

1 Corinthians 3:16-4:5

You can tell by Paul's comment in verse 16 that's he's getting quite worked up with these folks in Corinth. They want to play at church and Paul's having none of it! He's sick to the back teeth with their appalling lack of true commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are immersed in their own wee world of party politics and personalities. Basically, they have taken their eye off the ball. That makes Paul's challenge to them all the more meaningful and all the more important—it's a plea from his heart for them to get their act together, he does it by focusing their attention on their relationship with God. He says: 'Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?'

The fact is, that's what they had conveniently forgotten. They were living as if they were a law unto themselves. They were happy to bag all the privileges but weren't too keen to take on board the list of responsibilities that went along with them. It seems to me that's a perennial problem in evangelical circles and it's certainly rampant in today's church scene.

Individually and corporately they are the 'temple' of God, that is, the place where God is pleased to dwell. God lives among them, his presence is in their midst, when they gather together as a local assembly of believers.

That's gloriously true on a congregational level, it's also true on a personal level for, at the moment of their conversion, the Holy Spirit took up residence in their hearts and lives. They can testify: Christ lives in me!

When we mess around with our bodies and indulge in certain practices that are roundly condemned in Scripture, then we're asking for trouble, big time. We're making a rod for our own back! The same principle holds true for the local gathering of God's people—if you play with fire in the church, you'll end up getting very badly burned. Hence Paul's down-to-earth, jerk back to reality

comment in verse 17: 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him.'

Tough talking from the apostle, it sure is. There comes a time when even apostles and God's servants have to crack the whip. When it comes to some of these hard issues that Paul is left to deal with, the softly, softly approach just doesn't work! These folks have grown accustomed to soft-peddalling on the truth and they're not going to be too enthused about preachers who ruffle their feathers.

I appreciate the way Paul diverts attention away from himself and them back to the Lord when he says that God's 'temple is sacred'. In other words, God's house is holy and his people are sanctified. The link between the two is clearly defined and there should be no contradiction between what they are and what they do!

A holy life, a holy people, a holy church: that's what a thrice-holy God expects and, furthermore, it's what he demands. If these folks think they can tarnish God's image, then they have another thing coming. Anything less than the best is a slur on his impeccable character and nature. Anything else is a veiled attack on his behavioural standards of right living combined with right thinking. That tells me that our God is a holy God and he has a code of practice which he expects us to follow 1, 2, 3.

I think we'll pause for a short music break at this point, that'll give you time to mull over these enormously challenging truths in 1 Corinthians 3. I'll be back in a minute for a bit more of the same from the pen of Paul.

MUSIC BREAK

My wife Lois and I live in South Yorkshire and, when I hear Paul say what he does in verse 18, you could be forgiven for thinking he had a drop of Yorkshire blood coursing through his veins. He calls a spade, a spade! As we say, he doesn't beat about the bush.

Hear his comment: 'do not deceive yourselves.' The word 'deceive' means 'to give a false impression, whether by appearance, or statement, or influence.' These guys in Corinth were self-deceived. They had the impression that they knew it all!

When Paul says 'don't deceive yourselves' he's saying: don't lull yourself into thinking that all is well, for it isn't! Don't be a Nebuchadnezzar! Remember him! In Daniel 4 we find him proudly looking over his kingdom and drooling about all the wonderful things he's done! He was singing his own praises, giving himself a pat on the back. How wise we are in our own eyes!

You may have a decent sized congregation and you may have seen a number of signs of God's blessing, well, don't be fooled, God will work in spite of you, not because of you! The Lord builds his church, he grows his kingdom. The reality is, God doesn't need us! The fact that he uses us says more about him than it does about us—he's the one who's taking the risk, as it were! It's certainly not us!

Paul harks back to what he told them earlier in relation to the wisdom of this world—it's better to be a fool for Jesus than it is to be a sage in man's eyes. The man who knows his God and the man who walks closely with his God may be an idiot in the eyes of modern man, but he's a wise man in God's sight, and that's all that really matters.

