilled and Godless lives. And he didn't really mind what he had to do in order for that to happen.

That's why he uses phrases like "*fools for Christ*", "*by all possible means*" and "*all for the sake of the gospel*". Now, if you go into Christian leadership because it seems like a good idea, it might look good on your CV, you just want to make friends, you fancy a bit of power, then you've got it all wrong. But if you find yourself, almost involuntarily, in Christian leadership because you are just so desperate to get involved in this amazing calling of letting other people in on the mystery of Jesus Christ and of proclaiming the values of justice and righteousness and holiness that are at the heart of the Kingdom of God – if that's what's behind it, then you're on the right track.

And those things are not really just for leaders either. We are all called to seek this burning desire to get involved, to speak out. To do that we all need to be filled with God's Holy Spirit, to open ourselves up to all that God has for us to enable us to serve him better. As Paul writes in 4:20, "*The Kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.*" Those whom God calls, whom he appoints, he also anoints and empowers and equips. I hope that we will all pray especially that the leaders of this church will be filled with the Holy Spirit. And let's pray that each and every one of us will feel that power at work in our own lives too.

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4. MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER – 1 Corinthians 4:1-21; 9:1-23

Paul includes in this letter a powerful defence of his authority and his own calling as an apostle, a leader in the church of Jesus Christ and emphasises that his authority comes from God

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This is behaviour which sets an example: Paul urges the new Christians in Corinth to imitate him (4:16).

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Paul expresses his need for material support. In a rather broader way, we might want to ask ourselves whether we value and respect what our leaders try to do for us?

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Questions for discussion

1. What difference does it make that Paul was the servant of Christ rather than the servant of the church? What difference does it make today?
2. If God, rather than the congregation, is the judge of church leaders, how can we be sure they are doing the right thing?
3. Paul uses rather a lot of sarcasm in these passages and seems to be complaining rather a lot. Is he right to do this? Why/why not?
4. How can we ensure that we are treating our leaders properly? And how can we ensure that they do not take advantage of their position?
5. Give some examples of ways in which Paul was "*all things to all people*" (9:22). How might we follow his example?
6. Do we have the same kind of burning desire to spread the gospel as Paul did? Why not?