

FIRST CORINTHIANS

The Minister I Corinthians 3:5-9

In some circles of the evangelical wing of the Christian Church today there is a heated debate as to whether there is a special office of pastor-teacher and whether there is any divine call to full-time ministry. For some there is a subtle dislike for any organizational church structure which acknowledges a man as its pastor, for it is their conviction the church should be ruled, shepherded and taught by a group of elders who all share the teaching and preaching duties equally. For them, there should never be any special office of pastor in the local church. I suppose this issue will be debated until the Lord comes for His Church, but my own understanding of scripture is that God does call some men in a special way to be in the full-time ministry. This is also the belief of the Presbyterian Church in America and they are officially referred to as teaching-elders. God calls these men and gifts them to do certain tasks in and for the Body of Christ. While it is true the local church is to be ruled and shepherded by ruling-elders, the church is primarily to be taught by men who have been gifted by God and these are called teaching-elders or pastor-teachers.

In the Old Testament, God has His prophets whom He called to prophesy to Israel. He also set apart the Levites in a special way to be priests in Israel. All through the Old Testament we see how God worked through a leader Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Saul, David, Solomon and many others. When we come to the New Testament, it is clear God called men to be apostles. However, it is not so clearly stated God calls some to the special office of pastor, but it certainly is implied.

“It was he (Christ) who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers (pastor-teachers), to prepare (equip) God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Eph. 4:11-12).

Ephesians 4:11-12 indicates Jesus Christ picked some men and gave them the gift of pastor teacher to equip the saints. The New Testament seems to make some kind of distinction between a ruling-elder and a teaching-elder.

“The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. .” (I Tim. 5:17).

The teaching-elder seems to be equivalent to the gift of pastor-teacher. Ruling-elders are to teach, but they do not have to have the special gift of teaching. Teaching-elders are to rule but must have the special gift of teaching. Both the teaching-elders and the ruling-elders are equal in authority, but God has given a special gift to the pastor-teacher in knowledge of the Bible and the ability to minister it. The pastor's primary task is to pray, study the Bible and teach it to the flock through public teaching, counseling, exhortation and example.

Timothy, the pastor-teacher at Ephesus, seemed to have a special office among the elders. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy about how to run a local church in First and Second Timothy. Why were these letters written specifically to Timothy unless he had some kind of special office?

In Revelation chapters two and three, the seven churches of Asia Minor are all addressed to an angel, but many scholars believe the word "angel" should be translated "messenger," and if that is the case, then the messengers of these seven churches were the seven pastor-teachers or teaching-elders of the individual churches.

By simple analogy, it may be shown that each flock of sheep has but one shepherd, and the sheep primarily hear his voice to follow. However, the shepherd might have many helpers and that would be the other ruling-elders and staff who are pastor-teachers (teaching-elders).

Lastly, throughout the history of the church, Catholics and most Protestants have acknowledged a special calling of some men to the ministry, and for these men the ministry is their whole life. Most of these called men are paid for their labors by those to whom they minister. Some may chose to get a secular job and minister on the side, but all are called and gifted. These men invariably become leaders of leaders; that is, the pastor-teacher takes the position of leader among the elders, not in authority but in influence. The teaching elder is subject to the overall authority of the Board of Elders (Session) but because he does the preaching, moderates the Session, initiates vision and works at the ministry twenty-four hours a day, the teaching-elder obviously has more influence.

A number of years ago I talked with a woman who was in a local church where they did not believe in the office of pastor-teacher nor did they want to pay anyone to do the ministry full time. This church was ruled, shepherded and taught by elders. She was lamenting the fact her husband (an elder) was really doing more than the other elders because he was the key administrator and motivator of the other elders, and every spare minute apart from his secular job as a college professor was given to the ministry. She said they had very little family or social life because her husband was looked upon as the leader. In a kidding way, I said to her, "Your husband, then, has become like a bishop. He is the leader of the leaders whether he wants that to happen or not!"

