

True Servants of Christ

Scripture: Acts 20:27; 1 Corinthians 4:1–5; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Galatians 1:10; 2 Timothy 2:15
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How do you evaluate Christian ministers? People use all kinds of criteria to determine who are the most successful, the most influential, the most gifted, and the most effective. I once saw an article called "The 50 Most Influential Christians." There were some faithful ministers and wonderful Christians on the list; but the list also included some of the premier peddlers of the church growth philosophy, some extreme charismatics, and two high-level Roman Catholics. In fact, an anti-trinitarian modalist was at the top of the list.

The people who published that article based their selections on the "meaningful" input of "Christians across America and around the world." That's disturbing on a number of levels, but especially because it represents a growing confusion about Christianity and Christian leadership. When people who turn the church into a mall, confuse the nature of Jesus and the Godhead, and anathematize the true gospel are voted onto a list of influential Christians, evangelicalism is in trouble. Hard times are ahead because so few are able to discern the difference between true and false servants of Christ.

If we return to the Word of God, we can find our way out of the cultural confusion and into the clarity of the mind of God. First Corinthians 4:1-5 focuses on the nature and marks of God's true ministers. It's a look at how God evaluates His ministers. You won't find Paul talking about popularity, personality, degrees, and numbers playing a role in the Lord's perspective—they should therefore play no role in ours. What you will find is radically different from much of what we see in the visible church today.

The Identity of the Minister

Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4:1).

Servants of Christ

Paul thought of himself, first of all, as a "servant of Christ"—Jesus Christ, not men, was his Lord. In everything he was subordinate and subject to Christ, and that Master set the parameters of his obedience. Paul understood that God did not call him to be creative but obedient, not innovative but faithful. For Paul, success in ministry depended upon pleasing Christ. "For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ" (Galatians 1:10).

Stewards of God's Mysteries

Paul also understood that his work in service to Christ was that of a steward of divine mysteries. A mystery in the New Testament is not something mysterious or mystical; it's a truth that was previously hidden but is now widely known by divine revelation and apostolic proclamation. Paul and the other apostles and prophets of the early church openly declared the mysteries that the Holy Spirit

later canonized in the New Testament. Like household stewards or managers, they administered freely the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27).

Some years ago I read a magazine interview of a certain well-known pastor. The gist of his statement was:

I decided that the pulpit was no longer to be a teaching platform but an instrument of spiritual therapy. I no longer preach sermons; I create experiences. I don't have time to write a systematic theology to give a solid theological basis for what I intuitively know. What I intuitively believe is right. Every sermon has to begin with the heart. If you ever hear me preaching a sermon against adultery, you'll know what my problem is. If you ever hear me preaching a sermon about the coming of Jesus Christ, you'll know that's where I am heartwise. It so happens I'm not hung up on either of those areas so I've never preached a sermon on either one. I could not in print or in public deny the virgin birth of Christ or the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ or the return of Christ. But when I have something I can't comprehend, I just don't deal with it.

That is the description of a totally corrupted and perverted ministry. Those who listen to that man are not hearing all God has to say. Rather than bringing men to God, he is standing between men and God.

God's Word is explicit about adultery, the virgin birth of Jesus, and His second coming. A preacher may not fully understand those truths, but God requires him to proclaim them fully and faithfully. That's why a steward must diligently study God's Word before he enters the pulpit (2 Timothy 2:15).

The Requirement of the Minister

In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy (1 Corinthians 4:2).

By far the most important quality of a good steward is faithfulness, trustworthiness. He is entrusted with the master's household possessions, businesses, and money; and without faithfulness he will bring about wholesale ruin. Above all, God wants His ministers, His servant-stewards, to be trustworthy.

God supplies His Word, His Spirit, His gifts, and His power, and He calls His stewards to administer those resources faithfully. The work is demanding but is basically simple: faithfully take God's Word to God's people so they can feed on it. That doesn't require brilliance or cleverness or creativeness or popularity. It requires trustworthiness, and that's the standard by which every steward will be judged.

The Evaluation of the Minister

But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord (1 Corinthians 4:3-4).

Others' Evaluation

Since God is the Judge of internal and external fidelity to the servant-steward task, it should be a very small thing to any of us when others praise or criticize our ministry or our spiritual life. We can benefit greatly from the counsel of a wise friend, and sometimes even learn from the observations and criticisms of unbelievers. But no human being is qualified to determine the legitimacy, quality, or faithfulness of our work for the Lord.

A caring minister of Christ cannot and should not be insensitive to the feelings, needs, and opinions of his people. But no minister can remain faithful to his calling if he lets his congregation, or any individual human being, decide how true his motives are or whether he is working within the Lord's will. Because human knowledge and understanding of the facts are imperfect, human criticisms and compliments are imperfect. In humility and love, God's minister must not allow himself to care about other people's evaluations of his ministry.

His Own Evaluation

Nor must he allow himself to care about his own evaluation of his ministry. All of us are naturally inclined to build ourselves up in our own minds. We all look into rose-colored mirrors. Some people seem to put themselves down, especially in front of others, but it's only a veiled appeal for recognition and flattery. The mature minister doesn't trust his own judgment any more than he trusts the judgment of others.

Paul knew of no serious sin or deficiency in his own life and ministry; he also knew his evaluation was limited by his finite understanding. He was neither proud of the fact that he knew of nothing wrong, nor was he worried that he might have overlooked some fault. His own evaluation, favorable or unfavorable, made little difference in carrying out the faithful stewardship of his ministry.

God's Evaluation

Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

The only evaluation that mattered to Paul was the Lord's—that's how it is for every true servant of Christ. God has planned a day when He will "both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts." Those two phrases refer to the things only God can see, the things hidden from the knowledge of other men. As the only omniscient and impartial Judge, only God can render a righteous verdict.

It's such a comfort to me that every believer will have praise on that day, for "there is therefore now *no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, emphasis added). All Christians will have some reward and some praise—only God knows who will receive much and who will receive little. We do know, however, that the rewards will not be based on the size of our church, the apparent accomplishments of our lives, or the number of converts we claim. God will sort out—based on hidden things, based on motives—who receives much and who receives little.

I think one of the marvelous experiences Christians will share on that day will be to recognize how

many dear saints, completely unknown to the world and hardly known to fellow believers, will receive reward after reward after reward from the Lord's hands—their unseen works were gold, silver, and precious stones. Their hearts will have been pure, their works will have been precious, and their rewards will be great.

Because God will reward according to the motives of men's hearts, our single purpose in life should be that, "whether [we] eat or drink or whatever [we] do, [we] do it all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). That motive should govern everything we think, say, and do.

It is good when fellow Christians can speak well of us sincerely. It is good when our own conscience does not accuse us. But it will be wonderful beyond description if, on that day, our Lord can say of us, "Well done, good and faithful servant." To hear that refrain is the aim of every true servant of Christ.

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