Better to be wise in the things of God than to be a learned fool in the school of the worldly-wise. Paul backs his argument up with a couple of Old Testament quotes, this time he reaches into Job 5:13 and Psalm 94:11. I value the way Paul bases his practical theology on the word of God. It seems to me that's a good principle for us to similarly take on board!

Having made the point and aired his well-founded concerns over their man focused behaviour, Paul comes down on them like a ton of bricks when he says in verse 21: 'So then, no more boasting about men!' That's straight talking. Pretty blunt, they must be really thick if they don't get Paul's message! He wants them to get rid of their man-worship and begin to give God his rightful place in their lives. You see, when we exalt people, it perpetuates immaturity. And the higher they are the harder and further they fall! People worship always limits our perspective, on life, on church, and on God!

The reality is summed up beautifully in verses 21-23 when he says: 'All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.'

What a powerful reminder to them that man has nothing to do with their standing in Jesus Christ. And it doesn't matter what life throws at them in the first century or twenty-first century, our relationship with God is intact.

People don't impinge on our security in Jesus Christ, time will not rob us of our eternal relationship with Jesus—we don't miss out in any way when we give God his rightful and proper place in our hearts. The fact is, we belong to the Lord, and just as the Son is directly linked with the Father in heaven, so we are indissolubly linked with him down here on planet earth. That's a link nothing or no one can sever!

What a fantastic privilege is ours! When it comes to heaven, we are as good as home and dry! When it comes to living out our lives in this world, we have each other, but even more wonderful, we have the sweet presence of Jesus 24/7, plus the power of the Holy Spirit operating within us.

Think about that while the music plays in the background, in a minute or two we'll move into 1 Corinthians 4 and see what the man himself has to say there about apostleship etc.

MUSIC BREAK

1 Corinthians 4 is one of the great chapters in Scripture on apostles and their unique role in the early church. What amazes me is how Paul refers to himself and others who are in the same mould: according to verse 1, they are the 'servants of Christ'. I think we need to realise that in Paul's day everyone knew what a servant was. They were two a penny. That's it, he's nothing more than a servant, he's nothing less than a servant, and he's nothing else but a servant!

I have a soft spot in my heart for Paul. I really love this side of his character for he doesn't see himself as a kind of evangelical prima

donna who has to be treated with soft kid gloves, nor is he portrayed as a preacher man who has to be worshipped as a ministry hero at every port of call. This guy knows his humble place in the divine big picture—he may have an impressive CV and personal portfolio under his belt but he knows when he gets down on his knees before the cross, these things don't amount to anything. He's only a servant!

And yet, that's not a derogatory or a derisory term, far from it! So far as God is concerned, Paul's following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ for he was a servant to all. He has no airs about himself.

When it comes to Paul the apostle, in computer-speak, what you see is what you get. This man is the real McCoy, he's genuine through and through.

The word that Paul actually used in the Greek has a fascinating origin for it refers to an 'under-rower'. That is, an oarsman on the bottom level of a sailing vessel. Someone you didn't see, he was hidden from view, but his work determined whether the ship would or would not make progress on the high seas. This guy couldn't be done without!

So it is with the likes of Paul and others in the local church. In one sense, apostles have come and gone, they've done their bit, they've played their walk-on part, the rest of us are still here in one role or another, and just like them, we're servants! It's an opportune time for us to realise that we can be too big for God to use, but we can never be too small! Servants don't have big heads, they have big hearts. Servants don't have swollen egos, they have tough and tender hearts. Servants are happy to do as they are told—their aim is to please their master. So it is with you and me in the church of Jesus Christ.

Another way of looking at it is also found in verse 1, it's where Paul describes us as 'stewards' for we are those 'entrusted with the secret things of God.' In other words, when it comes to the things of God, they don't really belong to me, they belong to the Lord, they're his; I'm only here to share his bag of goodies with others. My

responsibility in today's world is no different to Paul's in his day—I am here to minister Christ to people all around me.