The church at Corinth was having a problem in that they were exalting their ministers way out of proportion. Apparently Paul acknowledged a distinction between himself and Apollos and the rest of the Corinthians, for he talked about ministers as "servants, through whom you came to believe" and he also says, "For we (Paul and Apollos) are God's fellow workers; you (the Corinthians) are God's field." There was a distinction between these men (Paul and Apollos) who were called to the ministry in a special way and the Corinthians. Surely the people were to recognize the calling of Paul and Apollos and respect their office, but they were not to be looked upon as infallible leaders, tin gods, or as lords over the flock. These Corinthians had Paul and Apollos up on a pedestal and were exalting their leaders in a way which caused divisions in the local church. What Paul was seeking to do in I Corinthians 3:5-9 was to get the Corinthians to think straight and get a right perspective on the minister and the ministry. One of the marks of their carnality was the exalting of human leaders, dividing into groups and saying, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos." They were baby Christians and they refused to grow up out of their rebellion to God in the area of preacher-worship.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MINISTER 3:5-9a

Servant: What, after all is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants... . Notice carefully it says "what" not "who". We know who a minister is -- he is a man called and gifted by God to equip the saints so the saints can do the work of the ministry. The stress is upon the what which places emphasis upon his functions and place in the Christian Church. What is said of the pastor-teacher can be applied to any person involved in ministry: elder, deacon, Sunday school teachers Bible teacher, small group leader or whatever. There is a broad sense in which we are all ministers and the minister's function is that of a servant. The word in the Greek is diakonoi from which we get the word "deacon." Originally it meant "a waiter of tables" or "an attendant in a home." It was a despised word because usually slaves were the servants. Some have tried to put this word into a modern day context saying it is equivalent to "errand boy." Paul and Apollos, who had a high calling and very important spiritual gifts were "servants" or "errand boys" in the kingdom. A minister is first and foremost a servant of God and then a servant of the church. As a servant, he has no rights of his own and he is called to give his life to God and to others. "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Lk. 17:10). A servant gives up his rights to time, his desires, his ambitions, and, to some degree, his family to serve God and man. A pastor-teacher must believe God will bless his family in a special way if he is away from them in the cause of Christ. Ministers are not men of super status but super service.

How often Christians incorrectly view a pastor. They see him as a distinct person with a special pipeline to God. They view him as a revered person, his name and personality as a rallying point, his influence as superhuman and sometimes his authority as absolute. Men who are ministers often feed this image by portraying a "holier-than-thou" attitude, dress with a special clerical garb and live a certain kind of unhealthy separated lifestyle. It is wrong to put any man of God on a pedestal, for ministers are merely men called by God to do a task. They are servants, but they are also men with

feelings, problems, frustrations, conflicts and concerns just like all people. Yet, they have been called by God to serve in some particular way. A

minister is not a professional. In fact, he is just the opposite of the exalted, esteemed, preferential position the Corinthians were giving to the men who were ministering to them. Are ministers to be "the heavies," "the bosses," "the brass?" No, they are to be servants. The Lord Jesus Christ set the example for all pastors, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.." (Mk. 10:45a). A minister is a servant who gives and gives and gives to the cause of Christ and His kingdom and expects nothing in return.

Instrument: Through whom you came to believe Ministers were merely instruments God used to bring the Corinthians to faith in Christ. We should never exalt the instrument but God. To exalt a minister, who is but an instrument, would be like paying homage to a paint brush of Rembrandt or bowing down to the piano of Mozart. The instrument is nothing but God is everything, and it is to God we are to give the glory.

Recipient: As the Lord has assigned to each his task (opportunity). It is the Lord Jesus who sets the task and gives opportunities for the pastor to minister the Word of God. It is not his wit, cleverness, IQ, managerial skills or anything else which opens the doors for ministry, but God, and He is the One to receive the glory. A servant should be thankful for any place or type of ministry because God has given it to him.

"Father, Where shall I work today? And my love flowed warm and free.

Then He pointed me out a tiny spot and said, 'Tend that for me.

I answered quickly, 'Oh, no, not that. Why, no one would ever see,

No matter how well my work was done. Not that little place for me.'

And the word he spoke, it was not stern. He answered me tenderly,

"Ah, little one, search that heart of thine. Art thou working for them or me?

Nazareth was a little place, and so was Galilee."