The key quality for this privileged position is spelt out for us in verse 2 where Paul declares that faithfulness is the name of the game.

He's looking for people who can be relied upon, people who can be depended upon, people who'll rise to the occasion and respond to the challenge and need around them. Paul says that we have to be consistent in our walk with God—we're not here to prove ourselves for God is willing to trust us and let us get on with the job in hand.

However, he does expect us to be loyal and faithful in all things.

We're not here to make a name for ourselves, we're here to see people warmly respond to the precious name of Jesus; I'm not here to promote my ideas no matter how wonderful I think they are, I'm here to introduce people to the grace of God as seen in the lovely Lord Jesus. You see, whether I'm a servant or a steward, my prime role is to be what God wants me to be and to do what God wants me to do.

We'll take a music break at this point and when we come back I want us to zoom in on Paul's teaching in verses 3-5. He has a few more cutting edge comments to make on this fascinating and enormously helpful subject.

MUSIC BREAK

If these verses do nothing else, they at least remind us of one fundamental truth: God is more interested in what we are than he is in what we do. God is not nearly as concerned with fruitfulness as he is with faithfulness. Faithfulness is what the Lord honours. Character is important, integrity is essential, and especially in today's postmodern world.

It seems from what Paul says in verses 3 and 4 that he is big on accountability, it's mega important. Sure, we need to be able to give an account to those who rule over us, to those who pay our wages, as it were; that's hugely important and it's also a simple fact of life.

What we're talking about here is wider in its scope, so much so that it brings home to our hearts the nature of our relationship with God. Ultimately, in that final day, we are accountable to him; in a word, for all of us, there is coming a day of appraisal for you and me. Let's not run scared, let's be men and women and face up to the rigours of that personal interview with Jesus. If we've performed ok we have nothing to fear! We touched on this great truth in the middle section of chapter 3.

Having said all that, Paul isn't just thinking about a day in the future when we will be called to book, he's thinking about our response to those around us in today's world who judge us. If we dwell on other people's responses to our ministry, we'll get nowhere and we'll do nothing. Some will praise you and some will criticise you—you just can't please all the people all the time so there's no point in even trying: all that matters is that you please the Lord.

He is thinking about those who make comments, constructive or otherwise, on your ministry and mine. People who are not behind the ticket when it comes to airing their opinion on what you've just said or done. Take it from me, there's plenty of them around! You won't have to go looking for them! They'll find you!

The reason why Paul doesn't get overly excited or hurt about the opinions of people is because they are so fickle and they rarely know all the facts of the full story! He's accountable to God and that's enough for him to think about! He knows only too well that God always has the final say. And God's view is not influenced by peripheral issues or personalities that glow in the dark.

God sees through every one of us and he's the only One who can make an accurate and unbiased assessment of our life and ministry. That's enough for any man to handle—by the same token, it's also a source of tremendous comfort for we know that God gets it right first time, every time. Men are up and down, they come and they go, but God is faithful and true, he is constant. When it comes to our lives, the God we're talking of in this context, is a God who can be trusted.

Hence Paul's parting shot in verse 5: 'Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.' Paul knows it'll all pan out ok in the end, he knows that God will win and that he'll share in the everlasting glories of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's a day coming when he will tear down the facades that man has erected, he'll pull back the false faces that men have put on, he'll remove all those things that have disguised the real you and me—look, folks, we might fool each other, but we can't fool God. He sees behind everything, he sees through all the talk—he knows us for what we are, he knows us for who we are! Scary, yes it is! But that's the reality of serving Jesus in the third millennium. It's a call to reality, a call to authentic biblical living. It's a big challenge for you and I to take on board—like Jim Eliot, let's make it our aim to be fools for Jesus Christ.