Dependent: I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. Paul used an illustration from horticulture. In order to make a garden grow, it has to be planted and watered but God ultimately makes something grow. Paul was the evangelist, the church planter who started the church at Corinth. Apollos was the Bible teacher, equipper of the saints in that church. Which is more important, the Bible teacher or the evangelist? Paul's answer is neither. The important thing is not what either can do but what God can do. God takes the truth by the power of the Holy Spirit and changes lives. Evangelists cannot change lives; they can only preach the gospel. Bible teachers cannot change lives; they can only teach truth. The ultimate cause of all spiritual life and spiritual growth is God. Therefore, the minister is totally dependent upon God for results, for God is the ultimate cause of all things. There must be a planter; there must be a waterer, but these are merely the means to the end. It is God who gives the growth and the increase and He is to get all the glory.

Paul's sovereign grace theology comes out right here without using any theological terminology. His concepts of election, predestination and grace are behind the statement, "God made it grow." Notice as well he does not do away with the means of reaping the harvest. We must preach, teach, pray, witness, exhort and encourage but it is God who is the cause of all spiritual blessing. Knowing this fact shuts up the minister to total dependence on God for results.

Insignificant: So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. Without God, ministers are nothing. God is everything, but the minister is insignificant. Only God is to be looked up to as the source of truth, strength and success. Paul planted and was a "plowboy." Apollos watered and was a "water boy." A plowboy and a water boy are nothing but God who makes it happen is everything. It is a gross error to exalt a minister and put him on a pedestal for he is a servant and an insignificant instrument. We so subtly do this by putting "Reverend" in front of his name or giving him a special rank so he appears to be more important than he is. Any time we do anything to make a pastor seem more holy than others, we misunderstand the position of a minister and the nature of the ministry.

When we ask, "Who is more important, Paul or Apollos, Martin Luther or John Calvin, Bill Bright or Billy Graham, Pat Robertson or Bill Gothard, Charles Swindoll or John MacArthur, Benny Hinn or Joel Hunter or even something as simple as Jack Arnold or Jim Fitzgerald?" the answer is none of them. All are insignificant. It is not people who are important but God who works through people. Therefore, to give glory to a man as though he were everything is wrong. Now it is not wrong to honor and respect men for their position, but we are never to give them glory, for God said, "I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another" (Isa. 42:8).

We all at times exalt ministers too highly, but when we compare these mere men with God, they are leveled to nothing. Compared to God, the differences among His ministers are like the differences in elevation between Mt. Everest in the Himalayas, Mt. McKinley in Alaska or Mt. Whitney in California. These mountains seem so vast from an earth-bound perspective yet negligible when viewed from another planet; they are leveled to nothing. God's ministers are leveled to nothing when we look at God the cause and not the man His instrument.

Interdependent: The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, Paul and Apollos were not rivals but in harmony. They were one in office, one in purpose, one in mind, the extension of Jesus Christ and his kingdom to the ends of the earth. They were not competing but cooperating. Paul was absolutely dependent on Apollos, and Apollos was absolutely dependent on Paul. Paul had to plant; Apollos had to water, but neither could be successful without the other. In Christian work, there is a complete interdependence of one servant with another servant.

This concept is important because Paul and Apollos had both ministered in one local church at Corinth. Perhaps there was a period when they did it at the same time although we

cannot be absolutely sure. This does lend weight to a multiplicity of ministers and ministry in the local church. The Bible does not indicate there is one man who does all the ministry in one local church. God may have two or three or more men in one local church who are called to the ministry and gifted for the ministry who work side by side teaching and shepherding. This way

you have a variety of backgrounds and experiences. All are engaged in the ministry of the church. This will produce a well-rounded, well-balanced church but it may also create a situation where people become followers of men rather than followers of Christ. However, I believe this is the ideal situation. Even in this situation, there will be a senior pastor or someone who will become the leader of the leaders. Yet, I want to repeat, multiplicity of ministry must come from men called of God who have the gifts for the ministry who work very closely under the elders of the church. If this does not happen, then the potential for splits and divisions is very great and may destroy the local church.

Diligent: And each will be rewarded according to his own labor. Each minister has been given different gifts and different ministries to perform. They will each receive their wages or rewards not according to their office, gifts or successes but according to their labors. The Greek word "labors" is *kopos*, and it looks at the cost, strain, toil and weariness which is involved in being a minister of the gospel. Ministers will be rewarded not by their fruits but by their labors. This tells me two things. First, the ministry is a lifestyle, a way of life that engulfs everything a minister does. Second, the faithful minister or missionary who serves in obscurity and without apparent fruit, will receive a reward far beyond that of those who, with less self-denial and effort, are made the instruments of great results. Ministers labor, then, not for the plaudits of men but for God and His rewards which they will receive in eternity.

Agent: For we are God's fellow workers; This probably means ministers belong to God and are fellow workers with God. Ministers work for and with God in their labors. Every minister must have loyalty to God and not to men, and a loyal servant of God is always going to run into conflict with men because men as a whole do not want loyalty to God. Ministers are agents of God and not agents of men, and if they will do God's will, God will take care of His servants.

THE COMMUNITY OF THE SAINTS 3:9b

You are God's field. Paul stopped talking about himself and Apollos, men called in a special sense to the ministry, and began to talk about the Corinthians. They are first called a field which also belongs to God. Paul is probably thinking of evangelism, of the growth and increase of the church. As a farmer plants his crop each year, it increases as he plants; so each year he is able to plant more because of what seed he gets in return. So the church spreads and increases numerically as we work within it, building up each other. That in turn results in an outreach and people begin to hear the gospel as the seed is sown. This then causes the church to increase numerically.

It is obvious that the church belongs to God. It is His field. He bought the church and possesses it. The church does not belong to the leadership or the people; it belongs to God.

All too often those "in charge," be they clergy, boards, vestry, sessions, or what have you, tend to think of the church as "theirs." They pay lip-service to its being "Christ's church, after all," then proceed to operate on the basis of very pagan, secular structures, and regularly speak of "my" or "our" church. Nor does the church belong to the people, especially those who have "attended all their lives," or who have "supported it with great sums of money," as though that gave them special privileges. The church belongs to Christ, and all other things--structures, attitudes, decisions, nature of ministry, everything--should flow out of that singular realization (Gordon Fee, First Corinthians).

God's building. Now Paul refers to the church as a building. In I Corinthians 3:10-17, Paul will go on to describe this building, the church, as it relates to the minister.

CONCLUSION

What does God want us to learn from this section of scripture? First, we are to honor ministers and respect them, but we are not to give them glory. This is just one step away from giving a minister a position equal to or above God. Glory belongs to God alone. Second, we must learn to quote the Master rather than the servant. For instance, Dr. Arnold did not say, "Minister are servants," but God did, so give the Master the credit not the servant. Third, if a minister has been a help to you, you should say, "I want to thank you for the way God spoke to my heart through you," or "I'm so grateful to God for the way He has used you in my life." This honors God above the servant, the Master above the instrument. Fourth, when we become the disciple of another man, one of two things will happen. We will soon discover the minister has feet of clay and he is not nearly as perfect as he seems to be when he speaks from the pulpit. We will then become disillusioned with him which will cause us to become cynical towards Christ, Christians and Christianity. Or else, we will become perverted Christians because we will become disciples of one man only which will cause us to be narrow, prejudiced and biased. The result is we will not be well balanced and healthy spiritually. In fact, we will become unbalanced Christians. Fifth, a multiplicity of teachers and preachers in a local church is God's ideal, but to have this situation demands real maturity on the part of the congregation. They apparently had something like this at Corinth but they could not handle it because they broke up into parties, groups and sects within the local church, following men rather than Christ. One of the marks of a carnal-babe church and a carnal-rebellious church is their willingness to follow men, exalt men and glorify men rather than Christ.

If you are without Christ, I beg you not to say, "Well, I would become a Christian but look at those hypocrites in the church. Look at those people who are men followers. Look at those carnal pastors. Look at all the denominations!" For sure there are all these aspects to some degree in the visible, organized church, but God will take care of His people and shape them up. What you need to do is to look at Christ, the God-Man, who lived a sinless life, died for sinners and was resurrected from the dead to save men and women from the pains of hell and to bring them meaning, purpose and stability in life. If you look at Christians, you will be disappointed. If you look to ministers, you will be disillusioned. If you look at Christ, you will be satisfied forever, for He said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (Jn. 10:10).